

INTRODUCTION

Topographically, India may be divided into four well-marked parts¹- i) The Himalayan ii) The Indo-Gangetic plain iii) The Deccan Table land iv) The Coastal plains. North Bengal is related with the Himalayan and Indo-Gangetic plain and Darjeeling district is under the Himalayan region. Northern part of Jalpaiguri and Coocbehar district were under the Himalayan region, while Malda, West Dinajpur and southern part of Jalpaiguri i.e. Duars belongs to Indo-Gangetic plain. North Bengal bears distinct features in the socio-economic structure of the geo-political atlas of India.

The oldest reference of the name 'Malda' is found in an inscription at the tomb of *Pir Sahagada* dated August 4, 1455 during the reign of Nasir-ud-din Muhammad Shah.² Malda is the southernmost of the northern Bengal districts. It came under the British administration with the acquisition of *Diwani* by the East India Company in 1765. The district of Malda did not exist as a separate entity at that time, because Malda got the official recognition as a district in the year 1813. It should be noted that in 1816, four police stations of Purnia, two police stations of Dinajpur and three police stations of Rajshahi were added to form the Malda district which was under the supervision of a Joint Magistrate³ (order of Governor, 25 April, 1815). At the time of its formation, the district was placed under the charge of a Joint Magistrate and Deputy Collector (Mr. Braddon).⁴ In 1832, for the first time, a treasury was established in Englishbazar and from that very year the separate entity of the district of Malda was recognized. In 1859 the district was placed in the official charge of a Magistrate and Collector.

The district of Malda which was formed with that of the Dinajpur had been the western portion of the Rajshahi division of Bengal. It was bound on the north by the Purnia and Dinajpur districts on the east by Murshidabad, and on the west by Murshidabad, the

Santhal Parganas and Purnia.⁵ It automatically brought in the prevue of the Permanent Settlement because the all three districts (Dinajpur, Rajshahi and Purnia) were placed under the Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornwallis as well as Cornwallis Code. The river Ganges forms the boundary of the district along the western and south-western frontier.⁶

During the year 1876-1905 Malda formed itself 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.⁷ The district was included in the Rajshahi division until August, 1947. Before partition, the district of Malda consisted of fifteen police stations. In 1947 under the Radcliffe Award the five police stations of the district Sibganj, Nabwabganj, Bhatol, Nachol and Gomastapur went to East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) and the remaining ten police stations Englishbazar, Kaliachak, Old Malda, Gazol, Habibpur, Bamongola, Manikchak, Ratua, Kharba and Harishchandrapur remained in India.⁸ As a result of the partition many of fertile land and business go to East Pakistan and it affected the political and economic scenario of the district in a large way.

The district of Malda possesses a rich historical heritage. A greater part of present Malda was the centre of civilization and culture in ancient times. The region had the privilege of having many famous capital cities such as Gour, Pandua, Ramavati, Lakshanavati and Tanda. Besides, Devikot, the earliest Muslim capital of Bengal and Rajmahal, was also adjacent to Malda.⁹

The district Malda has a good geo-physical and demographic social background. The river Mahananda flowing from north to south roughly divided the district into two equal parts, corresponding by local tradition to the old boundary line of the Rarh and Varendra.¹⁰ The region to the east of the Mahananda was called 'Varendra.'It stretched into Dinajpur and Rajshahi and formed a marked contrast to the other half of the district.¹¹ The *Barind* sub-region of Malda was relatively a high agricultural land of red clay soil of the old alluviums.

In the Mughal period *Barind* was thickly populated and prosperous.¹² It lay within a day's journey of the capital of Gour and Pandua.¹³ However, after the removal of the capital to Murshidabad, and the decay of Gour, the *Barind* must have gradually become depopulated and overgrown with jungle.¹⁴ The remainder of the tract was entirely occupied by thorny tree jungle called '*kathal*'.¹⁵ However, by the time of survey and settlement operations in the 1930s, the *Barind* was transformed into a developed agricultural zone mainly due to the efforts of the migrant *Santhals* from the neighbouring district of Santhal Parganas.¹⁶

To the west of the Mahananda the region was again divided into well defined parts by the 'Kalindri' river flowing west and east from the Ganges. To the North of the Kalindri the distinguishing natural feature was the '*tal*' land. The most fertile and populous portion of the district was known as '*diara*'. It consisted of a strip roughly eight miles in width along the western and southern tracts of the district.¹⁷ The island '*char*' of Bhutni *diara* lies in the bed of the Ganges.

The first census of the district was taken in 1872¹⁸. Since then, the population of the district has shown a regular increase. When the capital of Bengal shifted to Gour at that time several castes, creeds, and religious communities were settled in Malda.¹⁹ *Nagar, Dhanuk, Chai, Rajbanshis, Koch, Polias* came from Dinajpur and Purnia. *Kol, Orawn, Santhal* and *Munda* took shelter in Malda from Rajmahal and Chotonagpur.²⁰ On the other hand, Malhar, Bhuihar, Kunjara, Pazra and weaver came from Bihar and other areas. Muslims were settled in Malda after the fall of the Sena dynasty.²¹

The district of Malda was not a homogenous one. The society was composed of numerous and diverse social groups of several historically evolved and evolving social collectivities. The population belonged to different ethnic linguistic and cultural groups, to various castes and religious communities. Most of these groups went through important social and economic changes during the period of our study.

Dinajpur was one of the most enriched and ancient lands. The district was closely related with Pundravardhana, Kotivarsha, Devkot and Varendri.²² Ancient Dinajpur district was under the authority of Pundravardhana territory. In the 15th century a Hindu king founded a Hindu dynasty in Bengal. This Hindu king was known as *Raja Ganesh*. According to Buchanan Hamilton-“Ganes, a Hindu and *Hakim* of Dynwaj (perhaps a petty Hindu chief of Dinajpur) seized the government”. Scholars think that from the source of *Hakim* of Dynwaj the name ‘Dinajpur’ came. French scholars used ‘Danuj’ and they speak as ‘Dynwaj’.²³ Later this Dynwaj flourished as Danuj>Dan-u-j>Dan-owa-j>Din-owj. British choose ‘Dynwaj’ the Bengali meaning is ‘Dinaj’. Later added ‘pur’ and came to be known as ‘Dinajpur’. According to Buchanan Hamilton, “Dinajpur is said to signify the abode of beggars and is identical with Dynwaj, a *Raja* of which, Ganesh usurped the government of Gour. The name appears originally to have applied more particularly to the locality in which the present *Rajbari* is situated and a possible explanation of it may be that some forgotten prince of the Dinajpur family gave his name to the site.”²⁴

The early history of the Dinajpur district rests on a number of vague traditions and legends. Dr. Buchanan Hamilton refers to the extreme obscurity of these traditions, owing to the Hindus, by whom they have been preserved, having been at one time nearly eradicated. The historical account given below is mainly on that of Dr. Hamilton supplemented by a history of the Dinajpur *Raj*, from the pen of Mr. E.B. Westmacott, who between 1868 and 1877 spent some years in the district, first as Joint Magistrate and subsequently as Collector.²⁵

Dinajpur was acquired in 1765 under the Dewani Grant. The *zamindari* then was covering an area of 4.119 square miles, and corresponding to modern Dinajpur mostly, and north-eastern Malda.²⁶ At the time of Permanent Settlement there also included a healthy portion of Pargana Saruppur (Parbatipur police station), small portions of Ghoraghat, Pastul

and Masida *zamindaris* (in Nawabganj and Porsha police stations) and small strip of Haveli Tajpur (Ranisankail and Raiganj police stations)²⁷. In 1770 a massive famine took place in Bengal.²⁸ At that time Mr. H. Kortel was appointed as revenue collector.²⁹ In the mean time, the *zamindari* of Dinajpur came under the British authority.

There were a lot of changes came into force in the jurisdictions since Permanent Settlement. From 1798 to 1896 there made a lot of developments in the Dinajpur district.³⁰ The Karotoya river made the eastern boundary and in 1817 Dinajpur was transferred from the Board of Revenue, Bengal, to the Commission of Beneras and Bihar.³¹ In 1825 police stations Chapai and Rahanpur transferred to Malda from Rajshahi and later in 1879 Malda got transferred civilly to Rajshahi, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri transferred from Rangpur Judge.³²

In mediaeval period Dinajpur came under the authority of Rangpur and in the British period it goes to Rajshahi division and apart from these there were some parts of Nepal. In 1786 excluding the Islampur Sub-division Dinajpur was declared as district.³³ In 1787 all the districts became a strong administrative unit. George Hatch became the first Collector of Dinajpur and this time East India Company reduces the number of the districts into fourteen.³⁴ W.W. Hunter mentioned that in 1872 there were seventeen police stations in Dinajpur.³⁵ After that construction and reconstruction continues. The total population of Dinajpur district consisted in 1872 of 1501924 souls, 776431 males, and 725,493 females.³⁶ The great mass of the population (99.6%) consisted of Hindu and Muhammadans, with a small sprinkling of Buddhists, Christians and aboriginal tribes, which made up the remaining 0.4% of the population.³⁷

The Dinajpur Sub-division, which is irregular in shape, comprises the central portion of the district and extends from Raiganj on the west to Ghoraghat on the south east.³⁸ When Balurghat was under the Sub-division, at that time Patiram police station was shifted to Balurghat.³⁹ Balurghat was included in the Balurghat police station in the district and situated

to the west of the railway lands belonging to the Bengal and Assam railways.⁴⁰ Balurghat Sub-division then divided for administrative purposes into five police circles viz; Balurghat, Gangarampur, Porsha, Patnitala and Phulbari.⁴¹ It also contained the independent police out post of Kumarganj which was separated from Kotwali police station of the *Sadar* Sub-division in 1909.⁴² It is rather interesting to note that out of the 30 police stations in the district, 15 have Muslim majority, and exactly the same number have a majority of non-Muslims.⁴³

For some administrative reasons some *mauzas* of Porsha and Tapan police station which were under the authority of west part Purnabhaha, were connected to Bamangola police station in Malda in 1941.⁴⁴ By the declaration of Radcliffe Award in 1947 Dinajpur district was divided.⁴⁵ Under the instruction of Nehru there established The Bengal Boundary Commission and it was accepted by Jinnah. The proposal was as following. The Boundary Commission was instructed to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of Bengal on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims. In doing so it wills into account the other factors.⁴⁶

For administrative purposes Dinajpur Sub-division was divided into six police stations viz. Raiganj, Banshihari, Kaliaganj, Kotwali, Parbatipur, Nawabganj and three independent police out posts namely Itahar, Chirirbandar, Ghoraghat.⁴⁷ The district of West Dinajpur was formally constituted by Notification No.584 G.A dated 23.02.1948 and it consisted of the police stations of 1) Balurghat, 2) Kumarganj, 3) Gangarampur, 4) Tapan, 5) Raiganj, 6) Hemtabad, 7) Banshihari, 8) Kushmandi, 9) Kaliaganj and 10) Itahar.⁴⁸ The new police station of Hili was constituted on 8th May, 1948. Now Raiganj Sub-division was formed in 14.07.1948 with the police stations of 1) Raiganj, 2) Hemtabad, 3) Banshihari, 4) Kushmandi, 5) Kaliaganj and 6) Itahar.⁴⁹

At that time the district was consisted of two Sub-divisions-1) the *Sadar* Sub-division, 2) the Sub-division of Raiganj, 3) and an additional Sub-division was also created. The *Sadar* Sub-division consisting of the police stations of 1) Hili, (2) Balurghat, 3) Kumarganj, 4) Gangarampur, and 5) Tapan.⁵⁰ The Raiganj Sub-division consisted of the police stations of 1) Raiganj, 2) Hemtabad, 3) Kaliaganj, 4) Itahar, 5) Bansihari and 6) Kushmandi. The Sub-division of Islampur consisted of the police stations of 1) Chopra, 2) Islampur, 3) Goalpokhar, 4) Chakalia and 5) Karandighi.⁵¹

In 1956 Purnia was included to West Bengal.⁵² It comprised of the southern portion of the district, and it bounded on the east by Malda and Dinajpur.⁵³ Later that area was included to Darjeeling district. After the publication of Gazetteer, Chopra was included to Phansidewa police station. Later it was included to Islampur Sub-division.⁵⁴ In this way West Dinajpur district was formed. West Dinajpur lies between $26^{\circ} 29' 54''$ and $25^{\circ} 10' 55''$ north latitudes and between $89^{\circ} 0' 30''$ and $87^{\circ} 48' 37''$ east longitudes in the Jalpaiguri Division of West Bengal.⁵⁵ It is bounded on the north by the river Mahananda and the district of Dinajpur in East Pakistan; on the west by the district of Purnia and Bihar and by the district of Malda and the districts of Rajshahi and Bogra in East Pakistan.⁵⁶ It is bounded on the east by the districts of Dinajpur and Bogra in East Pakistan. The eastern boundary has been formed in accordance with the Award of Sir Cyril Radcliffe.⁵⁷

The district is rather peculiar in shape. The tract of land between the Mahananda in the north and the boundary of the Raiganj police station in the south is between sixty and seventy miles long, but its width rarely exceeds ten miles at any point.⁵⁸ The general appearance of the district is flat, slopping gentle south wards, as is shown by the trend of the rivers. Another marked feature of the district is the tanks especially numerous in the south.⁵⁹ In the absence of hills it is hard to trace the natural divisions, but there are many points of difference between the south and the north of the district.

The river system and the water resources take a significant part in the district. Mahananda, Nagar, Gamari, Chiramati, Tangoan, Purnabhaha, Atrai, Ichhamati and Yumana flows through the districts.⁶⁰ Geologically the district is a rather featureless plain consisting entirely of alluvium. The area forms part of the great '*Barind*' or Pleistocene (older) alluvium, which is the largest of the alluvial units of the Bengal basin.⁶¹ At the surface, this older alluvium is covered by the flood plains of the Mahananda, Punarbhaba, Atrai and Yumana rivers which flow in a southerly direction across the district.⁶²

The Karatoya river apparently has its course controlled by a north-west, south-east fault forty miles long with upthrow on the south-west.⁶³ In the southern half of the district the soil consists of ash-coloured clayey silt, locally called *khlar*.⁶⁴ In the northern half of the district and on the banks of some of the principle rivers in the south, the soil consists of a sandy loam mixed, towards the north with gravel. This goes by the local name of *pali*.⁶⁵

Ancient Dinajpur has a legendary history. It was a part of the kingdom of Pundravardhana. According to *Brihatkathakosa* of Harisena, Bhadrabahu, the Jain *guru* of Chandragupta Maurya, was a son of a Brahmin of Kotivarsha in Pundravardhana.⁶⁶ Maurya, Gupta and Pala-Sena kings were dominated in this district. In the mediaeval period Bakthyer Khalji invaded this district and at that time the district was under the kingship of Lakshmana Sena.⁶⁷ In the Sultanate period the district was attacked by several rulers. Sultan Iliyas Shah took shelter in the Ekdala Fort which was situated between the rivers Balia and Chhiramati in West Dinajpur district.⁶⁸ Finding that he could not conquer the fortress of Ekdala, Firuaz Tughlaq by a ruse made the Bengal army come out on the plains and in the battle that followed, completely defeated the Bengal army which included a large number of *Paiks* or Hindu infantry.⁶⁹

The Muslim conquerors of Bengal appear to have carried out a systematic policy of subjugating the local Hindu Chiefs and of destroying temples and Hindu places of worship.⁷⁰

They were helped in their work by numerous ‘*Saints*’ and ‘*Ghazis*’ who acted as advance guards of the army in most areas. In the Mughal period Akbar’s general Munim Khan entered *Tanda* which was then the capital of Bengal and from there he sent out strong detachments in various directions, one of the detachments being sent to Ghoraghat.⁷¹ During the reign of Akbar, the district of Dinajpur was probably contained within the *Sarkars* of Tajpur and Pinjara.⁷² From the time of Murshid Quli Khan to the establishment of the English rule in Bengal (1717-27), this period came to be known as *Nawabi* period.⁷³ From 1574 to 1727 A.D there were twenty-nine Viceroys.⁷⁴ The last Viceroy, Murshid Quli Khan became virtually independent on account of the weakness of the Emperor of Delhi.⁷⁵ Suja-ud-din Sarfaraz Khan, Alivardi and Siraj-ud-daula practically ruled as independent *Nawabs*.⁷⁶ No incident worthy of note appears to have taken place in the district of West Dinajpur during which Bengal remained under the sway of the Mughals.⁷⁷

In the modern period the district came under the control of the East India Company in 1765, the year in which the East India Company obtained *Diwani* of Bengal. Muhammad Reza Khan and Setab Rai were charged to collect the revenue.⁷⁸ In 1770 the great famine took place. Warren Hastings arrived in Bengal as Governor in 1772. In 1780; a Mufassal *Diwani Adalat* was established at Tajpur having jurisdiction over Haveli Pinjara or Dinajpur, part of Purnia, the district of Malda and part of Rajshahi, east of the Ganges.⁷⁹ In the reign of Akbar we find the first authentic traces of the great *zamindar* family of Dinajpur, with which for the next two centuries the history of the district is closely interwoven.⁸⁰

In 1790 Lord Cornwallis the Governor General in council took over the superintendence of the administration. During his time land emerged as an important issue of reform, especially for the East India Company. The Mutiny of 1857 left the district happily undisturbed. There is an amusing story of how a regiment of rebel cavalry advancing from the Jalpaiguri direction as far as Birganj, intent on looting the Dinajpur treasury, asked their

way from some simple-looking yokels on the road.⁸¹ These directed them how to get to Dinajpur, but added that there was a European regiment stationed there, which had got wind of their coming and was advancing to attack them. Where upon the sowars, thinking discretion the better part of valour, sheered off towards Malda and were no more heard of. The story of the villages was fairy tale, as there were no troops at Dinajpur at the time.⁸²

The first census was taken in 1872 and the population increased 21.9%.⁸³ Buchanan Hamilton estimated the population at three million souls. Hamilton, who held a survey of the district in 1808, the population, was much greater in his day. At the census of 1881 it was found that the population was practically stationary, having advanced only to 1514346 or, taking the present district area to 1442518, an increase of .86%.⁸⁴ The rate of increase in population became still more rapid and the census of 1901 showed a population of an increase of 5.3% while in 1911 the population rose to a further increase of 7.22% and during the decade 1951-1961, a large number of immigrants entered the district and were enumerated during the 1961 census.⁸⁵ The census report reveals that there were majority of Hindu and Muslim population, along with a marginal number of Buddhist, Christian and aboriginal tribes. The Hindus were somewhat fewer in point of numbers than the Muhammadans, but as a body they occupied a more respectable social position.⁸⁶ The district of Dinajpur was divided into two parts following the partition of the province of Bengal with the independence of India in 1947. One part being named West Dinajpur has been included in the province of West Bengal in India and on the other part as Dinajpur in East Bengal of Pakistan.⁸⁷ West Dinajpur district has become one of the fourteen constituent districts of the province of West Bengal.⁸⁸

The district of West Dinajpur has a good demographic social background and the society was composed of numerous and diverse social groups of several historically evoked the evolving social collectivities.⁸⁹ The *Rajbanshis* (1,34,976) were the most populous

scheduled caste in the West Dinajpur district followed by the *polias* (79,432) who were regarded by some as a sub-caste of the *Rajbanshis* and these two communities together account for half the scheduled caste population of the district.⁹⁰ In West Dinajpur, we also found *Jale-Kaivarta*, *Namasudra*, *Goala*, *Bagdi*, *Hari*, Muhammadans, tribals (*Santhal*, *Orawn*, *Munda*, *Mahali*) etc.⁹¹ The *Orawns* mainly hail from Chotanagpur in Bihar.⁹² They began coming to the district at about the same time as the *Santhals*. MS. LSSO' Malley described the social system of tribals. H.H. Risley also depicted the picture of the social life of tribals in his book '*The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*'.

During the period of our study we noticed a rapid change in the formation of the transformation of the rural society of North Bengal especially in Malda and West Dinajpur. Land became a crucial issue that started during the reign of Cornwallis in 1793. From that year to 1978 land became a principal issue about land reform and with this issue North Bengal's socio-cultural dimension swept in a new way.

On the 1st Day of April, 1992 West Dinajpur District was divided (Notification Date and No-28.02.1992 177/L.R-6m-7/92) into Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur.⁹³ In Uttar Dinajpur there included nine police stations namely Raiganj, Kaliaganj, Hemtabad, Itahar, Karandighi, Goalpokhar, Chakulia, Islampur and Chopra and in Dakshin Dinajpur there included eight police stations namely- Hili, Kumarganj, Tapan, Balurghat, Gangarampur, Banshihari, Harirampur and Kushmandi.⁹⁴ Dinajpur has thus been facing the redrawing or reorganization of her boundaries first in 1947 and then in 1992, 1st April. After independence in 1947 the Indian portion of Dinajpur was renamed as West Dinajpur and in 1992 when it was partitioned as Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur, the name West Dinajpur was permanently wiped out from the geo-political atlas of West Bengal as well as of India.

Actually, the land situation of North Bengal was different. Land atlas i.e. land revenue system and land settlement was not a uniform one. Different kinds of land system

vis-à-vis land settlement was prevailed in North Bengal and in this connection we can especially mention the cases of northern parts of North Bengal namely the Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Darjeeling district. Though southern North Bengal i.e. Dinajpur, Malda was brought under the Permanent Settlement of revenue, in Jalpaiguri and Duars we found the non-Permanent Settlement, *jotdari* system, *zamindari* system whereas in Coochbehar the *izaradari* system was prominent.

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