

## Chapter - IV

### **Role of Santipur Weaving Class - as a reformer of society**

In the previous chapter we have discussed the mass protest of the weavers of Santipur. Revolt, protest or honesty were innate in the weavers at Santipur and so it was natural for them to express their grudge and fight for the social issues being part of the society and they did it rightly. The social reformation movement in the 19th century is well known. It was not just unrestricted support towards the reform led by Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and their effort in building up mass support and awareness for the same was remarkable. Due to the entry of the East India Company and other foreign companies the socio-economic atlas of India as well as for weavers of Santipur was changing. In tune with this change the socio-cultural changes started in the 19th century and since the last half of the century it joined hands with the political movements. Since early days the weavers of Santipur were committed to the mass welfare moves. Without social reforms, development and freedom from the claustrophobic social malice was not possible. This ultimate truth was beyond the understanding of many learned whereas the simple half educated weavers could understand that easily. They had chosen the loom and weaving as their weapon to create awareness among the people. The finer needle work of the weavers of Santipur and they had used these tapestry to express the messages of Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and reach the mothers and sisters and brothers in Bengal. Later, during the independence movement they had also used the same medium to express their commitment towards the country. The practice of Sati or self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husband was a social practice prevalent in India from ancient times. To stop this inhuman practice Raja Rammohan Roy gave the movements its real

momentum. Finally Governor General Lord William Bentinck prohibited Sati in 1829 by a Government Regulation. The Santipur weavers welcomed the Regulation and they designed on the cloths the lines praising the efforts of Rammohan as "*Banglar Susantan Raja Rammohan*". Inspired by Vidyasagar's effort to Ban Child marriage and promote widow remarriage in 1856, the weavers embroidered designs on the border of Santipuri saris and dhotis, depicting - "*Beche thako Vidyasagar Chirojibi Hoe*" this was the first line from the composition by Baidyanath Mukhopadhyay.

the complete verse is as under -

*Beche thako Vidyasagar Chirojibi Hoe*  
*Sadare koreche report bidhoba ramonir biye ||*  
*Kobe habe heno din, prokash hobe a ain,*  
*Jelai jelai thanai thanai berube hukum,*  
*Bidhoba ramonir biyer lege jabe dhum |*  
*Moner sukhe thakbo mora monomoto poti loye |*  
*Emon din kabe habe, baidhobyo jontrona jabe,*  
*avoron poribo sobe, loke dekhbe tai,*  
*Alochal kanchkola malsar mukhe chhai,*  
*Eyo hoye jabo sabe baron dala mathai loye |*  
*Kobibor hese koi, ghuchilo nareer voi,*  
*Sakoler hater kharu hoilo akshay |*  
*Sobe bole Bidyasagar mahasayer joi ||*

During that time Vidyasagar had visited Santipur and was felicitated with a cloth designed in the above manner with those lines.<sup>1</sup> During the social reforms movement, Gour Das Basak, a dedicated baisnab was a famous weaver. Inspired by the social reforms movement he gave up his baisnab religion to adopt Christianity. In support of widow remarriage he had written and designed the

following lines that were sung by the cart drivers around the villages- "*Vidyasagar Sadare koreche report bidhobader hobe biye*". Based on this, Belgachia Natyashala was established and Michael Madhusudan's drama 'Sharmistha' was staged. Later Rabindranath's Nobel Prize winning was depicted as - "*Banglar Robi biswer kobi*".<sup>2</sup>

No other instances of such social awareness could be found among other weavers in Bengal other than at Santipur. Situating 61 miles away from Calcutta and poorly connected with the city but amazingly the weavers in that remote corners were aware of contemporary socio-political movement in Calcutta. Finer muslins were found in Dacca that was slightly better than ones at Santipur. But immaculate tapestry and preserving different events through needlework was the characteristics of the weavers of Santipur. In the mass movements the weavers had separate existence and this was one of its significant aspects.

Another important facet of social reforms was to eradicate division in the society due to caste and creed. The weavers of Santipur were to acclaimed for their broad-minded attitude. During Mughal period the weaver community were the ones who used to weave. During the time of the Nawabs when textile industry was flourishing, people of many other castes had joined this profession.<sup>3</sup> Generally the people belonging to the baisya caste used to carry on with this significant profession. But the weavers did not earn much respect in the society. During the 18th and 19th century the superstitions and malice of caste and creed had differentiated them further. The Hindus did the main section of the work in the weaving process. But the masters, arang-worksmen and washerman or dholai-men were the Muslims. The combined effort of the Hindus and Muslims made the Santipur textiles world famous. The comunal harmony among the weavers of Santipur was exemplary.<sup>4</sup>

That the Santipur weavers could rise above the superstition of caste creed was

evident from the marriages that had occurred in 19th century between the Radhi and Barendra sect of communities.<sup>5</sup> At Pabna the marriage between Sri Prankrishna Saha's grandson (Radhi) and Sri Kartik Chandra Pramanik's daughter (Barendra) was an instance of such generosity. Sri Bonkobihari Basak of Dogachi village was the patron of several such marriages.

In the last quarter of 19th century and the first half of the 20th century the revolt of the factory workers was laced with communalism and this was their weakness. But they could get out of this from the first half of the 20th century. The weavers of Santipur were also aware of the importance of women's progress in the society. The women were self reliant in the weaving industry from the very beginning. Those who were in need of money were able to earn from weaving itself. They had never thought of the women folks as the second class citizen rather the women were thought of the complete and enlightened and cultured messiah of the society as contemplated by Rammohan, Vidyasagar and the weavers supported such thoughts wholeheartedly and the weavers of Santipur were remarkable in it. They realised that education was the primary step to women's emancipation. They strived continually to include all children particularly girl-child within the purview of education among the weavers community in Bengal. They had made written acknowledgement and appeal in this regard in the Bengali magazine of weavers' community 'Tantu O Tantri'.<sup>6</sup> To inspire the women they had open invitation for writing articles for the above papers from the women of the weaver's community. Consequently Srimati Protima Seth had written about the importance of education among women and awareness of their rights. She suggested the formation of women's association or 'Nari Sangha' for solving the problems of women.<sup>7</sup> It was quite unthinkable at that time.

Due to this awareness Santipur was chosen for setting up the weaving school

over all other weaving centres. Vice chairman of Santipur municipality Sri Bhagabati Charan Das, Raysaheb Sri Khetranath Pramanik had pioneered the process. In the age when there was acute crisis of basic necessities, they could think of the importance of setting weaving school for the youths to combat the problems of unemployment. Santipur was basically the weaver predominant area and famous for textile-weaving centre hence it was most suitable for such high-class ideal weaving school.<sup>8</sup> After the school started at Santipur, a good number of boys and girls have attended it and till to date it stands there with its glorious history.

The weavers' protest against the vices of child marriage and polygamy was significant. They started sensitizing the weaver's community about the physiological, psychological, economical and ethical adverse effects of such vices upon them barring all progress. They sensitized the community about the myths of wrong reproductive practices and how it can incapacitate the ability of hard labour, affecting mental strength and happiness. Among the western people Anne Besant was the foremost to sensitize about these issues and had to face hardships for it though the labourers could understand its benefits later.<sup>9</sup> The weaver's community was not backward in any way. The weavers of Santipur was advanced with time and adapted with the changes.

They had also participated in the India wide self-empowerment movement when all other provinces of India had integrated themselves and unitedly empowered themselves and rose gainst the British, the weavers of Santipur did not lag behind. They had inspired themselves with the spirit of 'arise and awake' and know your rights. 'Otho jago, nijeder odhikar bujhe nao' and advanced despite the fact that the job was not easy. During the post industrial revolution the handloom production was hampered. Many of the weavers had shifted to other profession for survival. The weavers broke into several groups and sub-groups

that destroyed their traditional unity. Utter poverty had driven some to dishonest recourses faking inferior clothes and as those of original Santipur stuffs and selling them to make high profits.<sup>10</sup> Some were using higher quality yarns at the borders and in between using inferior yarns claiming it to be of good quality.<sup>11</sup> Besides the stay orders put by congress over Santipur textile was taking the weavers away from their looms and profession. In this difficult situation it was really tough to bring the weavers back to their profession.

There were plenty of problems. The economic misery of the weavers can be attributed to the existence of the intermediaries between the buyers and the sellers or weavers. The intermediaries controlled the textile business. They were the investors. Another set of intermediaries who were residents of Santipur was the wholesalers. They would take the textiles to the retailers at Howrah haat or Calcutta market. So many middlemen caused huge difference between the prices at the weaver's hand and the final sale price and the artisan was worst affected. Weavers would lose on the profit and moneylenders prospered. The weavers understood the elimination of the intermediaries in the process to claim rightful profit. They had realised that to survive handloom in the face of mechanized loom they would need improved techniques.<sup>12</sup> Otherwise it would be difficult to thrive against competition with the foreign companies. Gokhale' Bittal das and Mr. Havel Chatterton could establish the supremacy of handloom over powerloom. Though it was declared that the western method of powerloom was not good but western spirit, its persistence, never to give up attitude were acclaimed great. In the book - "Sachitra Bayan Bigyan", Sri Rasamoy Singha had suggested new techniques in handloom.

Nowadays certain new varieties of loom have been discovered and the basic reason behind this is still the clattering loom (Thakthaki Tant). Many varieties of looms could be designed and derived from the basic variety that any intelligent

weaver would understand. During weaving on one side the cloth is prepared and wrapped around the front part called noroz on the other side the warp yarn is taken out from the outer naroz. Both the naroz are kept secured with the help of latch. Hence after weaving a little each time one has to unlock and tighten the latch and that leads to loss of time. So if by any technique we can attach with the naroz a toothed wheel and a ratchet or by any way set it such that after wrapping the cloth in the naroz and releasing the latter it would remain in position then the loss of time for locking/unlocking the latch can be avoided. Similarly the wooden loom can be designed so that the maku need not be pushed and the push in the rod would move the maku automatically. 'Salvation Army Loom' is one of the instances of this kind."<sup>13</sup>

But not just at Santipur, weavers of other areas were indifferent about the use of improvement in loom design. The Santipur weavers were aware about the lethargy and lack of motivation. The weaver community at large along with the Santipur weavers was keen on restoring the lost glory of Bengal textile through persistent effort. They were eager to overcome obstacles and gain strength. The primary need was to identify the loopholes and make people aware of it and finally correct them.

To identify the defects in the loom structure many efforts were made. The first step was to set up a weavers union to unite the Santipur weavers under one roof. They would be able to express their grievances and discuss solutions there. The organisation would give the necessary platform to discuss their problems and progress. Besides a cooperative credit society was the need of the hour to enable weavers to sell their products directly in the market. It was then a remote thing for the illiterate weavers until some of the learned and well to do persons of the society would come forward to support the weavers.<sup>14</sup>

In order to aware the weaver community, the committed and patriotic weavers

continued writing articles in different papers. Santipur had its own publication called Jubak from where we come across references of different conferences of weavers. In those conferences the weavers discussed about the use of advanced technique and designs for looms and effort to realise it was remarkable.

The Resolutions of some of the weaver's conferences are given below:-

1323 Bangabdo, Pous 9th

“On the above date at Santipur a conference was held. People from all classes poor and rich, from Santipur and Sutragarh had joined in. The first meeting of the conference was held in the hall of the English medium school, Oriental Academy. Sri Bhagabatcharan Das, M.A. presided over it. The objective was to spread literacy among the weaver community. Sri Ramkrishna Das was the secretary, Sri Bamacharan Das treasurer, Gokulchandra Pramanik, Sri Hajarilal Dalal and two others were the assistant secretaries. Sri Bhagabatcharan admitted to donate Rs 100 to the central fund. Sri Nabadwip Chandra Pramanik though not present, confirmed over telegram of sending money for the fund. He had agreed to donate Rs 1001 for the national literacy mission and provide scholarship to one student. Also member of the village community who were at work in places like Kanpur, Lucknow, Jamalpur, Assam, Dinajpur had sent letters, money and praised the effort saying that the effort would be successful where people like Sri Bhagabatcharan, Sri Bamacharan, Sri Nabadwip Chandra were involved.

Such efforts were not new at Santipur. 15 years back another such meeting was held at the same venue and since the rich people of the community could not join the attempt went in vain. We often fail to understand who are the great people. At Santipur among the 3000 people the dominant classes were of Goswami, tantubai and ripukar (muslim tapestry artist) who were advanced, rich, intelligent and educated. They lacked progress for lack of unity among

them.<sup>15</sup>

1324 Bangabdo, Baisakh :

The weaver community were above the division of caste, colour or creed. For progress it is important to mix open-mindedly and have generosity. Creating distance among each other had become a normal practise. Most of the enlightened people had admitted to the fact. It is imperative to educate the fellow members of the community. Social interaction and exchange of views is possible through the magazines of the community.<sup>16</sup>

1326 Bangabdo, 18th Asadh

On the above date Thursday evening after 6pm, a huge meeting was held for the weavers of barendra community of Santipur at the premise named Pond View of Sri Nabinchandra Pramanik, a great well wisher of the community. More than 500 people had attended it. Sri Bhagabatcharan Das presided over it.

He delivered a remarkable speech on the "Strength of Unity". Much money was spent in the meeting but Sri Nabinchandra was not worried what he wanted was to unite the weavers community rising above all differences. At Santipur many Basak families are there but lack of unity had led them to break into sub groups. The internal meanness, competitiveness made them weaker and dragged them into misery without progress. The meetings were held to dissolve this difference and unite them. Sri Nabinchandra had visited every house requesting the members to be present in the meeting. His commitment and effort would perhaps take the entire effort to heights and benefitted the weaver community. The appeal signed by all leaders of different regions were read in the meeting which highlighted the internal conflicts among the Santipur weavers that had left their glory and fame almost extinct. The weavers have made groups and subgroups that had created differences among themselves hence were separated.

The groups need to be united beyond all differences or else weaver community will be soon extinct.<sup>17</sup>

From 'Tantu O Tantri' an article on 'Santipur Tantubai Sangha' has details of a meeting of the weaver community that reveals the social awareness of the community.

On the above date at the school premises the second annual meeting of the association was held that was presided over by Bhagabaticharan Das. Secretary was Sri Amulya Kumar Pramanik. 15 issues were taken up and discussed. The remarkable ones were: -

1. Boys like Sri Sushil Kumar Pramanik had received higher education. They should be felicitated.
2. Uniting weaver conference with other conferences.
3. Suggesting support of association for the census on weavers in the community.
4. 'Tantu O Tantri' magazine handed over to an effective association was happily acknowledged.
5. Requesting widows of the community to engage in profession of their own community and not to approach to other communities
6. Increase revenue through collecting membership fees and enrolling more members.
7. Proposal to establish a health centre
8. Proposal for holding a district conference for the weaver community"<sup>18</sup>

The other matters that were discussed were that in the second year an average 34 boys and girls had received education from the weaving school out of which 27 are disabled. Some of them had received admission in Oriental and other English medium schools for higher study.

From the above it is evident that the weavers of Santipur were highly aware and

socially conscious and keen on social reform that places them higher above many other communities.

The weavers of Santipur had realised the importance of education much before. Poverty was the primary obstacle. A reference in the Jubok magazine reveals that awareness. Sri Damodar Pramanik –a famous weaver of Santipur wrote that want of money was driving the weavers to direct their sons to other professions other than weaving. As a result weaving was affected and there was threat against its further development. The literates among the weavers community were not taking up weaving as their profession. But everyone needed to come forward or else the progress of the community was impossible. So the call of the hour was to forget hesitation, doubts and revive the latent energy to progress.<sup>19</sup>

In 1323 Bangabdo at Santipur with the above objective the 'Jatio Siksha Bistar Samity' was founded. Every year the mission held meetings and its work continued. In 31st Aswin, 1328 Bangabdo, in the evening, the 6th annual meeting was held in the house of Sri Nabadwip Chandra Pramanik. In tune with national literacy progress matters related to the spread of education in the weaver community was thoroughly discussed.<sup>20</sup> The 6th annual meeting was also held in the same venue. Sri Saratchandra Banga Mohodoy had presided over it. The response was not very encouraging. But the meeting had discussed important issues. To ease the work of the association, Sri Sachinath Pramanik was elected both secretary and treasurer. Sri Haripada Pramanik was elected additional assistant secretary.<sup>21</sup>

In this drive for literacy another programme was the establishment of free school at Chugacha for the children of the community. The well wishers like Sri Haridas Pramanik, Sri Amulya Kumar Pramanik and Sri Hariprasad Bidyanto patronized the school. Many children started studying in the schools. Not just school, but

to encourage students prizes were distributed too.<sup>22</sup> In the 7th annual meeting this step was initiated. Sri Rasamay Pramanik felicitated the students with garlands and addressed them saying the garlands were much beyond that when they saw the meanings should reach their soul and inspire them.<sup>23</sup>

The weavers did not restrict their endeavour to spread education among the Hindus, its effect had reached to the Muslims as well. There were few schools for the Hindu girls and the weaver community requested the Muslims to set up schools for their girls as well enhancing the benefits. Educated mothers would produce an educated son that was the belief then. The Hindus praised the Muslims for being proactive in many fields and urged them to be so in the field of education as well. This was a very unique examples of Hindu Muslim unity and communal harmony.<sup>24</sup>

Not just promoting education, attempts were taken to bring back the educated weavers in the community to the traditional profession of weaving and not to take up jobs elsewhere. In the 'Tantu O Tantri' magazine Sri Damodar Pramanik had appealed to the weaver community to discard lethargy and hesitation and also analyzed the reasons. Most of the people at Santipur are economically backward. He had identified laziness; inconsistent effort, uncontrolled freedom and lack of farsightedness were the reasons behind their weakness. Consistent effort and regular hard work can assure earnings better than in any professions. However, in the last decade of the 19th century the condition of the weavers was better to some extent. Damodar Pramanik said that, If a weaver worked for 6 hours regularly his daily income would be equal to or more than earned by any graduate. With regular 6hours of labour a weaver could easily earn Rs 2 to 9 daily. Due to variation of the seasons and adverse climatic condition the weaver might not get similar volume of work regularly. But if the weaver would plan and work with determination he could still manage 5 to 6 hours of work

daily and earn monthly Rs 50/60. The writer had inspired the artisans to go back to their original profession and not let the traditional weaving lose its glory due to depraved social notions. The weaver community possessed undaunted spirit and would give everything up to reach their goal. Their persistent effort and strength was praiseworthy. The Bengalese lacked it. That is why the English could snatch away Bengal's business. The Bengalese was responsible for that.<sup>25</sup> If the Bengalese did not become conscious, the progress of the British could not be stopped.

The socially aware weavers of Santipur had taken part in the freedom movement and had their remarkable contribution. During the partition of Bengal and freedom movement, the weavers used to design lines from poetry and songs on textile to express their sentiment, like "*Banglar mati Banglar jal*".... "*Mayer dewa mota kapor*"... "*Dhonodhanye pushpe vora*" ... "*Bandemataram*" etc.<sup>26</sup> Thus they try to hail the spirit of nationalism.

Since the 18th century the way the weavers had got involved in different movements to save the weaving industry and their participation in freedom movement had been discussed earlier. From the 2nd half of the 19th century weaver community started getting exposed to the world of education. Over and above the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement had inspired the weavers further. When in 18th century they had fought against the British there was no trace of patriotism in that. But in the beginning of the 20th century the weavers were inspired by patriotism and had fought against the British. They could be poor but did not lack in patriotism. They were true nationalists, deeply patriotic, humane and culturally developed. Lacked in conventional education their liberal thinking, deep understanding and wide outlook made it possible to stand by the side of Vidyasagar, ignoring the grudges of the conservatives.

Chaitra mela and Hindu mela in Calcutta were considered national convention precedent to that of Congress. Coordinating relations between fellow countrymen and promoting progress in the country Chaitra mela was held in 1273 on the day of Chaitra Sankranti (12th April, 1867) for the first time. On 7th August, 1865 under the editorship of Sri Nabagopal Mitra the first national paper was published. Such nationalist sentiment had been already present at Santipur since many years. The freedom lover people of Santipur had thought about freeing the country from the rule of the British. The weavers were no exception. The national club was established at Santipur. In 1898 at Motigunj on the Victoria road a national school was established.

In 1921 the high school was shifted from Motigunj to the Goswami's huge two-storied house near Rashkotha. Then started the Khilafat Movement (1919-1922) that was a significant Islamic movement in India during the British rule. This was an attempt by the Indian Muslim community to unite together in support of the Turkish Empire ruled by the Khalifa, which was attacked by European powers. Then started the anti Rowlatt Act. The act was passed by British judge Sir Sidney Rowlatt had effectively authorized the government to imprison for a maximum period of two years, without trial, any person suspected of terrorism living in the Raj. In protest, a nationwide cessation of work (hartal) was called, marking the beginning of widespread, although not nationwide, popular discontent. In 1921 when Gandhiji initiated the Non-Cooperation Movement, many youths of Santipur had responded to Gandhiji's call and accepted imprisonment and the remarkable among them were Narayan Goswami, Haridas Dey and others. Many of the students refused to sit for their examination from the British run schools hence examination was arranged by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das run school at "Gourio Sarbabidyatan". Out of 50 examinees at Santipur 7 of them had appeared in the examination. Among them Provas

Roy and Dhirananda Goswami passed in first division. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, Kiranshankar Roy, Hemant Sarkar and others conducted the examination.<sup>27</sup>

The name of Provash Roy deserves special mention being a very renowned person and representatives of the weavers community.

He was a learned man of Santipur. Originally a Pramanik later turned to Roy, he was a proud representative of the weaver community and had never discarded the surname out of hesitation but due to personal reasons. He had passed out from National school and later became its head master. In those days the boys were made aware of national movements and spirits of patriotism was inducted into them in the school days. They were also physically trained with exercises and martial arts with sticks by the secret society from the school days.<sup>28</sup>

Provash Ray was a great patriot dedicated for the country. He had also inspired others with patriotism. He used to impart basic trainings in weaving and others. The children were taught to work on the spinning wheel. Handloom was for all both literate and illiterate that was proved by the involvement of the educated and intelligent people and many instances could be cited. Till today the house of Provas Roy has the loom as a mark of history. During 20th century some other significant men among the weaving communities were Kanai Pal, Gour Pal and Nitai Pal.

Santipur was also not unexposed to the Leftist Movement. In 1934 Leftist Student Union had grown up at Santipur. People of the weaver community like Kanai Pal, Gour Pal and Nitai Pal were actively involved with such organisation.<sup>29</sup> 1942 Quit India Movement had deep influence on Santipur. At that time Leaders like Gour Pal, Kanai Pal, Nitai Pal used to run the powerful socialist groups. On 10th August under the leadership of socialist revolutionaries, the Nadia communist Party had held a public gathering at the field of Santipur Public Library. Sri Gour Pal had played a vital role in the meeting.<sup>30</sup> A campaign to the

police station was part of the agenda. In the campaign Haridas De the congress leader was from the weaver community. The slogans given by the revolutionaries had charged up the environment. The police were asked to discard their uniform under British service and adopt native clothes and surrender within 24 hours. In that circumstances Gour Pal had climbed up the roof of the police station and hoisted the leftist flag along with national flag. Within hours police from Lalbazar had arrived and arrested some of them. Gour Pal and Kanai Pal had hid themselves and eluded the police. Later Nitai pal was arrested and sent for imprisonment for 3 years in the central jail at Dumdum. Kanai and Gour Pal were also arrested later. Meanwhile Quit India Movement had slowed down.<sup>31</sup> The participation of the weavers of Santipur in all levels of the movements of social reforms, freedom movement and movement for empowerment was remarkable. They has left a glorious chapter of Protest and Reform in different periods of history. Their efforts marked a paradigm shift in the history of Cotton Weaving industry of Bengal nay India.

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