

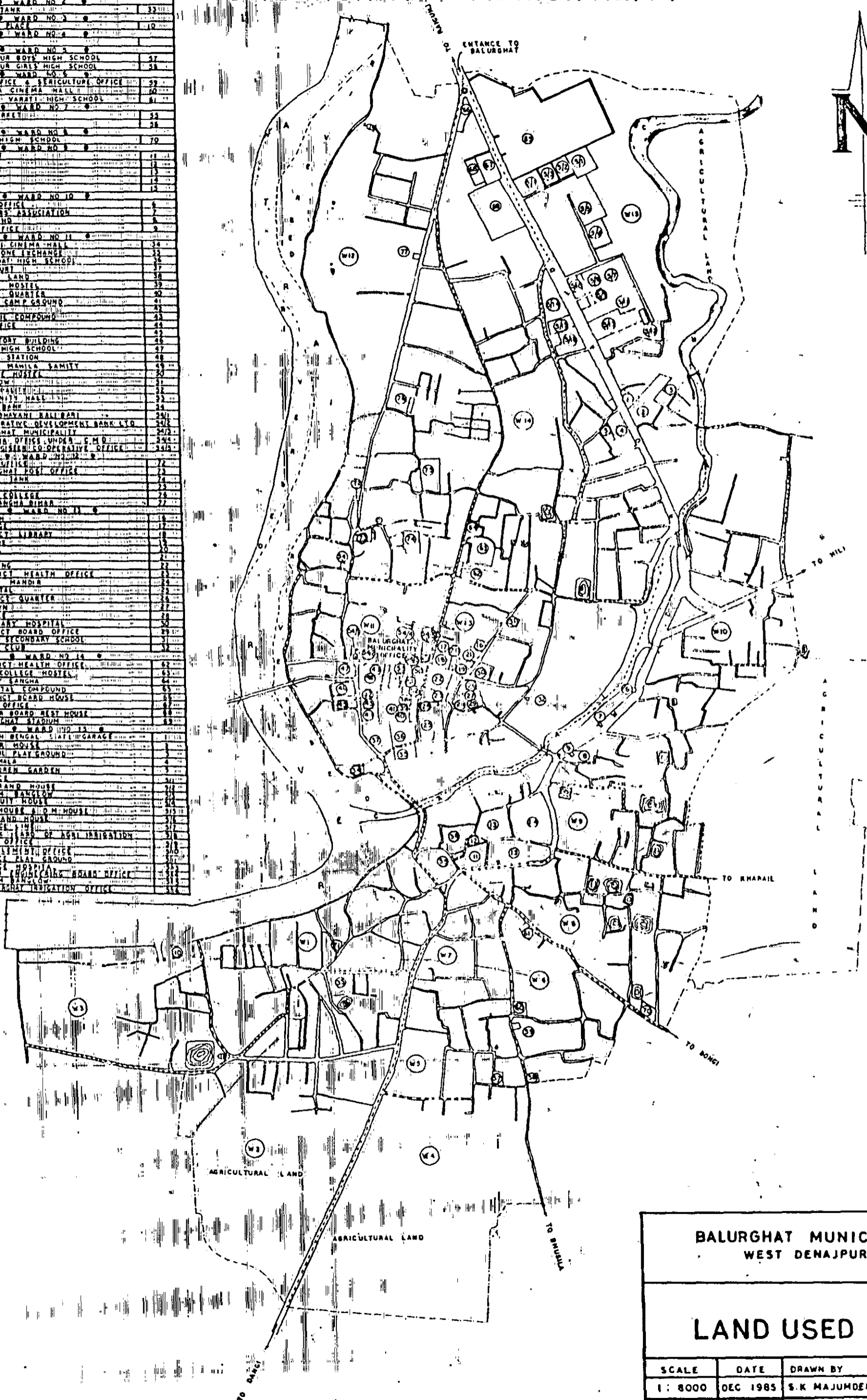
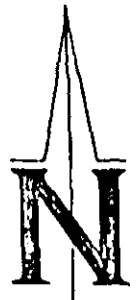
CHAPTER + 2

BALURCHAT : PROFILE OF A MEDIUM TOWN

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BALURGHAT MUNICIPALITY



BALURGHAT MUNICIPALITY
WEST DENAJPUR

LAND USED MAP

SCALE	DATE	DRAWN BY	CHECKED BY
1 : 8000	DEC 1985	S.K MAJUMDER	R P MAJUMDER
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N.B. For Location of Important Complex Please Consult Sheet No. 1

CHAPTER - 2

BALURGHAT : PROFILE OF A MEDIUM TOWN

A. Locale of the Study

Balurghat is situated in $25^{\circ} 13'$ N. and $88^{\circ} 47'$ E. in the south-west corner of the district. It has grown from a tiny riverside entrepot to a medium size city. This riverside village alongwith the whole district of Dinajpur of undivided India came under the control of the East India Company in 1765 and the house of local 'Zamindar' (landlord) was the institution of local governance.

In course of time, the establishment of sub-division in 1903 and the Municipality in 1951 enhanced its importance. Balurghat gradually assumed the shape of a town where, apart from agriculture, non-agricultural activities too, began to take place. As a result, it began to appear as the centre of political, economic and administrative activities.

One particular point to be noted here is that after independence, Balurghat came to be known as a 'border town'. The border with Bangladesh (Pakistan before the creation of Bangladesh) is a few kilometers away, making the town easily accessible to the entrants from the other side of the border. This caused a drastic increase in population, as found in the Census Report of 1981.

The status of Balurghat has continued to thrive on its position as administrative headquarters of the district of West Dinajpur. But of late, the bifurcation of the district has reduced its administrative importance because two important subdivisions, Raiganj and Islampur, have been kept outside the administrative jurisdiction of the newly-created Dakshin Dinajpur district.

Another notable aspect is that the Balurghat Municipal area consists of 23 wards in stead of 15, after the delimitation of the municipal area in 1993. So, Balurghat is a medium size city, and is reckoned as an important place, especially from the geo-political and administrative points of view.

B. Significance of the Study

Dynamics of urban development administration in West Bengal is largely a comparatively unexplored research area. There are a few research works on different aspects of the problems, but these do not cover the key issues of urban development administration today.

Currently, it is widely believed that the goal of urban development will be unattainable unless harnessed by a coordinated effort of the agencies. But there are actually very few works on how the machinery is organised and works in the small and medium size cities and towns.

To fill the research gap, an attempt has been made here

to study the dynamics of urban development administration in Balurghat. It is admitted that this micro-level study on the problems of urban development would not be able to highlight all the problems of small and medium cities and towns. Yet, the study seeks to make an indepth analysis in order to analyse the major issues of development and their management in a medium-size city in the backward part of the State of West Bengal.

The significance of the study of Balurghat hinges on a number of factors. Balurghat has grown as a town mainly after independence, and has been passing through various ups and downs. The study is significant because its growth from a riverside tiny village to a township is the typical manifestation of post-colonial urbanisation in West Bengal. It helps to understand the forces that are responsible for the sluggish growth of the city.

Besides, the significance of the study derives from the fact that before independence nationalist fervour swept through the town and during the 'quit India' call of Mahatma Gandhi in 1942, the town was freed from the colonial rule for twenty four hours. How nationalist politics was pressed into service for the creation and working of the civic body and how it gradually became enmeshed with the later developments, is important in understanding the functioning of the civic body.

The study is significant in understanding the problems of Balurghat as a medium size city, attention of the

government to its problems and also the politics and management of civic affairs. Further, the study is significant for examining the problems and prospect of the evolving pattern of decentralised development.

C. Growth of Balurghat : An Historical Survey

Urban centers grow from the pre-urban spatial form, but such growth seldom resembles one another. The drift from rural to urban has been a common phenomenon and urban centers in most cases have some rural background. As a consequence, urban growth has been polymorphous in nature.

Growth of urban centers stems mainly from the conjuncture of the social, economic, political-administrative and geographical factors. Different forms of urban development stem from different modes of interaction among them. So, from the symptomatic perception of different forms of urban growth, experts have stated them in various terms, such as 'pre-industrial urban development', 'industrial urbanisation', 'pseudo-urbanisation', 'dependent urbanisation', 'subsistence urbanisation' etc.

In a colonial setting, urban centers grow to serve the colonial interest. Throughout the world, colonial onslaught on the backward societies has destroyed their old urban order and also side by side generated urban development, conducive to their interest. Urban growth in the backward regions of the world

after their colonial contact has been moulded to streamline the flight of resources from the periphery to the centre. In Peru, Mexico, India, the Middle East and China, where indigenous urban civilization had already developed, urban forms were radically altered under the impact of European expansion.¹ For instance, forts and coastal settlements were the stimuli for urban growth in most part of the traditional world.² In India, cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, created under the impact of colonialism, outstripped the erstwhile prominent cities like Allahabad, Lucknow, Varanasi, Murshidabad, Mathura, Ayodhya etc. The ancient and medieval cities perished and some medieval cities like Delhi, Jaipur, Hyderabad due to some growth impetus survived in a modified form.³

However, relevant to the present study is the growth of small or tiny urban centres which have grown from some rudimentary stages of population settlement. Conjunction of social, economic, political-administrative and geographical factors acts as the catalyst for urban development. Urban growth then is the sum total of the interplay between economic, social, political-administrative and geographical variables. So, the urban centers are not the casual growth, but the fall-out of a transition. Union of the forces of change leads such transformation. This is true to all urban or proto-urban growth as found in 'The City in History' (Lewis Mumford : 1961) in which the evolution of towns from the primitive cave-shrines and burial tombs of paleolithic

man to the sprawling megapolis of modern times has been traced.

Urban centers grow as a result of specific change, brought through the interplay of different factors, mentioned in the previous section. Different factors work together to facilitate a change from rural to urban spatial form. However, in certain cases like in the remote areas of the backward societies, it is sometimes found that geographical factors are profound in comparison to other causes of urban growth. So, the areas having specific geographical advantage, supplemented by some economic spurt, have advanced ahead of others. Amongst the favourable geographic conditions, rivers play a key role in the transformation by the river-side unknown areas into growing centers. So, it has been pertinently noted that population settlements throughout the world to a large extent grew up in the irrigable regions and the rivers have often been corridors of advance into the unoccupied territory.⁴ This process of population settlement enabled the growth of Balurghat along with the villages like Patiram, Patnitola, Kumarganj and Chandiganj on the bank of river Atreyee, in the southeast corner of the erstwhile district of Dinajpur of undivided Bengal.

Early records, gazetters and official publications depicted Balurghat as the tiny village in the police circle (thana) of Patiram from where rice and other agricultural produces were being exported to other districts of Bengal. It was located in the southern half of the erstwhile Dinajpur district. In the

writings of Buchanan Hamilton and J.L. Sherwill, published in 1833 and 1863 respectively, Balurghat was depicted as a trade centre alongside the lower part of the river Atreyee, while Patiram was reckoned as a town.

Growth of Balurghat as an important trade centre had begun roughly since 1850. Before the transfer of thana from Patiram to Balurghat in 1904, Balurghat and other villages within Patiram thana were one of the backward and less populated area in the district. The Census Report, 1872, found in the 'Statistical Account of Bengal' showed the lowest density of population i.e. 103 persons per square mile in Patiram thana in comparison to other thana in the district of Dinajpur. Obviously, the area within Patiram thana failed to emerge as a major centre of population settlement. Besides, census figure of 1872 showed that the average number of houses per mauza, village or township in Patiram thana were above the lowest position.⁵

However, despite the prolonged backwardness indication for the growth of Balurghat can be noticed from the increasing rate of population growth during the subsequent decades, before the partition of Bengal. The prominence of Balurghat may be attributed to the improvement in production, economy, infrastructure and the installation of administrative sub-division in 1904.⁶

Growth of this tiny entrepot was mainly based on large scale reclamation of waste-lands for cultivation with the

help of aboriginal tribes, who came from Chotanagpur and other parts of the state of Bihar.⁷ In addition, traders, especially from the districts of Pabna and Kushtia (now in Bangladesh), came to Balurghat for trading of agricultural produces. They built warehouses near the river, for the convenience of trading through the river route.⁸ Installation of warehouses had helped the gradual development of this tiny entrepot, as they were necessary because of the length of production and trade cycle, because of the slow pace of travel and communication, the risks of distant markets, the irregularities of production and treachery of the seasons.⁹ After the transfer of thana from Patiran to Balurghat in 1984, the installation of educational institutions, hospitals, civil court, post office and several government offices shaped Balurghat into a growing urban centre.¹⁰ Many people from outside Balurghat migrated to this growing urban centre. From the mauza maps of Balurghat and adjoining areas,¹¹ it was explicitly clear that population immigration was considerably higher than other centres. The Table 2.1 provides the evidence for the gradual growth of population in Balurghat, prepared from the Census Reports from 1872-1941.

Table - 2.1

Year	District	Balurghat Sub-division	Balurghat Police Circle
1872	402,167	142,062	34,936
1881	407,293	145,152	36,919
1891	523,305	154,820	39,304
1901	456,501	178,836	48,718
1911	409,557	204,785	55,644
1921	30,434	194,691	54,050
1931	523,997	291,738	57,787
1941	583,484	251,317	66,570

The figures presented in above Table show considerable increase in population from the early decades of the 20th Century.

Therefore, it was noticeable that Balurghat began to grow as an important town in the south-eastern corner of the erstwhile Dinajpur district from the first half of the present century.

D. Socio-economic Profile of Balurghat

This section is to explore the socio-economic characteristics of Balurghat. Balurghat achieved the status of

a city, according to the criteria of the 1981 Census. The Census of 1981 had also identified it as a centre of urban agglomeration with two urban out-growths, such as Chakbhrigu and Baidyanathpara. In the 1991 Census, too, Balurghat has been accorded the status of a city and the West Bengal Municipal Act, 1993, has selected it as one of the Group-C municipal areas, determined on the basis of population.

The population of Balurghat, according to the Census of 1991, is 1,19,796. A analysis of the population reveals certain demographic characteristics. According to the Census of 1991, the number of male population is 61,650 and female population is 58,146. Another significant feature is that the scheduled caste population is 12,500 and 2,243 persons belong to the category of scheduled tribes. Besides, a noteworthy aspect is that the city is entirely populated by the people of Hindu community, who belong to the higher strata of the Hindu social order. The scheduled caste population is 10.4 per cent while the scheduled tribe population is 1.9 per cent respectively.

In terms of literacy, data show that Balurghat is a highly literate city. Almost 72 per cent of the population are literate and it is remarkable that out of 58,146 female population 67.5 per cent are literate. This phenomenon of higher female literacy can be substantiated by the fact that out of 7402 students, reading in 50 primary schools, 55.6 per cent are female students.

But although the literacy level in Balurghat is

fairly high, its economic prosperity has declined due to the absence of industrial development. Economic opportunities are mainly agricultural, trade and jobs in the government and semi-government establishments. Due to this inadequate income opportunity, most of the people are without any source of income.

Table 2.2

Distribution of population into different occupational categories, shown in percentages

Population	Main workers	Cultivators	Agricultural labourers	Household industry, manufacturing, processing, servicing & repairs	Other workers	Marginal workers	Non-workers
119796	24.17	3.72	0.49	0.35	19.61	0.16	75.67

Source: District Statistical Handbook Uttar & Dakshin Dinajpur, 1995.

Percentages of workers in different sectors of the economy are very low. The category of 'other workers' is the largest, which comprises 19.61 per cent of the workers. It is also found that 47,276 persons live below the poverty-line which is 39.5 per cent of the total population.

Balurghat is almost devoid of industrial activity. Modern industry has not flourished in Balurghat. Only a handful of units of small-scale industries have grown in the city. These units have come up due to the presence of a few income and

employment generation programmes under Nehru Rojgar Yojna.

(Scheme of Urban Micro Enterprises etc. Under this scheme, three types of economic opportunities have been opened. They are :

- (i) enterprise with no skill requirement ;
- (ii) enterprise with some skill requirement, and
- (iii) micro manufacturing enterprise requiring higher skill.

All these three types of enterprises are mainly for the establishment of shops, repairing of different types of machineries, manufacturing of different consumable goods like shoe, weaving, bangle, steel furniture, ball pen, washing powder, agarbati and such other activities.

Therefore, except some small-scale units, industrial activity is at a low ebb in Balurghat.

Impoverishment of Balurghat is also seen in the creation of transport facility. The city is devoid of railway transport, and linked with various places of the state only with bus routs. Important cities and the capital city of West Bengal are connected with motor transport. Also, there are several bus routes for its link with adjacent places. Both the Government and private transport system prevail in the city. They operate bus services in the following routes :

- (i) Balurghat - Malda route;
- (ii) Balurghat - Raiganj route;
- (iii) Balurghat - Gangasapur route;

- (iv) Balurghat - Kaligaganj route;
- (v) Balurghat - Tapan route;
- (vi) Balurghat - Kumarganj route; and
- (vii) Balurghat - Hili route.

Hence, in the absence of railway transport, Balurghat is adequately connected with other places and its hinterland through motor transport.

Analysis of the socio-economic characteristics of Balurghat reveals that Balurghat has been one of the most populated cities in West Bengal. But at the same time it is also an economically backward city of the state. All these have bestowed a distinct character upon the city.

B. Political Development in Balurghat on the Eve of Independence

Political developments in Balurghat on the eve of independence were largely influenced by the general political atmosphere throughout the country when the anti-imperialist struggle gained momentum. But for understanding the political developments in Balurghat, it is necessary to trace the integration between local and national political development, prior to independence.

The decline of the zamindari system as the predominant institution, marked the emergence of a gentry comprising tiny landlords and professionals in Balurghat. Its eclipse facilitated the transfer of political authority to the rising

land-owning and professional people. Gradually, they emerged as the dominant force in the local affairs of Balurghat before independence.

Political activity in Balurghat came into being with the rise of nationalist political parties. Young students and workers of the political parties spread the nationalist ideals. Before the start of nationalist movement, superstitions and traditional social practices governed the society in Balurghat, but the wave of nationalism shook the roots of traditions. Gradual expansion of education and building up of consciousness in the lower rungs of the society considerably removed the traditional beliefs and social practices.¹²

As a part of the political developments in Balurghat the Congress Party gained wide popularity. It successfully mobilised the public opinion against the colonial rule. The local Congress leaders encouraged the people to use country-made goods. At that time, Congress controlled most of the social, economic and political institutions of the town. This helped the party to build a strong political base in the town. Congress participated in the management of local services and won the election of local board. A non-government sanitation board was also founded by the local Congress leaders before independence.¹³

As Balurghat was the main centre of political activity, most of the movements that took place were intensive in nature. In the Quit India Movement, 1942, Balurghat took part in

a noteworthy manner. Most of the Government offices were either ransacked or burnt, and the town was freed from British rule for twenty four hours by the local Congressmen.¹⁴ Hence, the most significant developments in Balurghat, at that time was the consolidation of public opinion against the colonial rule.

But subsequently, on the eve of Independence, growth of factionalism within the Congress Party and gradual accumulation of strength of the leftist political forces brought notable changes in the local political arena. Leaders and workers of the Congress party were divided on the basis of their factional loyalty. Dissent grew up against the local Congress leadership which was confined within a few rich families. This hastened factional rivalry and competition for occupying political power and positions of influence.

Distribution of membership in different social, economic, academic and cultural organisations and recruitment in important positions on the basis of factional loyalty widened the factional differences among the competing groups.

Therefore, political developments in Balurghat, on the eve of independence culminated in the gradual waning of influence of the faction-ridden Congress Party and strengthening of the leftist political parties.

F. Status of Local Self-Government in Balurghat Before Independence

With the trend of population growth and unplanned

settlement in Balurghat from the later part of the 19th century, the problems of Balurghat deserved greater attention from the Government for ensuring better living conditions. But, there was no effective machinery of the Government for the management of local problems. As a result, the problems like, drainage, sanitation, health, road went beyond the capacity of the local authority, which was subsequently installed for the management of local affairs.

Before the creation of the Local Board and Union Board, management of local problems was mainly conducted by the local zamindars¹⁵. Although the entire area was under the direct rule of district headquarters in Dinajpur town, it was practically ruled by local zamindars. But, after the creation of Local board under the District Board, management local affairs was performed at the local level. The number of members of Local Board in Balurghat was 9. The powers of the Local Board were very little and the contribution of the District Board to the Local Board rarely exceeded Rs. 1000 per annum. But the Board had to repair and upkeep certain village roads, maintain pond, ferries, primary education, village sanitation from this paltry sum of money. As a consequence, the Local Board could not undertake all the development works for financial hardship and had to earn lamentable failure.¹⁶ In addition to financial hardship the functions of the Local Board were also crippled by excessive official domination. The District Magistrate was the nominated Chairman of the Board and the members had no option to elect the

Chairman from among the elected members of the Board. This was the practice to ensure official domination.¹⁷

Subsequently, as a sequel to the restructuring of the local bodies throughout the entire Bengal, the Union Board was constituted in Balurghat, replacing the Local Board. But, for the persistence of financial hardship, the Union Board for long time could not undertake the functions such as construction and upkeep of roads, health and sanitation service.

Therefore, the functions of the local government in Balurghat were crippled by excessive official domination and financial hardship. At that time the growth of local self-government was in a nascent stage. But from the beginning, the local self-governments in Balurghat could not bring notable change in the living conditions of the town. They were not so effective in the face of the growing civic problems in Balurghat before independence until the task of civic management was handed over to the Municipal Board in 1951.

G. Political Developments in Balurghat since Independence

Political developments in Balurghat after independence have never taken place in isolation from the general political process. These developments are largely linked with the general political atmosphere in West Bengal.

The pertinent feature of the post-Independence political developments in Balurghat is the inception of political

participation at all levels of the governance. After Independence, the headquarters of the newly formed district of West Dinajpur were installed in Balurghat and since then, Balurghat became the centre of intense political activity in this region. Besides, the creation of constituency for the Lok Sabha and Bihar Sabha and the inception of the Municipal Board in 1951 have helped the development of intensive political activity in Balurghat. Most of the major political parties including the Indian National Congress, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Communist Party of India and subsequently Communist Party of India (Marxist) have established their district offices in Balurghat (the parties are henceforth referred to as I.N.C., R.S.P., C.P.I and C.P.I.M) respectively. They conduct their political programmes for expanding their party-organisation all over the district.

The striking feature of political development in Balurghat has been the gradual strengthening of the Leftist political parties since Independence.¹⁸ The factional squabbles within the Congress Party and the disenchantment of the local electorate with the activities of the Congress Party have led to strengthening of the left political parties. Although, initially after Independence, Congress had been able to win the parliamentary, assembly and municipal elections, afterwards, the left political parties, especially the R.S.P., has made heavy inroads into the strength of the Congress Party.

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