

INTRODUCTION

The present Dissertation will attempt to look into the significant political, economic and social transition of the district of Malda between the years 1876 and 1953. Malda is the southernmost of the Northern Bengal districts. It is to be mentioned here that Malda as a district was a British creation in 1813. During the years 1876-1905, Malda formed part of the Bhagalpur Division. In 1905, the district was again transferred from Bhagalpur Division to Rajshahi Division on the formation of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. It was included in the Rajshahi Division until August 1947. Before the Partition, the district of Malda was composed of fifteen police stations. In 1947, under the Radcliffe Award the five police stations of Siibganj, Nababganj, Bholahat, Nachol and Gomastapur went to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Our study proposes to begin with a brief description on the land and the people of the district. I like to mention here that the population of Malda belonged to different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, to various castes and religious communities. A study of these ethnic groups, such as Santals, Rajbansis, Polias, Deshis, Binds, Mominis, and Maithis etc. is necessary because the demographic composition and socio-cultural dimensions along with economic factors came to influence social and political movements in the district in significant ways.

In this connection, we will study the origin and growth of the social mobility movement among the Rajbansi Hindus and the Hinduization movement among the Santal peasants in the Barind region of Malda. The economic scenario of the district in the period of our study will also come under the purview of our research. We will study here tenure and revenue arrangements, agriculture and agrarian system, agrarian structure and differentiation in the agrarian society. The growth of industry, mainly silk, trade and commerce will also be highlighted. One of our major aims is to trace the emergence and growth of nationalist politics in Malda at various levels. It should be mentioned that the nationalist politics in the district may sharply be

divided into two domains. In the domain of elite politics, the principal factors were people belonging to educated middle class. They played an active role in the Anusilan Samiti, Brati Samiti and Jugantar. Later they participated in the movements led by the Congress. In another domain, the principal participants were peasant masses and tribal people. For instance, the revolt of Jitu Santal in 1932 in the Barind region was massive in scope and rich in anti-colonialist consciousness. Apart from this, the origin and growth of the Communist movement in the district will be considered in some details.

About the period, I would like to say something. In the first place, I will explain the selection of the beginning year of our study. Although the district was formed in 1813, I select the year 1876 as the starting point of my study for some reasons. In the year 1876, the district of Malda was transferred from the Rajshahi Division to the Bhagalpur Division. It seems that it was purely an administrative decision. While the district was formed in 1813, the *thanas* of Sibganj, Kaliachak, Bholahat and Gurguribah of the Purnia district were transferred to the newly formed Malda District. Therefore, from the time of its formation, the district had a link with Bihar. Perhaps this thing acted behind the decision of its transfer to the Bhagalpur Division. Whatever may be the reason, the inclusion of the district in the Bhagalpur Division for a relatively short period (1876 – 1905) was to influence the socio-political developments later on. In the first place, an increasing number of people from Bihar began to settle in the adjacent areas of the district. Apart from this, the migration of the *santals* from the Santal Parganas of Bihar after the failure of their 'hul' in 1855 – 56 began to accelerate after 1876. Thus, a new element was introduced into the demographic composition and social life of the district. Secondly, a difference of opinion centering Malda cropped up among the leaders of Bengal and Bihar. At the time of the partition of Bengal in 1905, a section of the political leaders of Bihar demanded the joining of Malda with Bihar. Their argument was that the district was included in the Bhagalpur Division during the years 1876 – 1905. The same demand was raised again in 1954. On both occasions, the people of Malda vehemently opposed this demand. The reason for selecting 1953 as the ending year of my study is that in this year the zamindari system was abolished. It may be pointed out that the district of

Malda was the land of nearly all the big zamindars of North Bengal and the abolition of the system had far-reaching consequences in socio-cultural and economic life of the district. I would like to mention here that one of the aims of our research is to highlight the contribution of the zamindars of Malda in the socio-cultural life of the district in the proper historical perspective.

AN OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

The major publications on our study are very few in numbers. Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh has written a number of articles on social, economic and political aspects of the district under colonial rule. Dr. Ghosh has conducted research on the rise and growth of English factories of Malda. Sujit Guha has made a penetrating analysis of the silk industry of Malda and Murshidabad from 1660 to 1833. Ratan Dasgupta has published an article on the urbanization, economy and politics of Englishbazar town. Tanika Sarkar has written an article on the revolt of Jitu Santal in 1932. However, she has not studied the contemporary local newspapers, an important source of information in this regard. Apart from this academic publications, some non-academic researchers have written on some aspects of our study.

HYPOTHESES

Though geographically Malda belonged to the radius of modern North Bengal, economically the district was separated from the rest of North Bengal, particularly from the northern portion of North Bengal. Because Malda was part of the Permanent Settlement areas, whereas the northern portion of North Bengal i.e. Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling belonged to the category of non-Permanent Settlement areas. Administratively Malda was also separated from the rest of North Bengal. Because the other districts of the northern portion of North Bengal belonged to non-regulated administrative structure. However, Malda was a regulated district like the other districts of Bengal Presidency.

Therefore, from the point of view of land settlement and agrarian structure, Malda was closely connected with the rest of Bengal. In other words, the revenue and agrarian system of the district was an extension of the zamindari

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system of the Barendra region of North Bengal and the southern and eastern Bengal. If a student of the agrarian history meticulously studies the rise and growth of the zamindari system in the northern portion of the present day West Bengal, he will find that Malda presented a considerable number of zamindars. In fact, from the point of view of numbers of zamindars, Malda stood next to Rajshahi and Pabna. This issue is going to be one of the major hypotheses of my research scheme.

The second major hypothesis is a corollary of the first one. Because the land revenue system here determined the social structure of the district. Unlike the rest of North Bengal, the zamindars of Malda not only controlled the agrarian affairs of rural areas, but also the rural society and urban politics. In fact, in this respect Malda was prototype of the Rajshahi district. So the society of Malda was more or less based on the structure of the land revenue system.

The third research hypothesis is that the cultivation of mulberry and mango was the lifeblood of Malda district. A popular folk-rhyme indicates the importance of mulberry, rice and mango in the economy of Malda –

Aam resham dhan
tin Maldar Jann

Aai

During the period of my study, Malda was in fact the producer of mulberry and supplier of it to Benares. In other words, the silk piece goods, which once earned a legendary fame in Bengal, were not made in Malda during our period of study. The merchants and financiers of this business mostly belonged to the *sannyasi* and *giri* community. The *marwari poddar* traders and *tilli* businessmen were also involved in this business. All this trading communities came to Malda from other districts of Bengal. It is stated that these *marwari poddars* started to come to the district from the time of Lakshman Sena. In addition, the *tilli* business community, the most prosperous section of the local business community came to Malda after the bargi invasion of Bengal. Prof. N. K. Sinha stated that some merchants came to Malda after the Great Famine of 1770. One important aspect is to be noticed here. The *marwari poddars* of Malda have been assimilated with the

local people whom we do not find in the case of Jalpaiguri, Siliguri or Coochbehar *marwaris*. This is a unique feature in the social history of Malda. This question is to be studied in proper socio-historical perspectives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first research question, which greatly preoccupies my mind, is the question of social relation between the Hindus and the Muslims. In respect of religious community-wise composition of population, Malda was the only district of North Bengal in which the Muslim formed a majority. This was a unique feature in the demographic atlas of North Bengal. Another fact may also be mentioned here that Malda was the only municipality where number of Muslim urban settlers was higher than any other towns of the then North Bengal. Despite this variation of Hindu-Muslim population, it is remarkable indeed that up to 1947 Malda remained free from any overt Hindu-Muslim conflict, though tension was not entirely absent. In the present canvas, I would like to trace the forces that operated behind such type of apparent harmonious relations between the two major communities.

The second research question, which draws my attention, is the question of the *santali* community of the district. After their abortive '*hul'* of 1855-56, a large number of *santals* from the Santal Parganas had left their ancestral home and began to settle in the adjacent areas of Bengal such as Malda. It is assumed by the social historians that this large-scale migration of the *santals* from the Santal Parganas to the district of Malda was mainly because the district was a part of the Bhagalpur Division during 1876-1905. In fact, the geographical and administrative convenience played a very vital role in the migration of *santal* population to this district in comparison with the other districts of North Bengal. Consequently, the local zamindars employed them for clearing of *jungle* lands in Barind regions. They brought under cultivation a large tract of cultivable wasteland in Barind. On the other hand, many *santals* of Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas came to the northern region of North Bengal as plantation workers. In fact, on many occasions they were forced to work in the tea gardens. With the passage of time, we find that *santal* peasants of Malda region had started a social mobility movement as well as

protest movement against the British Raj and its collaborators, namely the zamindars and *mahajans*. However, such type of socio-political behaviour was absent among the santal plantation workers of Duars and Terai region of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling respectively. It is really an interesting social phenomenon to the students of social science research group.

In fact, this is interesting enough that same group of people behaved in a different manner simply due to their settlement pattern. The *santals* of Malda district were engaged in agricultural pursuit. On the other hand, the immigrant *santals* of Jalpaiguri district worked mainly as wage labour in the tea gardens. The peasant *santal* violently protested against the oppression of the zamindars and *mahajans*. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, an organized revolt broke out among the *santals* of Barind region of Malda under the leadership of Jitu Santal. The magnitude of the incident was overwhelming in the contemporary politics of Malda. On the contrary, the plantation worker *santals* did not raise their voice against the oppressive planters. One more observation needs to be made. We know that a social movement, namely the Tana Bhagat movement had emerged and spread among the *santals* of the Jalpaiguri Duars region. However, curiously enough the Tana Bhagat movement was absent in Malda region.

The third research question that comes to my mind is the near absence of any movement among the sizable Rajbansi community of northern Malda to upgrade their social status. It may be mentioned here that a powerful social mobility movement had emerged and spread among the Rajbansi Hindus of Jalpaiguri district as well as in the other districts of North Bengal, particularly Rangpur and Dinajpur, the princely state of Coochbehar and Goalpara district in Assam. The movement came to be called the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement by its leaders and participants. However, we find a different picture in Malda. This social up gradation movement had little impact on the Rajbansi community of Malda. In other words, the Rajbansi community of Malda was not stirred at all by the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement that became widespread in other parts of North Bengal. This problem requires further research. In this connection, I like to mention here that locally the Rajbansis are known as

bangals and the part of the village in which they reside, as the *bangalpara*. They are also known in this district as *deshi* or *polia*.

METHODOLOGY

One of the very recent trends of the Indian historiography is that a number of historians have concentrated on writing the history from below i.e. the history of the toiling people of our country. An attempt to write people's history has emerged as an effective answer to the traditional approach of writing elite history. This paradigm is followed in my present dissertation. In order to prepare this dissertation I have followed different types of methodology. Materials from the State and National Archives, District Collectorate Record Office and the oldest libraries and institutions were collected and consulted very meticulously. It is unlikely that I will get sufficient materials on my study in the Archives and National Libraries. Being a study on the district of Malda, an important source should be material available there. I have made considerable use of local materials such as the records that has been present at the Collectorate Record office, contemporary weeklies and journals published from Malda and records of business organizations like the Mango Merchant Association, Malda. Apart from this, I have given much importance on oral history study. I have met and interviewed as many people as possible who were either active in or close witness to the social and political life of the district in the first half of the twentieth century.