

CHAPTER - I

DAWN OF A NEW ERA —
THE IMPACT OF WESTERN
CONTACT IN NORTHERN BENGAL

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a gradual change in the socio-political life of the people in the northern districts of Bengal. There were obvious reasons behind this. Contact with the western people and their culture, the spread of western education, the development of communications, the introduction of local Self-Government as well as the formation of some institutions like the Englishbasar, Old Malda and Jalpaiguri municipalities that reflected the aspirations of the educated people, contributed to the process of change under discussion and the growth of nationalism in Northern Bengal.

While discussing the growth of nationalism in the region we should note a few essential points that will provide a vivid picture of the socio-political and economic milieu in which development of national consciousness was possible. Mention may first be made of the fact that Northern Bengal is inhabited by people of diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups like the Bengalis, the Rajbanshis, the Nepalesse and the Lepchas. Thus Northern Bengal is a composite region in the real sense of the term. Furthermore, the present districts of Northern Bengal were not in

existence in the beginning of nineteenth century. The district of Malda was brought into existence in 1813 comprising parts of the districts of Purnea and Dinajpur.¹ The district of Jalpaiguri which comprises the territory wrested from Bhutan as a consequence of a war with that Himalayan Kingdom was formed in 1869² while the district of Darjeeling was acquired in 1835 by the Government of India by virtue of a deed of grant³ signed by the ruler of Sikkim, the tiny Himalayan Kingdom whose existence was threatened by constant pressure exerted by the neighbouring states.⁴

The native state of Koochbehar tucked in the North Eastern corner of our area of study came under British influence in 1773 as a result of British intervention precipitated by a conflict between Bhutan and Koochbehar.⁵ The princely state of Koochbehar underwent a process of modernisation under the enlightened Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Brahmo marriage* fame. The modernisation of Koochbehar, it is interesting to note, coincided with the growth of nationalism in some other regions of Norther Bengal.

-
1. Lambourn, G.E., Bengal District Gazetteers, Malda, p. 1, Calcutta, 1918.
 2. De Barun et al., W.B. District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri, p. 1, Calcutta, 1981.
 3. Banerji, A. et al., W.B. District Gazetteers, Darjeeling, p. 93, 1980.
 4. Ibid, p. 92.
 5. Masumdar, D., W.B. District Gazetteers, Kochbehar, Calcutta, 1977.
 6. Ibid.

* Keshub Chunder Sen, the famous leader of the Brahmo faith gave his daughter Sumiti Devi in marriage to Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. This marriage sparked off a controversy among the followers of the faith that resulted in a split of the Brahmo order.

Until the late fifties of the Nineteenth Century the western system of education did not spread to the farflung areas of undivided Bengal as well as its northern parts lying North of the Ganga and south of the eastern Himalayan Terai.

As early as the 1680's the East India Company had erected a factory⁷ in the district of Malda where the Dutch⁸ and the French⁹ Companies too had their footnings. After the lapse of a Century following this a new dimension was added to the commercial activities of the English people in the region with the initiation of Indigo cultivation at several places including Guamaty¹⁰ and Madnabati.¹¹ Some officials of these factories later on earned reputation for their keen interest in the history, religion and culture of this region. Mention may be made here of George Udney¹² who succeeded Charles Grant as resident of Malda factory in 1786 and his colleagues, especially Ellerton¹³ and Henry Creighton¹⁴ of the factory of Guamaty and the illustrious William Carey¹⁵ who was placed in charge of the factory of Madnabati

7. Lambourn, OP. cit., p. 26.

8. Ibid, p. 71.

9. Sengupta, J.C., W.B. District Gazetteers, Malda, p. 101, 1969.

10. Lambourn, OP. Cit. p. 26.

11. Ibid, p. 33.

12. Ibid, p. 65.

13. Mukhopadhyay, G., 'Bangladeshe Janashiksha Bistarar Itihas (Article in) Itihas, Poush-Chaitra, 1377 B.S., p. 269.

14. Sengupta, J.C., OP. Cit., p. 60.

15. Lambourn, OP. Cit., p. 28.

Ellerton on his ^{own} initiative established some primary schools in his locality as early as 1803 and taught his pupils in vernacular.¹⁶ He also wrote some text books to facilitate the curriculum of those schools.¹⁷ This was the earliest attempt by any European to teach the local children in vernacular in the region. Meanwhile Henry Creighton had toured the dense wood in the vicinity of the factory of Guamalaty and sketched several of the mediaeval monuments of the abandoned city of Gour¹⁸ while William Carey at Madnabati came in contact with a large number of people with a view to converting them to christianity but without any success.¹⁹

Whatever may be the reasons for Carey's failure or the withering away of the Schools founded by Ellerton in a few years time, the early contact with the Europeans and the spread of education subsequently are of immense significance. The spread of English education was a gradual process with the first Government School coming up in the district of Malda in 1858, namely the Malda Zilla School²⁰ which grew up to be a high school from a middle English School to be followed by the establishment of three more English Schools in the district by 1870.²¹

16. Mukhopadhyay, G., OP. Cit., p. 269.

17. Ibid; Bengali Literary year Book, 1322 B.S., Bankipur, 1323 B.S.

18. Creighton, Henry, Ruins of Gour, Introduction, London, 1817.

19. Sengupta, K.P. 'The Results of Christian Missionary Activities in Bengal (1793-1833)' (Article in) Bengal Past and Present, January-June, 1970, p. 75.

20. Mitra, A., Census 1951, W.B. District Handbook, Malda, p. 146-47.

21. Lambourn, OP. Cit., p. 96.

As regards the district of Darjeeling the Loreto Convent for Girls was established in 1846 while the St. Paul's School was brought into existence in 1868. Receiving affiliation from the University of Calcutta the St. Paul's School became the first College in Darjeeling in 1880.²²

It is worthwhile to mention that the schools at Darjeeling did provide education for the European and the Anglo-Indian Children only, during the early days.²³ Later on Christian missionaries introduced elementary Schools for the Lepcha and the Bhutia Children.²⁴ Around 1850 a missionary named W. Start had established a vernacular school for the Lepchas.²⁵ Another missionary, namely Niebel, wrote some Lepcha primers and taught his children in vernacular.²⁶ But the most effective work in the field of vernacular education in Darjeeling was done by William McFarlane who came to Darjeeling in 1869.²⁷ In the years that followed there was significant advancement in the field of vernacular education.

The Jalpaiguri Zilla School²⁸ was started in 1868 while the Zenkins School at Coochbehar in 1861.²⁹ The Sunity Academy,³⁰ the Girls' School of Coochbehar came into existence in 1881 while the

22. Banerjee, A.K. et al., OP. Cit., p. 475.

23. Ibid, p. 474.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid, 479.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid, p. 480.

28. Jalpaiguri Zilla School Satabarshiki Smark Patrika, 1969.

29. Mazumdar, D., OP. Cit., p. 174.

30. Sunity Academy Satabarshiki Smark Sankhya, 1981, p. 67.

Victoria College³¹ of the same town, a very prestigious institution of Northern Bengal was founded in 1888.

The part of Northern Bengal which is now within the territorial limits of Bangladesh was also brought under the network of Schools and Colleges established by the new system of education. The Rajshahi College and the Carmichael College of Rangpur produced many of the early nationalists of our area of study.*

Another factor that accelerated the change of Socio-economic milieu of Northern Bengal was the development of the means of communication during the second half of nineteenth century. Particularly the extension of railways to Northern Bengal was of great importance. The Northern Bengal Railways³² was introduced in the 1870's while the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway³³ was brought into existence in 1880. In 1893 the Bengal Dooars Railway³⁴ and the Koochbehar State Railway³⁵ became operative. Thus the people of Northern Bengal were brought closer to each other the consequence of which was indeed important.

The newly formed class of English educated gentry mostly the products of schools and colleges mentioned above and eager to keep contact with the world outside was thus provided with a great impetus.

31. Masumdar, D., OP. Cit., Kochbehar, p. 176.

32. Buckland C.E. Bengal Under the Lt. Governors, p. 540, New Delhi, 1976.

33. Banerjee, A. et al., OP. Cit., p. 290, Calcutta, 1980.

34. Jalpaiguri District Centenary Souvenir 1869-1968, p. 364.

35. Masumdar, D., OP. Cit., p. 40.

* Radhesh Seth, the noted nationalist leader of Malda was a student of Rajshahi College. (vide Palit Haridas, Maldaher Radheschandra, p. 7, Calcutta, 1318 B.S.)

As early as the 1880's some mufassil gentlemen were attracted by the Indian Association, a political organisation led by Surendranath Banerjea. The National Conference held under the auspices of the Indian Association in 1883 did include in the list of delegates the representatives of Jalpaiguri and Siliguri.³⁶ On the other hand the third session of the Indian National Congress held in Madras was attended by Radhesh Chandra Seth from Malda who was at that time a student of Rajshani College.³⁷ Radesh Chandra had also formed an organisation named Malda Association³⁸ of which Social service was a fundamental objective and himself developed close contacts with the Zemindars' Association of Calcutta.³⁹

The formation of some municipalities in some Northern Bengal towns during the period was of tremendous importance. The old Malda and the English bazar Municipalities were brought into existence in 1869⁴⁰ while totally under Government control the municipality of Jalpaiguri was formed in 1885.⁴¹ In the same year the Town Committee of Koochbehar⁴² was founded. This committee was a nominated body.

36. Bagal, J.C., History of Indian Association, p. 64, Calcutta, 1953.

37. Palit, H., Maldaher Radheshchandra, p. 7 ff, Calcutta, 1318 B.S.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid, p. 10.

40. Lambourne, OP. Cit., pp. 94-5.

41. De, Barun et al., OP. Cit., Jalpaiguri, p. 246.

42. Masumdar, D., OP. Cit. P. 166

The old Malda municipality offers us an interesting case study of how the civic bodies occupied the minds of educated people. The public opinion in that town^{was} sharply divided over the issue of the formation of the municipality. One section of the gentry opposed the working of the civic body and wanted its abolition⁴³ while another group appreciated it and wanted the municipality to continue for the benefit of the people.⁴⁴ This was actually a conflict between the traditionalists on the one hand and change seekers on the other.* The dichotomy becomes crystal clear to us when we find Radheshchandra Seth, till then a student, leading the second group. It was under his initiative that a pamphlet was publicised containing cogent arguments in favour of the existence of the municipality⁴⁵.

The municipality was allowed to continue and as a matter of fact this was a morale-booster to the change-seekers.⁴⁶ Persons involved in the controversy over the civic body later on indulged in various social and cultural activities with an indomitable spirit. Radhesh Chandra himself published the Gourbarta a fortnightly news paper and founded the Krishna kali press which ran on

43. Palit, H., OP. Cit., p. 7.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

* The conservative opinion was opposed to any change in the socio-political milieu and favoured the age-old Panchayati system instead of the municipality which would enhance the influence of English educated gentry.

a co-operative basis. The Gourbarta, however, did not continue for a long time for lack of response from the people yet unprepared to appreciate the pioneering venture.⁴⁷ Despite the initial failure Seth's initiative did not wane and soon after he published the Gourdut in which numerous articles were printed highlighting issues like landlord-peasant disputes, maladministration of the municipalities, the District Board and the Local Boards, Police inaction in respect of law and order, the necessity of extension of railways to the district etc.⁴⁸ The end of the Gourdut came abruptly. A violent earthquake destroyed the Krishnakali press in 1897. Thereafter Seth joined the Maldaha Samachar as a regular Columnist. The publication of the Gourdut could be resumed only in 1910,⁴⁹ a little before Seth's death.

Curiously enough the wave of national consciousness also gripped the royal family of Coochbehar to a certain extent in the late nineteenth century.

In 1877 a movement had started against the Government decision of lowering of age as regards the eligibility of candidates intending to appear in the ICS examinations. Surendranath Banerjee, the leader of the Indian Association toured almost the whole of India Lecturing over the issue. One such lecture was delivered at

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid, p. 10 ff.

49. Ibid.

Bankipur near Patna. Maharaja Nripendranarayan of Kochbehar who was a student of a Government institution at Bankipur at that time had attended the meeting addressed by Surendranath Banerjee.⁵⁰

In 1886 the Sakhi Samiti was formed by Swarna Kumari Devi, editor of Bharati, a noted Bengali periodical, with the object of campaigning in favour of economic self-sufficiency and spreading of female education.⁵¹ The Samiti organised fairs in which were displayed indigenous goods. These fairs received liberal contribution from Suniti Devi, the wife of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.⁵²

During the Congress session held in Calcutta in 1896 an exhibition of indigenous goods was organised. The inauguration ceremony of this exhibition was presided over by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Kochbehar. On this occasion he delivered a nice little speech.⁵³ Finally we should refer to the Congress Report of 1886 which includes Maharaja Nripendranarayan as one of the contributors to its fund.⁵⁴

These contributions or the sympathy with the national organisation need not lead us to the hypothesis that the Kochbehar family had any sympathy with anti-British feeling. With the growing

50. Banerjee, S.N., A Nation in Making, p. 42, Calcutta, 1963.

51. Bharati O Balak, Poush 1295 B.S.; Choudhurani Sarala Devi, Jibaner Jharapata, p. 220-21, Calcutta, 1975.

52. Jugabani, (Ed. Burman, D), 1362 B.S., p. 23

53. Banerjee, S.N., A Nation in Making, p. 135, Bombay, 1963.

54. Sing, H., Problems and Policies of the British in India, p. 242, London, 1963.

disapproval of the Government of India the contributions ceased to flow to the Congress fund.⁵⁵

Nevertheless Maharaja Nripendranarayan had sympathised with some swadeshi commercial ventures generated after the partition of Bengal in 1905. He associated himself with the Hindusthan Co-operative Bank⁵⁶ and sincerely believed that spread of primary and secondary education was an imminent necessity which was revealed by his speech delivered at Mathabhanga, a town in the state of Kochbehar.⁵⁷

The Western part of the district of Dinajpur which forms part of our area of study was by and large a neglected area and did not undergo any considerable socio-economic change during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The sub-division of Balurghat was formed only in 1904.⁵⁸ However, the town of Dinajpur, the headquarters of the undivided district witnessed the growth of national consciousness at an earlier date. The Indian National Congress established a branch office at Dinajpur town in 1895.⁵⁹ The political activists of Dinajpur town gradually sprinkled their ideas to the interior regions.

55. Ibid.

56. Sarkar, S., *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1903-1908)*, p. 132, New Delhi, 1973.

57. *The Amritabazar Patrika*, April 29, 1907.

58. Sengupta, J.C., *W.B. District Gazetteer, West Dinajpur*, Calcutta, 1965.

59. Ali Mehrub, *Dinajpurer Rajnaitik Andolaner Itihas*, p. 57, Dinajpur, 1965.

In Northern Bengal the social fabric was also undergoing transformation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. With the influx of people from different places who engaged themselves in higher independent professions like legal and medical practices, various Government services, teaching assignments etc. and were keen in sending their children to schools for receiving English education, there was a growth of Bhadralok class in the towns like Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, Alipurduar and Darjeeling.

The district of Malda, formed much earlier, had already provided a base for the Bhadraloks particularly in the towns like old Malda and English bazar. Here a conflict was in progress between two sections of affluent peoples. One section mostly composed of affluent landholders and merchants, given to luxuries of many kinds⁶⁰ was opposed to the wave of transformation while another section of which men like Radhesh Seth were the products, forged ahead with their new ideas and aspirations.* The outcome of this conflict was the splendid growth of swadeshi movement in Northern-Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century in which the Malda Bhadraloks like Radheshchandra Seth, Benoy Kumar Sarkar were in the forefront inspiring their compatriots at Jalpaiguri, Siliguri and Balurghat.

60. Nag, Girishchandra, Deputy Jiban, p. 187 ff., Calcutta, 1334 B.S.

* It appears that the members of the former group were not eager to part with the power and influence which they had hitherto exercised.