
I N T R O D U C T I O N

The period 1857-1947 occupies a very important place in the history of India as well as of Bengal. This importance, as we are aware, is mostly due to the movements for national liberation launched during the period.

The historiography of the nationalist movement in India has been contributed by numerous scholars. Nevertheless most of their noteworthy works deal with the subject from a broader national perspective and often have little to say about the involvement and participation in the struggle of the people of interior sub-regions or in other words do not usually highlight the micro aspect of the subject.

The struggle for liberation had its root in the socio-economic as well as political infrastructure of Indian polity which is essentially a relative factor. As for instance the politico-economic pattern that prevailed in a native state like Kochbehar had only a few things in common with a metropolis like Calcutta. Therefore, political values and social norms differed from region to region giving a variety of expressions to them. These varieties, local or regional, have drawn the attention of a host of modern scholars like Stephen Henringham (Peasant Movement in Colonial India : North Bihar 1917-42, C.J. Baker (The Politics of South India 1920-27), Amalendu Guha (Planter Raj to Swaraj; Freedom Struggle and Electoral

Politics in Assam 1826-1947), C.A. Bayly (Local Roots of Indian Politics Allahabad, 1880-1920), Gyanendra Pandey (The Ascendency of the Congress in Uttarpradesh 1926-34; A Study in Imperfect Mobilisation) etc. who offer different methodologies and deal with various subject matters.

In the present thesis an attempt has been made to study and analyse the various aspects of the nationalist movement and freedom struggle in five Northern Bengal districts namely, Malda, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Kochbehar and Darjeeling. It is worthwhile to mention that the present work differs in many ways with the regional studies mentioned above because of the demographic and geographical peculiarities of our area of study which is the homeland of various ethnic groups and a predominantly agrarian region dotted with a few semi urban pockets like the district centres or sub divisional centres like Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, Darjeeling, Malda, Kochbehar etc. Three of these districts viz., Malda, Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri were directly affected by the partition of India. Large chunks of territory from Malda¹ and Jalpaiguri² were given to Pakistan while the western part of the district of Dinajpur was given to India which eventually came to be known as the district of West Dinajpur.³ At a later date a portion of the district of Purnea⁴ in Bihar was added to West Dinajpur providing

1. Sengupta, J.C., W.B. District Gazetteers, Malda, p. 3, Calcutta, 1969.

2. De, Barun et al., W.B. District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri, p. 66, Calcutta, 1981.

3. Sengupta, J.C., W.B. District Gazetteers, West Dinajpur, p. 5, Calcutta, 1965.

4. Ibid.

the state of West Bengal a continuous line of territory from the shores of the Bay of Bengal to the hills in the district of Darjeeling. The newly added territory known as the Islampur sub division of the district of West Dinajpur forms part of our area of study which may be defined as the region lying south of the Eastern Himalayan mountains and North of the Ganga and has the state of Bihar on the west and Bangladesh on the east.

The political and economic movements that took place in the geographical region described above have so far been neglected. It may be categorically stated that no concrete attempt has yet been made to highlight the political aspirations of the people of Northern Bengal and their participation in the nationalist movement as well.

In this thesis topical discussions have been made of the various socio political and economic movements that took place in the region between 1857 and 1947.

To begin with an epochmaking change had taken place in the region in the second half of nineteenth century which had considerably affected the socio-political milieu. In a brief discussion this transformation has been attributed to the western contact particularly the improvement of communications and spread of western education.

The movement for the promotion of Swadeshi and the boycott of British run educational institutions that took place in the first decade of the twentieth century was amazingly successful in Northern Bengal. Pioneer nationalists like Radheshohandra Seth of Malda had

prepared the ground upon which the enormous edifice of national education movement was built by stalwarts like Benoy Kumar Sarkar etc. The movement had penetrated into the micro-interior regions of our area of study and was most intensive in the district of Malda (Chapter II).

In the early twenties the Non Co-operation Movement once again shook the region considerably. This time the centre of political gravity shifted from Malda to Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling although the Khilafat movement made much headway in Malda which had a vast Muslim population (Chapter III).

Right from the first decade of the twentieth century youngmen from Northern Bengal joined the revolutionary movements organised by secret revolutionary groups like the Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar etc. Northern Bengal activists took part in all sorts of overt activities of the revolutionaries. As a matter of fact some of the ablest revolutionary cadres of the early period were from Northern Bengal. ✓ Mention may be made here of Prafulla Chaki of Rangpur, Birendra Duttgupta of Jalpaiguri, Mahendranath Das and Krishnajiban Sanyal of Malda etc. The revolutionary groups of Bengal continued to enlist the support of a section of the younger generation of Northern Bengal till the late thirties (Chapter IV).

The peasants of Northern Bengal for a long period struggled against oppression as well as exploitation of the Indigo Planters,⁵

5. Progs. of the Govt. of Bengal (Judicial Dept.) File 146A
No. 20-24, July, 1877.

the local landlords and moneylenders and the foreign rulers.⁶ Particularly in the twenties, thirties and forties of the twentieth century a number of organised peasant movements took place in Northern Bengal which include the Chhatrishha movement,⁷ the tribal rising of Malda⁸ and the Tebhaga movement.⁹ In the chapter on agrarian unrest (Chapter V) these movements have been discussed at length. The peasants also participated in large numbers in the mass movements launched by the Congress. An interesting and remarkable feature of these movements is the large-scale participation of the tribal peasants.

In a predominantly agrarian region like Northern Bengal the Trade Union movements proliferated at a later date. Especially in the forties the power of trade unionism was seriously felt in Northern Bengal. The Tea Estates became the focus of Trade Union movements.¹⁰ Besides the railwaymen,¹¹ the teachers¹² and men of some other professions fought for the cause of the working class as has been shown in this thesis (Chapter VI).

The movement for the boycott of the Simon Commission (Chapter VII) and the Civil Disobedience movement (Chapter VIII) spread to all the districts of Northern Bengal. A notable feature of this movement in the region was the participation of women in great

6. The Pioneer, December 16, 1932; Roy, S, Muktijuddhe Bharatiya Krishak, p. 113 ff, Calcutta, 1980.

7. Chakraborty, K., 'Swadhinata Sangrame Balurghat' (Article in) Madhuparni, Aswin, 1372 B.S.

8. Bangabani, December 17, 18 & 19, 1932.

9. Desh, Falgun 17, 1353 B.S.; Rasul, A., Krishak Sabhar Itihag, p. 171, Calcutta, 1982.

10. The Amritabasar Patrika, March 9, 1947.

11. Ibid, July 14, 1946.

12. Ibid, April 29, 1946.

numbers. Strong women's organisation was founded even in the interior areas like Balurghat where Prova Chatterjee, Rajlakshmi Devi etc. were prominent Congress leaders.¹³ In Malda also leaders like Surendrabala Roy led the Congress organisation with great courage especially when the noted leaders of Congress were incarcerated.¹⁴

The thirties of the century were also marked by the growing tension of communalism. Different communities of Northern Bengal were increasingly becoming conscious of their respective communal interests. From an analysis of the political events of the contemporary period it appears that the Indian National Congress had lost much of its popularity following the failure of the Civil Disobedience movement. Organisations like the Muslim League the Hindu Mahasabha and the Gorkha League had capitalised on this vacuum in the arena of politics.

In the forties came the Quit India movement the spirit of which overcame communalism for the time being. Once again masses of people rallied round the Congress for a common cause. The movement assumed violent proportions in areas like Balurghat¹⁵ where in fact some sort of peoples' war was waged against the Government (Chapter IX).

13. Dasgupta, Kamala, Swadhinata Sangrame Panglar Nari, p. 193, Aswin, 1370 B.S.

14. Ibid, p. 205-06.

15. De Sarkar, B., The Peoples' Revolution — Balurghat 1942 (Article in) Challenge — A Saga of India's Struggle for Freedom (Ed. N.R. Roy et al.), p. 455 ff, New Delhi, 1984.

In all these movements the people of every sub-region of our area of study had participated. Various communities namely the Muslims, the Rajbanshis, the Nepalis etc. had joined the mass movements launched by the Congress. It is worthwhile to mention that Northern Bengal had produced great Muslim leaders like Moulvi Nur Bux of Malda and Amiruddin Choudhury of Balurghat and Nepali leaders like Dalbahadur Giri, Agam Sing Giri and Jangbir Sapcotta.

Barely within a few months after the outbreak of the Quit India movement the province of Bengal including its Northern districts was visited by a devastating famine. A period of confusion and frustration followed during which the activities of communists and socialists increased. Trade Union activities and agrarian unrest generated very rapidly. A remarkable event of this period was the launching of the Tebhaga movement which continued even after the partition of India.

During the period of confusion and tense political environment India was partitioned which affected Northern Bengal to a great extent.

As we have referred to earlier the struggle of the people of Northern Bengal is a hitherto untouched subject. Mention may be made here of the fact that the paucity of source materials has rendered the study of the subject difficult. The records housed in the state Archives, West Bengal have been consulted extensively. These records as is expected, do not throw light on different

aspects of the nationalist movement in a neglected region like Northern Bengal. In fact the Government records often remain silent about many important events in Northern Bengal and for this reason could be used only in a limited manner. Furthermore the reliability of the police records, as we are aware, is often exposed to doubt. As regards the district records we may mention that we have virtually no means to use them. A devastating fire had gutted the record office of the Kochbehar Collectorate in 1974 while the 1968 deluge had destroyed the Jalpaiguri district records. In Malda and Darjeeling the records are kept in such a haphazard manner that it is almost impossible to locate the relevant documents from the huge mass of papers piled up in the respective record offices.

For the reasons stated above we ought to depend on local sources like local newspapers and periodicals published during the days of struggle. It may be of interest to note here that while searching for local sources for the present thesis some invaluable primary sources have been located for the first time which are lying at the disposal of some institutions and individuals in Northern Bengal. The reports of a national school (situated in the interior village of Kaligram) and the memoirs of Mahendranath Das, the terrorist revolutionary from the district of Malda who received life imprisonment for having assassinated the pro-Government Headmaster of Malda Zilla School in 1916 are of such kind of records which are yet to be published.

The contemporary sources like the old files of various

newspapers published from Calcutta and other cities have been of great help and in fact used to a considerable extent in this thesis. Interviews with freedom fighters who are still alive have helped this work not a little.

Finally we should refer to the secondary sources which include a great number of books, journals, anthologies and periodicals which contain full length or stray references to the subject matter of this thesis.