

CHAPTER - VII

POLITICAL CONDITION OF NORTHERN
BENGAL IN THE WAKE OF THE
NON CO-OPERATION MOVEMENT

The Ahmedabad Session of the Congress held under the presidency of Hakim Ajmal Khan in December, 1921 decided to continue the Non Co-operation Movement. Mass civil disobedience was also recommended.¹

Soon after Gandhi requested the Viceroy to put an end to the repressive policy and submitted a long list that contained numerous instances of oppression. Since the Government ignored his proposal Gandhi proceeded to lead the Bardoli Satyagraha²

Next came the Chowri Chowra outrage when the police opened fire on an enraged mob and the mob subsequently killed a number of policemen.³ Gandhi was immensely shocked by this.⁴

On February 11, 1922 a meeting of the Congress Working Committee took place at Bardoli where Gandhi's proposal to suspend the movement was passed.⁵ This was however, deplored by leaders like Chittaranjan Das who now thought it appropriate to enter into the legislature and Non Co-operate with the Government from within instead of boycotting it as before.⁶ Proposals to this effect were voiced in the B.P.C.C session held in Chittagong in April, 1922.⁷ But the same proposals which formed part of the presidential address delivered by Chittaranjan

1. Mazumdar, R.C., History of Modern Bengal, Part II, p. 214, Calcutta, 1981.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

Das at Gaya were outvoted.⁸ However, in December, 1922 Chittaranjan Das, Motilal Nehru and several other leaders of the Congress especially those of Bengal decided to form the Swaraja Party.⁹ Following this Chittaranjan Das toured various places in India explaining the "Swaraja" policy of entering the councils.¹⁰ Congress was opposed to the policy in the beginning but the Bombay meeting of A.I.C.C. decided not to oppose it.¹¹ During the period that followed the Swaraja members entered the Councils and the Bengal Council witnessed several moves of those members which opposed and Non Co-operated with the Governmental proposals including crucial ones like budget.¹²

The period was marked by a depression in the arena of politics which was aggravated by Communal riots.¹² Police oppression came with renewed vigour in 1924 of which the instruments were the regulation III of 1918 and ordinance No. 1 of 1924. The ordinance promulgated was to suspend the ordinary criminal law in Bengal.¹³

In Calcutta many Congress and Swaraja leaders were arrested and many houses were searched.¹⁴ Subhas Chandra Bose, who was then the chief executive officer of Calcutta Corporation, was also arrested.¹⁵ Consequently several protest meetings¹⁶ were held and a complete hartal was observed on November 1, 1924.¹⁷

8. Ibid, p. 216.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid, p. 228 ff.

12. The Amritabasar Patrika, November 39, 1924.

13. Ibid, October 26, 1924.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid, October 30, 1924.

16. Ibid, October 28, 1924.

17. Ibid, November, 1, 1924.

The hartal of November 1, was observed in Northern Bengal also¹⁸ where the police arrested some prominent political workers. At Jalpaiguri, Khagendranath Dasgupta was arrested and interned to Godhanpasha, a terribly malarious village situated in the district of Murshidabad. He was released on November 24, 1924 after one month's detention.¹⁹

In November 1924 the governor of Bengal, Lord Lytton accompanied by his daughter Lady Hermon Lytton toured Northern Bengal.²⁰ On November 24, 1924 he arrived at Malda where he defended the repressive policy of the Government in very clear terms :

"Every singleman who has been arrested under Regulation III of 1918 or under the new ordinance was a member of a terrorist organisation"²¹

Lord Lytton however, did not fail to seize the opportunity of courting the local people particularly the Muslims. The large Muslim population of the district and the spread of the Khilafat Movement in the region might have prompted him to do so. He touched upon the subjects of local needs and extolled the munificence of the Raja of Chanchal and the Baishasari Wakf Estate* who had contributed to the opening up of a charitable dispensary.²² The

18. The Amritabasar Patrika, November 4, 1924.

19. Ibid, November 27, 1924.

20. Ibid, November 26, 1924.

21. Ibid.

22. The Amritabasar Patrika, November 25, 1924.

* The Baishasari Wakf Estate, the largest of its kind in Northern Bengal has jurisdiction over the holy Shrines of Hasrat Pandua in Malda district.

Muhammedan Association of Malda presented him with an address which referred to some of their grievances.²³ In reply to this the Governor openly sympathised with the Muslims. The following extract from his Malda speech doubtlessly proves it.

"It will be appropriate to deal with two please raised by the Mahammedan Association. One is a general plea for Communal representation on local bodies and the other a particular complaint regarding the distribution of seats over the respective wards of the Municipality. With regard to the former request the system of communal electorates has recently been introduced into the Calcutta Corporation but the Government are not at present disposed to extend the system to the Mufassal. I fully sympathise with the Muhammedan fears that their interests even in municipal matters can not be safe at the hands of a mixed electorate. As to the particular complaint that the present distribution of seats on the municipality among the various Wards is a source of hardships to the Muhammedans and needs readjustment I admit that there appears to be some force in the contention of the Association and the local self-government department propose to take the matter up with the municipality and the local officers to see if a fair distribution can be secured. While on the subject of safeguarding Muhammedan interests I may take the opportunity of announcing what will be of special interest to the Muhammedan Association that the Government have been pleased to

23. Ibid, November 26

make a free gift to the Committee of Model Madrasa of the land now occupied by it subject of course to the usual conditions. As the market value of this land is nearly six thousand rupees I think you will agree that Government have contributed generously to the furtherance of Muhammedan education in this district".²⁴

The Governor presented sanads of their titles to Khansahib Moulvi Abdul Gani and Raisahib Panchanan Mazumdar, two prominent local gentlemen. The Khansahib was lauded by the Governor for 'in the days of Non Co-operation' he gave 'sound and sober advice' to his followers and 'contributed to the success of the campaign against the movement'.²⁵

But on the day of Lord Lytton's arrival a complete hartal was observed at Malda. The shopkeepers, coolies, boatmen and cartmen also went on strike.²⁶ In a move to foil the strike the police worked very hard to remove the hartal placards and requested the merchants and shopkeepers not to join the strike. But their attempts proved to be abortive. The day was a 'hat day' at Englishbasar and the monday hat was not attended by the people and the town looked deserted.²⁷

The hartal at Malda signifies that despite the suspension of the Non Co-operation movement and the depression in the field of politics that followed the political awarness of the people did not dwindle down as such and the Congress still exercised considerable

24. Ibid, November 26, 1924.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid, November 27, 1924.

27. Ibid.

influence over the people.

The years 1924-25 witnessed some very notable incidents in Northern Bengal. In 1924 Dalbahadur Giri, one of the greatest leaders of the Non Co-operation Movement in the region who had been ailing after his release from the Hoogly jail, passed away.²⁸ In the following year Chittaranjan Das died at Darjeeling. A few days before his death Gandhi visited Northern Bengal and met Das at Darjeeling.²⁹ During his stay at Darjeeling, Gandhi addressed a ladies' conference on spinning and khadi held at the Hindu Public Hall and a large gathering in the market square of the town where he spoke on temperance.³⁰ Gandhi also visited Siliguri³¹ and Jalpaiguri³² and addressed gatherings on his way back from Darjeeling accompanied by Mahadev Desai.

During the period between the mass movements of the early twenties and those of the early thirties the leaders of the Congress paid considerable attention to social works like flood relief and famine relief. The vagaries of nature provided them ample opportunities of mass contact. The devastating flood of Northern Bengal in 1922 prompted Subhas Chandra Bose to visit this region and organise relief works.³³ He was assisted by many youths of Northern Bengal including Charu Chandra Sanyal and Khagendranath Dasgupta of Jalpaiguri.³⁴ In fact Bose exercised almost unparalleled

28. Ibid, November 5; Ibid, November 12, 1924.

29. The Statesman, June 12, 1925.

30. Ibid, June 9, 1925.

31. Sanyal, M., 'Swadhinata Andolane Jalpaiguri', (Article in), Jalpaiguri District Centenary Souvenir, p. 326.

32. The Statesman, June 10, 1925.

33. Sinha, Nripendra Krishna, Netajir Jibani O Bani, p. 12, Cal., 1952

34. Sanyal M., OP. Cit., p. 325.

influence over the youths of Bengal. Following his election as the P.P.C.C. President in 1928 many youths entered the body and 'its management came into the hands of younger generation'.³⁵ Therefore it is no wonder that Bose had a host of followers in far off Northern Bengal.

The famine of 1928 severely affected the district of Dinajpur. This time J.M. Dasgupta, MLC, visited Balurghat with a view to taking stock of the situation on behalf of the Congress. A relief centre was organised at Patnitala which he visited. This visit, it was expected, would strengthen the relief organisation and revive the lost prestige of the Congress in villages.³⁶ The Congress also chose Patnitala, the area worst-hit by the famine, as the venue of the Dinajpur District Political Conference to be held in March, 1928.³⁷ An exhibition was also proposed to be held at Patnitala at the same period.³⁸

In 1928 the boycott of Simon Commission was the most important political event. In accordance with the provisions of Government of India Act 1919, a British parliamentary committee headed by Sir John Simon was appointed in 1927 for a review of the act.³⁹ The Commission did not include any Indian and this paternalistic approach generated immense resentment all over the country.⁴⁰ The Commission was boycotted by all the political parties and series

35. Political Dept. (Political Branch), Confidential File No. 441, Govt. of Bengal, 1928.

36. The Amritabazar Patrika, January 16, 1928.

37. Ibid, February 4, 1928.

38. Ibid.

39. Mazumdar, R.C., OP. Cit., p. 291.

40. Ibid.

of meetings were held all over India which advised the people of boycott the statutory committee.⁴¹

In Calcutta on January 22, 1928 a huge public meeting was held at Sraddhananda Park in which announcement was made of a hartal to be observed on February 3.⁴²

The boycott campaign was a great success in Northern Bengal. Preparations were made well in advance to make the hartal of February 3 a success. The following is the text of a telegram⁴³ sent by Sureshnanjan Chatterjee, Asstt. Secretary of Balurghat Congress Committee to the Amritabazar Patrika. This was drafted on January 30.

"There will be a complete Hartal on the 3rd February till 4.30 P.M. No conveyance will ply from Hill to Balurghat. No Coolie will be available. Intending travellers should take note of it otherwise they will be put to great difficulties".

A public meeting held at Balurghat under the presidency of Moulvi Amiruddin Chowdhury, Zemindar and a prominent Congress leader of the region, resolved to observe the strike.⁴⁴ It was proclaimed by beating of drums at the weekly hat attended by a great number of people from different parts of the Balurghat Sub-division.⁴⁵

41. Ibid, p. 292.

42. The Amritabazar Patrika, January 24, 1928.

43. Ibid, February 1, 1928.

44. The Amritabazar Patrika, February 1, 1928.

45. Ibid.

At Jalpaiguri also preparations were made to crown the strike with success. A fairly attended public meeting was presided over by Srinath Hore, a local pleader and Congress leader on January 26.⁴⁶ The venue of the meeting was Arya Natya Samaj Hall. The meeting denounced⁴⁷ the elaborate preparations⁴⁸ made by the Jo hukums or pro-government elements to receive the governor who was to visit Jalpaiguri on February 16, 1928.⁴⁹ Furthermore the meeting of Arya Natya Samaj Hall declared that the 'Public Welcome' proposed to be accorded to the governor was 'Not a public one'.⁵⁰

The February 3, hartal at Jalpaiguri was 'Spontaneous' and 'unique'.⁵¹ The market was closed on that day. Nearly one hundred offices of Joint Stock Companies remained closed. The students did not attend schools. In spite of threats and intimidation the carriages, carts, motor cars, buses and lorries did not ply.⁵² As coolies joined the strike passengers had to carry their own luggages.⁵³ In this connexion we should not fail to note that the Congress had arranged for special Congress cars which conveyed the lady passengers on that day.⁵⁴ In the evening the Arya Natya Samaj Hall was again the venue of a meeting⁵⁵ which upheld the boycott programme.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid, February 1, 1928.

48. Ibid, February 9, 1928.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid, February 1, 1928.

51. Ibid, February 4, 1928.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid, February 4

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

✓ Hartal at Balurghat was decided by an all party meeting.⁵⁶ On February 3, private banks, shops and hotels were closed. The strike was joined by contractors, merchants, colliers, motor drivers, clerks of pleaders and the students. The pleaders' and muktears' libraries were locked up and only a few of them ventured to attend the court.⁵⁷ A meeting was also held which unanimously passed the resolution of no-confidence in the statutory commission.⁵⁸

The agitation, however, continued even after the strike. A mass meeting was held at Balurghat on February 20 of which the venue was Bura Kalitala.⁵⁹ Susilranjan Chatterjee presided over the meeting attended by the Hindus and the Muslims irrespective of their social stations. The local merchants including the Marwaris pledged to boycott all British goods.⁶⁰ The involvement of the Marwaris is an important aspect of the nationalist movement in our area of study. The community was divided over the question of boycott of the statutory commission.⁶¹ A section of Calcutta Marwaris denounced the boycott campaign and issued clearcut statement to that effect.⁶²

The boycott directed against the statutory commission was successful in the district of Malda also where on February 20, 1928 a colourful procession⁶³ started from the Congress office and passed

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid, February 5, 1928.

59. Ibid, February 23, 1928.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid, January 29, 1928.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid, February 25

through the principal streets of the town accompanied by a band of singers singing national songs in chorus. On that day a public meeting was held at the local dharmasala under the presidency of a local pleader named Upendranath Maitra.⁶⁴ The meeting denounced the Simon Commission as constituted in utter disregard of the self respect of the Indian nation and resolved to boycott British goods immediately concentrating on the boycott of British clothes.⁶⁵

In response to the challenge of boycott the authorities adopted a policy of discrimination against the nationalists. High officials of the Government meddled even in trivial affairs like election of the Secretary of the Managing Committee of a school.⁶⁶ When Surendra Chandra Bagchi, a pleader of Balurghat and a Congress leader of Swarajya following, was elected Secretary of the local Govt. aided Girls' School, the sub-divisional officer of Balurghat put forward his objections.⁶⁷ He argued that Surendra Chandra was 'a member of the Swarajya party of extreme views' and was 'always against Government measures'.⁶⁸ Curiously enough the sub-divisional officer was supported by the District Magistrate of Dinajpur and the Inspectress of schools Dacca circle.⁶⁹ The S.D.O., however, directed the managing committee to elect somebody else. The Grants-in-Aid received by the school was stopped pending dismissal of Surendra

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. The Amritabazar Patrika, February 24, 1928

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

Chandra Bagchi.⁷⁰ The incident caused sensation at Balurghat.⁷¹

Thus during the period between early twenties and early thirties several mass movements took place in Northern Bengal. The boycott of Simon Commission as a matter of fact was the prelude to the Civil Disobedience movement of the early thirties.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.