

CHAPTER SIX

EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF NATIONALIST POLITICS, 1905 – 1942

The aim of the present chapter is to study the emergence and growth of nationalist movement in Malda for the period from 1905 to 1942. A major focus here is on the Congress - led freedom struggle that articulated a collective voice against the foreign rule. With its continuous effort, the Congress successfully organized anti-British campaign in the district between 1920-1922 Non-Cooperation Movement and the 1942 open rebellion. Our study proposes to bring out the dynamics of India's nationalist struggle against a powerful state, which wielded the instruments of both coercion and persuasion. Organized by the local political leadership, the anti-British movement channelized mass discontent drawing upon both local and national grievances.

It has sometimes been argued that Malda had been all through a politically backward district¹. As it was the land of big zamindars in comparison to other districts of Northern Bengal, the progress of the nationalist movement was thwarted. However, our in-depth study would reveal that the district of Malda both sustained the anti-British sentiments and translated them into movements against the colonial state.

In fact, the district of Malda had a rich heritage of protest against the colonial rulers and their Indian compatriots. The district witnessed from the very beginning of the colonial rule the primary resistance movement. The earliest of these was the Sannyasi and Fakir rebellion, which rocked northern Bengal and adjacent areas of Bihar between 1763 and 1800. The Dasnami Sannyasis, known for their martial tradition, were involved in landholding, money lending and trade in raw silk, piece goods, copper and spices. These *sannyasi* traders used to purchase a large quantity of cloth made of mixed cotton and silk. The Gosaintuli area of Malda owes its name to them². The *sannyasis* and *gosains* were the chief merchants of Malda area for the export of silk piece goods to the Western Provinces and Deccan³. They partly sold

these goods at Patna and Benares. However, the major portion was sold in the mart of Mirzapore, the prominent trade centre of the entire North India. It was from Mirzapore they distributed these goods all over the Western and North Western Continent of Asia⁴.

In 1794, the prominent *gosain* merchants of Malda were Mahant Majgir, Gosain Sannalgir, Gosain Dasagir, Gosain Bhairovgiri and Mohant Kesargiri⁵. A fresh tax was levied on them at Malda even while they were paying sare duties at Kata Manzhi and Gazipur for their carrying trade to Benares and Shahjahanabad, and this was a cause of much resentment among them⁶. Some of the sannyasis of the Giri sect acquired landed properties in the district of Malda⁷. The Madari Fakirs, who traced their origin from the sufi order initiated by Shah-i-Madar, enjoyed rent-free tenures and retained armed followers during the Mughal days. At Pandua of Malda district, the *fakirs* came to possess the Baishazari Estate granted to them by the Mughal Emperor. The noted Adina mosque and Bari Dargah were under the supervision of this estate. The *fakirs* belonging to Madari and Burhan sect had resided in Malda. Both these groups of armed wandering monks, namely the *sanyasis* and *fakirs*, were affected by the company's high revenue demands, resumption of rent-free tenures, and commercial monopoly. The sufferers from the famine of 1769-70, a large number of aggrieved small zamindars, disbanded soldiers and the rural poor, inflated their ranks. The *sanyasis* and *fakirs* selected the factories and revenue offices of the company, the *kachharis* of rich landlords and the granaries of the merchants as the main targets of their attack⁸.

On 8 March 1783, Grant, the agent of Malda factory, reported to the Collector of Bhagalpur, "The country in the neighbourhood of Malda was being infested by several large body of Fakeers (headed by Shaw Burhan) who have committed many depredations"⁹. These fakeers probably belonged to Majnu Shah who himself had been staying with a greater force at Buddel, on the border of Purnia. It is also reported that a party consisting of 600 or 700 persons robbed the public *cutchery*, which was six *cross* away from Malda. After that, they appeared very near to the Company's aurang at Nirschindipur. Another party of 500 was near Colligang (Kaligram, near Chanchal), a

principal *aurang* of the Company. They beat the weavers and threatened to burn their villages if they refused to pay a contribution¹⁰.

We can easily realize the gravity of the situation from the above-mentioned report. His own armed men, Grant felt, were inadequate to defend his factories. Therefore, he appealed to the Colonel-in-charge of the Company's closest military station for a detachment of troops to protect the countryside from "wandering and robbing *fakereers*". Accordingly, the Collector of Bhagalpur intimated the Resident that six companies of *sepoys* under Major Bhchan was proceeding to Malda to prevent the incursions of the *sanyasi* raiders¹¹.

In February, 1793, George Udny, the Resident of Malda, informed the Board that a large body of armed *fakereers* numbering two or three hundred had appeared very near the factory and had visited Pundoos (Pandua) which was a revenue collection centre subordinate to Malda¹². On 1 July 1794, he again reported that the *coolies* at Ramgunj which was the seat of business of the Malduar *aurunghad* had been attacked and plundered by a body of three or four hundred armed *fakereers* who carried off cash and clothes worth 3700 rupees¹³. The leader of the bandits was supposed to be Sobhan Shah, the "*chelah*" or adopted son of Majnu Shah. Sobhan Shah came with a numerous body of *fakereers* to the town of Malda in Feb 1793, created disturbance and maltreated several merchants there. Shortly after, he plundered the public *cutchery* at Kanchan as well as several wealthy people thereabout. They also levied contribution on local people "under the name of charity"¹⁴. In fact, a distinctive characteristic of the peasant war in the 1790s was the assault on *gomastas* and other employees of English factories.

These frequent attacks caused alarm to the Company's Malda establishment. During the year, 1760-1800 recurrent confrontations between the *sanyasi-fakirs* and the armed forces of the Company took place in a wide region of northern Bengal, including Malda. Johuri shah, an important leader of the rebels, was arrested in Malda¹⁵. Considerable quantities of arms were seized from the *jungle* of Pichchli in Malda. Majnu Shah, the noted leader of the Sanyasi-Fakir rebellion, was injured while fighting with the company's army at the village of Manjura of Bogra district. His followers carried their injured

leader to Malda and took shelter at Pandua, which was a stronghold of the *madari fakirs*. Later Majnu Shah preferred to go to Bihar and breathed his last at Makhanpur village. The British administration considered the uprising as problem of law and order; the rebels were portrayed as primitive savages resisting civilization¹⁶ Whatever might be the opinion of the colonial administrators, the fact remains that the Sanyasi and Fakir rebellion bears ample testimony to the anti-British attitude of the people of Malda.

The Wahabi¹⁷ movement, another formidable peasant uprising, had deep impact on the district of Malda also. Writing in 1876 W.W. Hunter informs, 'a great many of the Muhammadanas belong to the Faraizi and Wahabi sects; and in 1869 several prosecutions for abetment of waging war against the Queen were instituted in this district¹⁸. The movement appeared so strong and organized in Malda that in 1868 that the District Magistrate thought it advisable to suggest the use of orthodox mullahs against the reformist preachers as a counter-measure to contain their influence. "There can be no doubt", he wrote," that the Wahabee movement in Malda is at present very vigorous, and will so continue until we meet the moulvies with their own weapons¹⁹." In Malda, the organizers of *jihad* set up compact organizations in rural areas, which systematically levied men and money and forwarded them by regular stages to the *jihad* camps in the Frontier. The Officiating Magistrate of Malda, J.O. Kinealy, in his report to the Government, dated 20 October 1868, stated: "the depositions show that during many years past the Wahabees have pursued a system of raising supplies for the support of the fanatics... who are waging war against the Government²⁰".

In Malda, the chief leader of the Wahabi movement was Rafik Mandal, a poor peasant himself²¹. Due to his efforts, Wahabi organizations were set up in different parts of Malda. The main centers were Sibganj, Kansat, Nababganj, Kaliachak, Harishchandrapur, Ratua and old Malda.²² Maulana Inayet Ali, a well-known Patna caliph, did extensive missionary work in Malda and Rajshahi, and his efforts were largely responsible for the great enthusiasm created in that area for the *jihad* campaigns in the north-west²³. In order to carry on their *jihad* or war against the British, the Wahabi Sardars (leaders)

collected money from the villages. Those who refused to join them were excommunicated from the society²⁴. At the instruction of Rafik Mandal, the Wahabis of Malda had maintained contact with the Wahabi centres of Patna, Sittana, Nadia and Murshidabad. Some Madrasas in Malda and Murshidabad played an instrumental role to train the Wahabis²⁵. In this way a large band of Wahabis, numbering not less than eighty thousand, was organized by Rafik Mandal and his son Maulavi Amiruddin in the district of Malda²⁶. The colonial administration became apprehensive of the activities of the Wahabis. W.W.Dampier, the Superintendent of Police for the Lower Provinces of Bengal, had mentioned in his report, that the Wahabis had been succeeded in creating 'religious fanaticism' among a large section of the Muslims in Malda and Murshidabad²⁷. The administration decided to take action against the Wahabis and Rafik Mandal was imprisoned in 1853. In spite of this, Maulavi Amiruddin, son of Rafik Mandal, continued to organize the Wahabis. It is stated in an official document, "the man who has most influence among the Wahabees in Malda is Moulvie Ameerooddin of Sandipa Narrainpore. Several of the men who had returned from Malka and Sittana stated that they had been influenced to go there by the preaching of the Moulvie....So long as this man remained at liberty, the collections on account of *jihad*, and for the support of the fanatics across the frontier, would not cease in Rajshahye and Maldah.... He is a fanatic, and preaches sedition against the Government, because, in his opinion, it is a Kaffir government....For years Ameerooddin has been engaged in collecting money, preaching sedition, and sending recruits to join band of fanatics across the frontier²⁸." There were many sub-collectors in district who collected small sums of money in their villages and send it to Maulvi Amiruddin²⁹. The name of such sub-collectors were Sardar Masoom, Enayetullah, Amanat Mondal, Saifulla, and others²⁹. In 1869, Maulavi Amiruddin and a number of his followers were arrested and prosecuted on the charge of waging war against the government³⁰. Property of Maulavi Amiruddin was confiscated and he was sent to Andaman in exile³¹.

However, even after his arrest, collections for *jihad* continued in the district, especially at Narainpur, Hanspookur, Shahaban Chuck and Mojampur. The Sardars who took a leading role in it was Habelash Mondal of Shahaban

Chuck and Amanat Mondal of Hanspookur. They recruited a large number of men from the villages of Hanspookur and Adatola and sent them for *jihad* in NWFP. At Hanspookur, there were nearly five hundred fanatical Muslims of the Wahabi sect who sympathized with the *jehadis*³². However, after their arrest in 1872, the Wahabi activities in Malda were subdued.

The peasant uprising that took place on the indigo plantations in Bengal in 1859-1862 had its impact in the district as well. Indigo trade became a rich source of high profits for the East India Company in India. The planter acquired lands from native zamindars in Bengal and Bihar and extended the cultivation of this crop on a large-scale as a plantation industry. Tenants were forced to grow indigo under a system of great oppression³³. Indignation was spread all-over the indigo-growing districts. Peasants' resistance first began in Pabna and Nadia in 1859 which soon spread to Jessore, Khulna, Rajshahi, Dacca, Murshidabad, Malda and Dinajpur. The planters and their *kuthis* (indigo factories) were attacked and arsoned. In Malda, the riots were organized under the leadership of Morad Biswas, Suhas Biswas and Lal Chand Saha of adjacent Murshidabad³⁴. On 20 March 1860, some three hundred ryots attacked the Bakrabad factory of Kaliachak p.s. owned by David Andrews. The rebels entered the office and destroyed the ledgers. They next attacked the residence of the manager and carried off several guns and a sword. Next day a large number of *ryots*, armed with spears and swords, attacked a neighboring factory managed by Mr. Lyons. In panic, Lyons opened fire on the mob, killing two and injuring five. Fortunately, for the planter a Government steamer arrived at a point opposite the factory and rescued Lyons. The ryots were dispersed. Morad Biswas and Lal Chand Biswas, together with twenty-four rebels, were arrested. Peace was restored in the district at the end of March 1860³⁵.

This rich heritage of protest eventually led to the emergence of nationalist stirrings in Malda district in the last decade of the twentieth century. The rise of nationalist consciousness was, no doubt, favoured by the spread of western education, development of communications, introduction of local self-government as well as formation of Englishbazar (1869), Old Malda (1869)

and some year's later Nababganj (1903) municipalities. The Malda Zilla School, established in 1858, was the first government school in North Bengal³⁶. A few more English schools were established in the district by 1870³⁷. There was no college in Malda until 1944. However, a good number of students used to go to Rajshahi College and Berhampur K.N.College for higher studies. Many of the early nationalists of Malda received education from these colleges³⁸.

Thus, a new class of English educated gentry emerged in the socio-political canvas of the district in the last quarter of the 19th century. These English educated gentry became the chief vehicle for spreading nationalist consciousness in the district. The career of Radhesh Chandra Seth symbolizes the aspirations and activities of this genre of early nationalists of Malda. Radhesh Chandra Seth was born in 1854 in a rich merchant family of Old Malda. He passed the Entrance Examination from Malda Zilla School in 1870. While studying in Zilla School, he had formed an organization named Malda Association. Its chief objective was social service³⁹.

Like many of his contemporaries, Radhesh Chandra got himself admitted in Rajshahi College from where he passed the B.A. Examination. At that time, a problem arose over the issue of the continuation of Old Malda Municipality. A section of the local gentry opposed the working of the civic body and demanded its abolition. However, another group, led by Radhesh Chandra, argued in favor of its existence for the benefit of the people. Radhesh Chandra himself wrote a booklet to propagate the necessity of smooth functioning of the civic body. It was due to his efforts that a strong public opinion was built up and the municipality was allowed to continue⁴⁰.

Radhesh Chandra was fully aware of the usefulness of newspaper as a medium of disseminating political consciousness in a district far away from the metropolice. While studying in the Rajshahi College, Radhesh Chandra had attended the third session of the Indian National Congress held in Madras as delegate from Malda⁴¹. In Madras, he came into touch with the nationalists coming from different corners of the country. He clearly understood that this new political consciousness cutting across the regional barriers had no

reverberations in his own district. Returning in Malda, he decided to publish a newspaper to make the people aware of the newly emerging nationalist consciousness⁴². In 1894 he started to publish *Gourbarta*, a fortnightly newspaper. Radhesh Chandra also founded Krishnakali Press with the help of some lawyers and teachers of the town. However, the people of Malda were yet unprepared to appreciate this pioneering venture. The *Gourbarta* did not continue for a long time due to lack of response from the people and paucity of funds⁴³. This initial failure did not divert Radhesh Chandra from his mission. Soon after, he began to publish another newspaper, the *Gourdoot*. In *Gourdoot* he wrote several articles relating to 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 etc⁴⁴. However, the publication of the *Gourdoot* also came to an abrupt end when in 1897 a violent earthquake destroyed the Krishnakali Press. Thereafter Radhesh Chandra joined the *Maldaha Samachar* as a regular columnist. During the time of the Swadeshi Movement, he wrote a number of articles in *Maldaha Samachar* to propagate the Swadeshi cause⁴⁵.

Thus, it was due to the efforts of some local middle class intelligentsia like Radhesh Chandra the stage was set for further and steady growth of national consciousness in a district far away from Calcutta, the nerve centre of provincial political activities. The incipient growth of national awakening was given a fillip by the Swadeshi Movement that followed Curzon's infamous decision of Partition of Bengal in 1905.

MALDA AND THE 1905 BENGAL PARTITION

Curzon's partition of Bengal provoked what is famous as the Swadeshi Movement which upset the 'settled fact' of partition and during which various new techniques of political mobilization were successfully attempted⁴⁶. Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims in Western Bengal and mainly Hindus in East Bengal came out against the imperial policy and developed the ideology of Swadeshi nationalism. It permeated large areas of Bengal and introduced

hitherto unknown devices of political mobilization to India's freedom struggle by directly confronting the British Raj.

The *mufassil* districts of Bengal played their due role in the Swadeshi Movement. The district of Malda did not lag behind in this phase of nationalist movement. The district itself was included in the newly created Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. In Malda, the anti-Partition movement began as an urban middle class movement in which leadership and inspiration were provided by Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Radhesh Chandra Seth. Benoy Kumar Sarkar stood first in the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University in 1901 as a student of Malda Zilla School. While studying in the Presidency College of Calcutta, he came under the direct influence of Satis Chandra Mukherjee, the founder of the Dawn Society and a prominent leader of the Swadeshi Movement. Benoy Sarkar became a member of the Dawn Society. He had also developed a close relation with Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, the editor of the nationalist periodical, the Sandhya⁴⁷. Benoy Sarkar thus imbued with zeal for the Swadeshi.

Meanwhile the people of Malda had begun to express their objection through numerous meetings against the partition of Bengal and inclusion of the district in the proposed province of Eastern Bengal and Assam⁴⁸. Radhesh Chandra Seth took a leading role in arranging such meetings in which leaders from various places including Calcutta spoke on nationalistic subjects⁴⁹. Sir Andrew Fraser, then the Lt. Governor of Bengal, thought it necessary to enlist the support of the people to the proposed measure and decided to come to Malda⁵⁰. Andrew Fraser delivered a speech in Malda in which he tried to convince the people of various advantages of the proposed transfer of the district to the new province and of the necessity of the creation of the new province. However, his speech did not have any impact on the people⁵¹. The people of Malda did not lag behind the other parts of Bengal in registering their protest against the Partition of Bengal. Legal practitioners, teachers, students were active participants of the movement⁵². The day, on which partition took effect, 16 October 1905, *Rakhi-bandhan* was observed by all

Bengalis as a symbol of brotherhood and vanity of the people of Bengal. In Malda town too, the day was observed⁵³.

An important aspect of the movement was the disrespect shown on the part of the people towards the machinery of the British Raj. When Sir Bamfylde Fuller, the Lt. Governor of the newly formed Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, arrived in Malda, the people showed a visible apathy to him. Only a few people assembled at the landing *ghat* to receive him, which annoyed the Lt. Governor, and he did not attempt to suppress it⁵⁴. The Swadeshi activists also resented the elaborate preparations made by the authorities of Malda Zilla School to receive Sir Bamfylde Fuller⁵⁵.

While this incident dramatically revealed the mood of the period, much more significant were various other expressions of nationalist feeling. A revulsion against western education became a major strand in the Swadeshi movement, taking the two forms of calls for boycott of official schools and colleges, and attempts to build up a parallel and independent system of 'national education'⁵⁶. Meanwhile in Calcutta a group of bright young students associated with Satis Chandra Mukherjee's Dawn Society had issued a manifesto in September 1905 calling for a boycott of the coming M.A. and P.R.S. examinations. Benoy Kumar Sarkar of Malda, holder of the Ishan scholarship was among these Swadeshi activists⁵⁷. He also made efforts to organize several meetings in Malda advocating educational boycott. In his endeavor, Benoy Kumar Sarkar got the support of Radhesh Chandra Seth and Bepinbehari Ghose, the two pioneer nationalists of Malda⁵⁸. It is to be noted that the agitators against the Partition were drawn from Hindus and Muslims alike, and Moulvi Mohammed Nur Bux, a distinguished nationalist leader of Malda presided at a few anti-partition meetings⁵⁹.

The spontaneous participation of a large number of students in the Swadeshi Movement forced the government to issue Carlyle Circular on 10 October 1905 threatening withdrawal of grants and scholarships and disaffiliation of institutions which failed to prevent student participation in politics and the Lyon circular on 16 October 1905 in East Bengal banning the *Bande Mataram* slogan and adding that students of recalcitrant schools and colleges could be

debarred from government service⁶⁰. The administration in Malda also did not lag behind. That the participation of students of Malda in anti-partition agitation caused alarm in the official circle was verified by the fact that the District Magistrate issued a circular in 1905 directing the students not to take part in political agitations. However, the circular seemed to have little impact on the student agitators⁶¹.

The Swadeshi Movement was not confined to only boycott of foreign goods and to the observance of Partition day. It rapidly spread in the fields of education also. Sincere and comprehensive efforts were made for the growth of national education. The National Council of Education was constituted on 11 March 1906. The National Council of Education drew up in 1906 a curriculum for a three-year primary, seven-year secondary and four-year collegiate course. Literary and scientific studies was proposed to be combined with some amount of technical training up to the fifth year of the secondary course, after which the three streams would be divided⁶². Provision was made for a system of affiliation and grants-in-aid. Eventually the Bengal National College and School started on 15 August 1906 in Calcutta, with Aurobindo Ghosh as its first principal and Satischandra Mukherjee as superintendent. The young men trained by Satischandra Mukherjee through the Dawn Society – Benoykumar Sarkar of Malda, Radhakumud Mukherjee and others formed the core of the teaching staff⁶³.

National schools were sprung up in a number of Bengal districts. Benoykumar Sarkar took a leading role in establishing in June 1907 the Malda Jatiya Shiksha Samiti. The president and the secretary of the organization were Prankrishna Bhaduri and Bepinbehari Ghosh. Radhesh Chandra Seth and Moulvi Mohammed Nur Bux served as its vice-presidents⁶⁴. All these men were leading lawyers well known for their social work. The Malda organization had a committee of 45 members with many of them coming from the rural areas. It had an examination system of its own, and unlike the Calcutta prototype tried to concentrate its efforts on mass education. The Malda Jatiya Shiksha Samiti had set up eight schools with 748 students by June 1908, three of them primary⁶⁵. These schools were located at Malda, Kutubpur,

Kaligram, Dharampur, Paranpur, Jadupur and Malatipur⁶⁶. In order to spread mass education, the Malda Jatiya Shiksha Samiti had established night schools at Kutubpur, Kaligram and Dharampur⁶⁷. The Samiti also endeavoured to spread female education. Girls' schools were opened at Kaligram and Dharampur⁶⁸.

The Malda Samiti since its inception had emphasized the need of well-written textbooks in vernacular. Radhesh Chandra Seth and Haridas Palit engaged themselves in writing textbooks in history and geography⁶⁹. Benoykumar Sarkar, however, took the leading role in this respect. During this period, he wrote Prachin Greecer Jatiya Siksha (1910), Bhasa Siksha (1910), Siksha Sopan (1912), Aitihasic Prabandha (1912) and several other books in vernacular to solve the problem of scarcity of text books⁷⁰. Prominent scholars like Radhakumud Mukherjee, Radhakamal Mukherjee, Bidhusekhar Shastri, Kumudnath Lahiri were invited to deliver lectures and to encourage higher research in Bengali⁷¹. The Malda Samiti founded a Literary Research Department in 1911, which greatly patronized the folk culture of the region. Haridas Palit was encouraged by the Literary Research Department to compose his Addyer Gambhira, which was published in the journal of Bangiya SahityaParishad⁷².

The Malda Jatiya Shiksha Samiti laid stress on technical education and vocational training as well. Many National Schools had their own laboratories. A number of craftsmen were appointed as teachers. The Kaligram National School had a small workshop⁷³. It was mainly through the initiative of Benoykumar Sarkar that a number of students associated with Malda Jatiya Shiksha Samiti were sent to various universities of the U.S.A. for receiving higher education in the field of technology⁷⁴.

Thus the Malda Jatiya Shiksha Samiti under the leadership of Benoykumar Sarkar and Radhesh Chandra Seth played a pivotal role in spreading 'national' education and national consciousness among a large number of student of Malda, many of whom in later years turned out as prominent persons in political, social and cultural arena of the district. To sum up, the period of Swadeshi Movement saw the sprouting of nationalism in Malda and

the nationalist activities had several dimensions. Although the Swadeshi Movement initiated a novel process in the district that yielded results in a later period, it nonetheless failed to expand the arena of nationalist politics beyond students, nationalist lawyers and some zamindars. In Malda where the overwhelming majority of the population was rural with little or no contact with Calcutta, Swadeshi as a political ideology was too distant to attract support among the masses. All these indicate the limitations of the first phase of nationalist activities in Malda.

By 1908, political *swadeshi* was certainly on the decline and was taken over by another trend, i.e., individual terrorism against British officials and Indian collaborators. This signified, as Sumit Sarkar points out, a shift from non-violence to violence and from mass action to elite action, necessitated primarily by the failure of the mass mobilization efforts⁷⁵. The real story of terrorism in Bengal begins from 1902 with the formation of four groups, three in Calcutta and one in Midnapur. The first was the Midnapur Society founded in 1902 and this was followed by the founding of a gymnasium by Sarala Ghosh in Calcutta, the Atmoroti Samiti by some central Calcutta youths and the Anushilan Samiti by Satischandra Basu in March 1902. The beginning of the Swadeshi Movement in 1905 brought an upsurge in secret society activities. The Dacca Anushilan Samiti was born in October 1906. A revolutionary weekly called *Yugantar* started in the same year. A district group within the Calcutta Anushilan Samiti headed by Barindrakumar Ghosh, Hemchandra Kanungo and Prafulla Chaki soon started action. Several *swadeshi* dacoity to raise funds was organized and a bomb-manufacturing unit was set up at Maniktala in Calcutta.

Both the Anushilan Samiti and the Brati Samiti had their branches in Malda⁷⁶. The Brati Samiti was formed under the leadership of Manoranjan Guha Thakurata who was closely associated with the Dacca Branch of the Anushilan Samiti. It had branches in Khulna, Faridpur, Malda and other places⁷⁷. Satish Pakrashi in his book '*Agniyuger Katha*' mentioned that he evaded the police in connection with the Rajabazar Bomb Case and after changing his name shifted his field of activity to Malda. Here, he recruited

some of the students of the local National School for the terrorist movement⁷⁸. Trailokyanath Chakrabarti, the noted revolutionary, has mentioned the names of Hangshagopal Agarwala, Krishnajiban Sanyal, Mahendra De, Dakshina Lahiri and others as the representatives of the Anushilan Samiti in Malda⁷⁹.

Meanwhile Kshudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki, the two members of Maniktala group of the Calcutta Anushilan Samiti made an abortive attempt at Muzaffarpur on the life of the Presidency Magistrate Kingsford. However, they mistakenly killed two European women. This incident led to the arrest of the entire Maniktala group, including Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Ghosh. At Maniktala, the police seized several bombs, dynamite, revolvers and other weapons along with numerous letters and various other documents indicating the existence of a secret society⁸⁰. The activists were tried in the Alipur Bomb Case and awarded in February 1910 various terms of imprisonment, including transportation for life. Aurobindo was ably defended by C.R.Das, and as the charges against him could not be proved, he was released.

The youngest person tried in the Alipur Bomb Case was Krishnsjiban Sanyal of Malda, aged about 16 years⁸¹. He was ousted from Malda Zilla School for raising the slogan 'Bandemataram' in the class. Later his guardian sent him to Bihar where he was admitted in the Giridi High School⁸². At Giridi, Krishnajiban came into connection with Barindra Kumar Ghosh and decided to join the Maniktala Secret Society⁸³. The members of the Maniktala Society were, with few exceptions, young Bengali Hindus. Most of them were from the 'respectable' (*Bhadralok*) castes and most of them fairly well educated⁸⁴. During the preparatory period of the Maniktala Society, its members were concerned chiefly with the collection of men, arms and money⁸⁵. All the recruits did in fact spend much of their time in study. There was a special emphasis on religious texts, in particular the Gita and Upanishads. Bomb making formed part of the general curriculum. In his statement before the police, Krishnajiban Sanyal said that 'in the garden Upen Babu used to teach us Upanishads and politics and Barindra Babu [taught] Gita and History of Russo-Japanese War and Ullas Babu delivered lectures on explosives'⁸⁶. In

the Alipur Bomb Case Krishnajiban was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for one year⁸⁷.

As it became clear after the Alipur episode, a section of students of Malda had a direct involvement in the revolutionary activities, the district administration let loose various repressive measures to scare the people away from *swadeshi* campaign⁸⁸. The situation in Malda was so panic-stricken that the editor of a local newspaper wrote, 'There is a general sense of insecurity throughout the district. People feel that any moment their houses may be searched and they may be arrested if only they have incurred the displeasure of the police'⁸⁹. Indiscriminate police repression helped to contain revolutionary activities for the time being.

However, the revolutionary activities again came into operation around 1915. During this time, the students and youth who were associated with revolutionary activities were Harimohan Jha, Mahendra Das, Pashupati Jha, Gopal Majhi, Hanshagopal Agarwala, Narayan Saha and others. On January 28, 1916 Nabinchandra Bose, the Headmaster of Malda Zilla School, was stabbed to death⁹⁰. The revolutionaries suspected that Nabinchandra Bose had been supplying information to the police about the political activities of his students⁹¹. As soon as the news of assassination spread, the police swung into action. Mahendranath Das, a student of Malda Zilla School who was suspected to have a revolutionary linking and was seen on the spot of murder, was arrested immediately. The police raided and ransacked his house, seizing some books, letters and other documents. A few days later some other students namely Harimohan Jha, Pashupati Jha, Kalipada Ghosh, Narayan Saha were taken into custody. The trial of Mahendranath Das and others created a sensation throughout the district. It had the effect of raising the level of political consciousness in Malda⁹². After the trial was over Mahendranath Das was sentenced to transportation for life. Four others - Harimohan Jha, Pashupati Jha, Kalipada Ghosh, Narayan Saha were sentenced to five years to one year of imprisonment⁹³.

The district administration was keen to wrap up the so-called troublemakers. It let loose various repressive measures to scare the people. Indiscriminate

police repression was effective for the time being in containing terrorist activities in Malda. It, however, contributed to raise the level of political consciousness in Malda. Previously, majority of Malda inhabitants were largely indifferent to the activities of the nationalists, repression brought to them the realities of the Swadeshi Movement, which provoked the local administration to undertake measures to combat the participants⁹⁴.

Although the Swadeshi Movement declined in the second decade of the century it had provided a solid foundation upon which was built the edifice of future nationalist movement. Meanwhile a void was created in the rank of nationalist leadership in Malda. His contemporaries considered Radhesh Chandra Seth's demise in 1911 as a great blow to the nationalist movement in Northern Bengal⁹⁵. In the same year Banerwar Das, a young and energetic nationalist leader in Malda, had left for the USA to receive higher education⁹⁶. In 1914, Benoy Kumar Sarkar himself had left for the USA and thus was created a void, which could never be filled⁹⁷.

The revival and growth of nationalist politics in Malda was again discernible after the entry of Gandhiji in the political life of the country. His arrival on the political scene introduced various new dimensions to the nationalist politics. India's freedom struggle was no longer confined to *bhadraloks* only, but was expanded to incorporate new social groups which so far remained peripheral. The involvement of new social groups in the freedom struggle helped crystallize their search for a new order. It is all these which snowballed into the Non-Cooperation - Khilafat Movement of the years of 1921-22⁹⁸. Malda too came to be involved in it and a large number of people from a variety of social backgrounds became involved in the movement.

As the Khilafat and Non- Cooperation Movements were twin movements and were interdependent, both the Hindus and Muslims unitedly participated. And in Malda also the Hindus joined hands with the Muslims in the Khilafat Movement. Large Khilafat meetings were held in the district. In an official record, it was stated that the Khilafat agitators were spreading false rumours and inflammatory appeals about the desecration of the holy places and the need for *jihad*⁹⁹. As we have already noted, the district of Malda was an

important center of the Wahabi sect and during the time of the Non – Cooperation- Khilafat Movement, they also began to organize the common Muslims around the Khilafat issue. As an official report states, intensive propaganda was conducted by the leading Wahabis of Malda and Rajshahi, where *pirs* and collecting agents collected Baitul- Mal, and their principal topic of preaching was the approaching declaration of *jihad*¹⁰⁰. In a large meeting at Malda, Maulavi Abdul Ghani compared the glorious past with the present humble condition of the Kingdom of the Caliph and opined that the decline of the Islamic powers was due to degeneration of the Muslims.¹⁰¹ The meeting was presided over by Maulavi Shah Mohammad Choudhury, a zamindar. The other speakers were Maulavi Mohammad Laljan Motwalli and Maulavi Mohammad Ismail.¹⁰²

The chief centers of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Malda were Englishbazar, Kaliachak, Chanchal, Kaligram, Harishchandrapur, Nababgang and Gomastapur. Training the volunteers, picketing before excise shops, boycotting foreign goods, establishing the cottage industry etc. were the programmes of the District Congress during the Non- Cooperation Movement. The prominent leaders of the Congress during this time were Bhupendra Krisna Misra of Harishchandrapur, Debendranath Jha and Bhupendranath Jha of Bangitola, Jatindranath Singha of Nagharia, Krishnagopal Sen of Bachamari, Satish Chandra Agarwall and Surya Prasad Behani of Old Malda , Phani Dube and Baroda Dube of Kaliachak and Ramesh Chandra Ghosh, Ramesh Chandra Bagchi and Bepin Bihari Ghosh of Englishbazar¹⁰³.

As regards boycott of school and colleges, the Non-Cooperation campaign in Malda probably attained a dramatic success. The local leadership urged the students to leave the government-controlled educational institutions. The students in Malda responded to this appeal in a striking manner. At Kaligram, a number of students, namely Charu Chandra Sarkar, Manindranath Roy Choudhury, Girindra Narayan Biswas, Gour Chandra Sarkar came out of the Government- controlled school and joined the Non- Cooperation Movement¹⁰⁴. Priya Nath Ghosh, an ex-member of the Anusilan Samiti took a leading role in organizing students at Gomastapur and Nababganj. Under his

leadership the students of Nababganj School went on strike¹⁰⁵. The student of the A.C. Institution of Englishbazar also participated in the movement. They organized strikes when the district leaders were arrested¹⁰⁶. Sachindranath Misra, a student of Harishchandrapur School, organized the students there in support of the Non- Cooperation Movement. Shibram Chakraborty, a noted literary figure afterwards, led the students of his school Chanchal Siddheswari Institution¹⁰⁷.

Establishment of national schools was one of the important programmes of the Non- Cooperation Movement. Malda district played a very significant role in this programme of the movement. In February 1921, a huge meeting was organized at the Town Hall, which resolved to establish schools, which would ensure within a short period national regeneration¹⁰⁸. Accordingly, the *Jatiya Shiksha Mandir* was established. Another National School was started at Kaligram and arrangements were made for training the students in important arts as well as industries. The art of spinning and weaving was given due importance¹⁰⁹. An official report stated that several zamindars of Malda provided financial assistance for establishing these schools as well as for organizing anti- British campaign¹¹⁰.

In late May 1921, Chittaranjan Das and several other leaders visited Malda. In response to his call, some prominent legal practitioners of Malda namely Ramesh Chandra Bagchi, Ramesh Chandra Ghosh, Jnanedrasashi Gupta, Gangacharan Datta and Maulavi Tahiruddin Ahmed suspended their law practice¹¹¹. In fact, Deshbandhu's visit to Malda during the Non- Cooperation Movement gave a fillip to this new urge for nationalist movement. C.R. Das addressed a massive rally at the Town Hall in which he explained the situation with special stress on the wrongs of Khilafat and Punjab and urged the people to make the Non-Cooperation Movement a success¹¹².

The Government reports indicated that a determined effort was made to establish youth and student- based volunteer corps under Priya Nath Ghosh, an ex-member of the Anusilan Samiti. The report also pointed out that this body had chalked out a programme for collection of funds, enforcement of the Congress Committee's programme of work, picketing before excise shops

etc¹¹³. Another report stated that the volunteers at Englishbazar, Kaligram and Shershahi were carrying out the instructions of the District Congress Committee and provoking the people to abstain from payment of taxes and rent. They also urged the people to boycott the law courts and prevented shopkeepers from supplying foodstuffs to the police¹¹⁴.

One of the important programmes of the Non – Cooperation Movement was the no- tax campaign, which had a deep impact in the district of Malda. The introduction of the union Board in 1919 as the lowest unit of administration provoked unrest in the district. The Union Board was introduced in the 1919 Bengal Village Self Government (BVSG) Act to strengthen administration at the grassroots. The primary objective of the Act was to assert the Government authority at the grassroots. It laid emphasis on the appointment of more *dafadars* and *chowkidars*. Although the Board members had virtually no power in their appointment, the Union Board was required to pay the salaries and the cost of equipment used by the *dafadars* and *chowkidars*. The Union Board was also expected to contribute to rural development. However, the Government did not sanction money for the boards to encourage them to undertake taxation for rural improvement. The Union Board was instituted with a 50% increase of the existing chowkidari tax¹¹⁵. The no-tax movement took a concrete shape at Kaligram, Harishchandrapur and Bangitola under the leadership of Manindranath Roy Chowdhury, Sachindranath Misra and Debendranath Jha respectively. The Provincial Congress Committee sent the volunteers to different districts including Malda to instruct the people, specially the peasant not to pay taxes. In its report for the month of June 1921, the Intelligence Branch recorded that the agitation against Chowkidari Tax continued in the district of Dacca, Murshidabad, Malda, Rajshahi, Noakhali and Rangpur¹¹⁶.

Police unrest was another significant feature of the Non- Cooperation Movement in Malda. The rural police was restive for inadequate and irregular pay. The social apathy coupled with inadequate pay broke their reserve, and they also started putting forth their demands for higher wages. Around this time, the local congress workers took the opportunity and urged the

policemen to resign their posts. At Shibganj, one *dafadar* and one *chowkidar* resigned from services in April 1922. The *chowkidars* of Bamongola p.s. were planning a strike in August 1922 to press their demand for pay hike¹¹⁷. Instances of *chowkidars* being socially boycotted for refusing to resign their posts were reported from the district¹¹⁸.

Unrest spread also among the *santal* sharecroppers of Barind region. Over the years, there developed a custom whereby the *santals* used to catch fish from *beels* or extensive water-logged areas. The leaseholders wanted to restrain the *santals* from fishing in the *beels* as a form of procession. The *santals*, on the other hand, were convinced that they had been following a traditional custom. In this practice, other local ethnic groups like the Polia, Rajbansi and Momins also joined the *santals*¹¹⁹. Disturbances cropped up when a spate of fish-looting broke out in February 1922 at Singhabad Estate for which three cases were started against the *santals*¹²⁰. Again in April 1922, about one thousand *santals* of Gajol- Bamongola- Old Malda p.s. and of Itahar and Bansihari p. s. of Dinajpur district indiscriminately looted fish from certain *beels* in Gajol and Bamongola p.s. An armed police force was deputed by the administration and several arrests were made¹²¹.

Evaluating the Non- Cooperation Movement from 1920 to 1922 in Malda, we may point out that the movement was a landmark in the nationalist politics of the district. The movement expanded the constituency of nationalist politics by incorporating the hitherto marginal social groups. The unrest among the *santal* sharecroppers, discontent among the rural police, no-tax campaign, boycott of law courts by the rural populace all were example of the popular politics, initiative and self mobilization at the grass roots level. The participation of a large number of students and youths was also a unique feature of the movement. They came not only from the elite class of the society but also from the middle class and the lower middle class.

The Non-Cooperation Movement is, as our discussion shows, certainly a break with the past in the sense that it brought new actors on the political scene of Malda. The movement reflected the existence of widespread discontent at the popular level. Until then the District Congress was

dominated by landed interests. Therefore, the District Congress never encouraged agitation at the popular level against local zamindars precisely because of the implications of offending the landlords who had always been a significant force in the Malda Congress. Albeit this, a process of self-mobilization around the name of Gandhiji began among the *santal* sharecroppers in Barind during the Non-Cooperation Movement. The *santal* sharecroppers of Barind did not precisely know who Gandhiji was or what were his ideas and principles. They only knew that a man named Gandhi was carrying on a struggle against the enemy of the common people- the British and the zamindars. To the *santals* of Barind, the name of Gandhi became a symbol of struggle and a source of inspiration. This trend had an element of popular messianism and demonstrated the impact of Gandhi on the minds of peasants and labourers who had a sort of marginalized existence. The name Gandhi began to capture the imagination of the masses. Indeed, the autonomous *santal* mobilization ushered in a new era by identifying a new constituency, which gradually became formidable culminating in the open revolt of the *santals* under the leadership of Jitu Santal in the year 1932¹²².

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT IN MALDA 1930 – 33

The Non-Cooperation Movement confirmed the popularity of the Congress and Gandhi's rise as its undisputed leader. However, Gandhiji suspended the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922 following the Chauri Chaura incident¹²³. By the end of 1923 the Malda District Congress Committee was in a state of decline. On the issue of Council entry, the Malda Congress workers sided with the 'No-Changers'. Debendra Nath Jha and Atul Kumar were perhaps the only prominent Congress leaders to support Chittaranjan on the issue of Council entry¹²⁴. After the demise of C. R. Das in 1925, a bitter factional squabble in the Bengal Congress cropped up between Subhas Chandra Bose and Jatindra Mohan Sen Gupta and their respective followers. This factional rivalry had its imprint in the nationalist politics of Malda as well¹²⁵. Although the

District Congress was in a moribund condition during this time, nationalist ideas remained in circulation among various sections of the population. In November 1924, Lord Lytton, the Governor of Bengal came to Malda where he defended the repressive policy of the government in very clear terms¹²⁶. On the day of his arrival a complete hartal was observed at Malda. The Congress volunteers organized the shopkeepers, porters, boatmen and cartmen who also participated in the strike¹²⁷. The district administration took every possible step to foil the strike. The police were ordered to remove the *hartal* placards. The merchants and shopkeepers were asked not to join the strike. However, the effort of the administration failed. The town looked deserted on the day of arrival of Lord Lytton¹²⁸.

The Barind region, on the other hand, was seething with discontent. The *santal* sharecroppers of Barind believed that the administration was backing the landlords and moneylenders who were responsible for their misery. Meanwhile, they had already been irked by a series of civil and criminal cases in which they had been faring badly¹²⁹. In March 1924, a crowd of about two thousand *santals* besieged a bevy of eight constables at Gajol *hat* until one of them fired from the musket and scared away the offenders¹³⁰. The district administration apprehended that the situation became so worse that the *santals* might confront the administration any day unless some precautionary measure was taken. It was observed that the extension of section 49A of the Bengal Tenancy Act failed to produce any significant result as the moneylenders were reluctant to give loans to the *santals* on the security of their land. In such a situation, it was felt, the government would have to come forward to give loans to the *santals* to pacify their discontent¹³¹.

However, the situation did not improve much. The Swarajists led by Kashishwar Chakraborty of Dinajpur took the opportunity and began to organize the *santal* sharecroppers¹³². Several meetings of *raiya*t were held in the Barind region. In March 1924, subscriptions were raised to meet the expenses of a visit of Kedar Nath Chakraborty, secretary of the Raiyat Association¹³³. A meeting of the *raiya*t was held at Jagdala in Bamongola p.s. on 18 March 1924. Its object was to stop payment of miscellaneous demands of the zamindars beyond the legal rent. This meeting was attended by about 1200 *santals*¹³⁴. Around November 1924, the *santals* were showing signs of restiveness. A meeting was convened on 26 November 1924 by one Sagiruddin Sarkar of Noapara in Bamongola p.s. The *santal* tenants of Jadunandan Choudhury were asked not to pay any *abwab* to the zamindar. This meeting was largely attended by the *santals* of Habibpur and Bamongola. Subscription of one *anna* per bigha was also raised to cope with the zamindar¹³⁵.

The period also came to be marked by unrest and excitement among the students and youth political workers in Malda. In 1927, the Malda Youth Association was established as a response to the call of Subhas Chandra Bose. The leading figures of the Association were Atul Chandra Kumar, Jyotirmoy Sharma and Sudhir Kumar Raha. The Malda Youth Association was affiliated to All Bengal Youth Association of Calcutta¹³⁶. One of the patrons of the Association was Sarjoo Prasad Behani, president of the District Congress. The chief organ of the Malda Youth Association was the 'Mahananda' – a bi-monthly journal published under the editorship of Sudhir Kumar Raha. The members of the Association made use of the Saraswati Library started by Dwarka Prasad Behani, son of Sarjoo Prasad Behani. This

library had a good collection of published work considered objectionable by the government at that time. A gymnasium was organized at Makdumpur ostensibly to give training in physical exercise and use of *lathis*¹³⁷.

Thus it seems that the younger section of the nationalist activists in Malda was eager to take part in a fresh spate of nationalist struggle. In late 1927 the Tory Government in London appointed an all-white Statutory Commission under Sir John Simon to review the operation of the constitutional system in India. Non-inclusion of Indians in the Commission provoked protest from all the political parties in India and resulted in a successful nationwide boycott. In response to the call of Indian National Congress, the people all over India observed *hartal* on the day of the arrival of the Commission in India¹³⁸.

The boycott campaign was a great success in Malda district. Preparations were made well in advance to make the *hartal* of 3 February a success. A meeting was held on 30 January 1928 at the Gandhi Dharmasala to discuss on boycott of Simon Commission. Sarjoo Prasad Behani, president of the District Congress Committee, spoke on the occasion and tried to convince the audience the nature and aim of the Commission. He appealed to the students and young men to be untied in their struggle for freedom and make *hartal* a thorough success¹³⁹. The *hartal* of 3 February in Malda was a success from nationalists' point of view. Market, shops, hotels were closed. The students did not attend schools. Most of the pleaders did not attend the court as well¹⁴⁰. The agitation in Malda, however, continued even after the strike. The District Congress organized a procession on 20 February 1928. The procession started from the Congress office and passed through the principal streets of the town. A public meeting was held on the same day which was presided over by Upendranath Moitra, a local pleader of repute. The meeting

denounced the Simon Commission and resolved to concentrate immediately on the boycott of British textiles¹⁴¹.

Thus, the years 1928 and 1929 witnessed significant development in every sphere of Bengali life. Besides youth and student, there arose the peasantry and industrial workers. Acute economic depression had started in India as repercussion of world economic depression (1929 -1933). There was everywhere a feeling of unrest. On 13 September 1929, Jatin Das sacrificed his life in his epic hunger strike of 64 days after being convicted in the Lahore Conspiracy Case. There was great reaction among the people of Bengal after the death of Jatin Das. The people of Malda too were deeply moved by the sacrifice of Jatin Das. On receipt of the news of his death, Atul Kumar, the assistant secretary of the Malda District Congress, circulated printed handbills in the town to commemorate and pay homage to the martyr¹⁴². A meeting was organized on 15 September 1929 by the District Congress in memory of Jatin Das. Priyanath Choudhury, the secretary of the District Congress and Atul Kumar spoke on the meeting eulogizing the noble sacrifice of Jatin Das for his country¹⁴³. Such was the political atmosphere of Malda on the eve of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

In such a situation, the Lahore Session of the Congress in December 1929 gave a new voice of militant spirit. A resolution was passed declaring Purna Swaraj to be the goal of the Congress and 26 January 1930 was fixed as the first "Independence Day". With its adoption began the preparation for another civil disobedience¹⁴⁴.

Observance of the Independence Day on 16 January 1930 was, in fact, a dress rehearsal of the Civil Disobedience Movement. From the beginning of

the month of January 1930, the Malda District Congress Committee started preparation for the celebration of the Day in a befitting manner¹⁴⁵. With a view to involving the entire district it formed a central sub-committee for the general propagation of the Congress aims and methods as decided at the Lahore Congress of 1929¹⁴⁶. At a meeting held on 13 January it was also resolved to establish branch Congress committees, volunteer corps and *khadi* board. Moreover, Ramesh Chandra Bagchi, a member of the Legislative Council from the district resigned. Surendranath Moitra, a member of Bengal Council from the Rajshahi district and Satyendranath Moitra, representative of the Rajshahi Division in the Central Legislative Assembly also resigned from their respective seats¹⁴⁷.

The people of Malda observed the Independence Day with great enthusiasm and unprecedented excitement. In all parts of Malda national flag was hoisted and the pledge of Independence was taken. A massive rally was organized by the District Congress at Englishbazar where Sarjoo Prasad Behani, president of the local Congress hoisted national flag. In the afternoon a meeting was held where the resolution of the Congress Working Committee was read to the people¹⁴⁸.

Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March from 12 March to 6 April 1930 provided the signal for the countrywide Civil Disobedience. The reverberation of the movement was felt in Malda as well. A meeting was held on 12 March at Araidanga. It was presided over by Asutosh Kumar who wished Gandhiji's success. Atul Kumar, assistant secretary of the District Congress, urged the youths to organize themselves for the cause of the nation. He appealed to the students to join the movement and to boycott the examination¹⁴⁹.

Within the district the Civil Disobedience took the forms of violation of orders, prohibiting meetings and demonstrations under section 144 and picketing of shops selling foreign cloth and excisable drugs and liquor. At Englishbazar almost 200 volunteers were recruited and from April to December 1930 they organized picketing before excise shops and shops selling foreign goods. Sometimes they organized Satyagraha before the local *thana* with prior notice to the police. Sometimes they assembled in an open place, read all prescribed books, and thus stirred the sentiment of the local people against the British Raj¹⁵⁰. To make the boycott of foreign goods a success, the Malda Congress workers persuaded the local merchants not to sell them further. Some merchants signed a pledge to that effect¹⁵¹. It was recorded in a government report that Congress organization was expanded and agitation in the rural areas of the district was 'greatly intensified'. The propaganda for non-payment of taxes to the Union Boards was 'widely spread' and several Union Board members have resigned¹⁵².

To counter the nationalist upsurge, the district administration resorted to repression. Armed police pickets were posted at various places. A large number of Congress volunteers were arrested and convicted. Picketers at the A.C. Institution, Maldaha Zilla School and Siddheswari Institution of Chanchal had to endure severe police atrocities¹⁵³. The police arrested two Congress leaders Ramesh Chandra Bagchi and Ramesh Chandra Ghosh on 11 July 1930¹⁵⁴. Ramesh Chandra Bagchi had earlier resigned from his seat in Provincial Legislature. Atul Chandra Kumar, the youth leader of the district Congress, was arrested on the charge of selling contraband salt. He refused to be released on bail though offered¹⁵⁵. Salt was however sold in various areas of Malda and the people purchased it from the *satyagrahis* with great

enthusiasm¹⁵⁶. One of the significant features of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Malda was the participation of a large number of students and youths in the movement. The police arrested 12 students in Malda on 25 May 1930 who were selling contraband salt and read out the book 'Deshar Dak' publicly¹⁵⁷. Ramraghab Lahiri and Sudhansu Lahiri, two youth leaders of the District Congress, led a procession about 50 young men and students carrying national flags. The District Magistrate ordered them to disperse. They defied his orders and courted arrest¹⁵⁸.

The first phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930 – 1931) ended with its withdrawal by Gandhiji after his pact with Irwin signed on 5 March 1930. However, the movement continued in Malda even after the Gandhi – Irwin Pact. The eleventh death anniversary of Bal Gangadhar Tilak was observed at the Gandhi Dharmasala. Pramatha Nath Choudhury, vice-president of the District Congress Committee, presided over the meeting. Krishna Gopal Sen, secretary of the Congress Committee, delivered a speech advising the audience to adopt the teachings of Tilak¹⁵⁹.

This broader national struggle in urban Malda had a reciprocal bearing on the movement of *santal* sharecroppers in the Barind region. At that time, the Barind region was seething with unrest. Rising prices, zamindari appropriation of land from *santal adhiars* in fear that the coming settlement would give long-standing *adhiars* a secure right to tenancy, widespread evictions, and rent and cess increases resulted in the outbreak of intense peasant struggle in Barind. In November 1930, rumour about the collapse of the government began to pour into Barind from the *santals* of adjacent Balurghat who were far better integrated with the Congress movement¹⁶⁰.

In December 1930, the *santals* of Barind, under the leadership of Jitu Santal, started plundering crops from the fields. They disobeyed the orders issued by the district administration asking them to refrain from such activities. Situation became tense; several cases were started against Jitu and his men. About 100 *santals* were arrested from Doba of Habibpur p.s. and sent to jail. The situation was brought under control by deploying armed forces in Barind¹⁶¹. The *santals* had noted with grief that while the rest of the district was receiving assistance for seeds and weeding, the *santals* in Barind were being pressed for arrear loans and taxes.

In February 1931, Jitu started collecting subscription from people of the locality to establish Gandhi Bank to give loans to the *santal* sharecroppers on payment of Rs.1 as application fee. A case was filed against Jitu, Gopal Santal of Kokabirni and Ragad Santal of Tulshidanga. They were, however, acquitted on trial for want of sufficient evidence¹⁶². In November 1931, a riot broke out between the agents of the Shah Zamindar of Porsha and the *santals* of Kulandanga of Bamongola p.s. Amin Shah, zamindar of Porsha, had purchased land in auction from Malda Court. When his men came to take possession of the land, the *santals* attacked them with bows and arrows. A case was started against the *santals* and arrests were made¹⁶³.

With the re-launching of the Civil Disobedience Movement in early January 1932, Malda once more became involved in it. The movement was renewed with great vigour, but evidently evoked less enthusiasm. The government retaliated with repressive measures; all front ranking leaders and thousands of volunteers were arrested. Four new ordinances were promulgated by the government. Numerous Congress workers were served with notice under new ordinances. In Malda, Atul Chandra Kumar, Ramesh Chandra

Bagchi, Krishnagopal Sen, Debendranath Jha, Dwarkadas Behani, Priyanath Choudhury and Baidyanath Sarkar were served with prohibitory orders¹⁶⁴. In spite of this, picketing was going on and meetings were held in protest against the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose and Sardar Patel. A procession at Kaligram was organized against the arrest of Kasturba Gandhi¹⁶⁵. By defying the orders of the district administration, the Congress volunteers observed the Independence Day and hoisted the National Flag on 26 January 1932¹⁶⁶.

During 1932, the techniques of the movement were almost the same and it is significant enough that women hailing from urban and rural areas rose to the occasion and participated even in the *thana-gherao* movement to lodge protest against misbehaviour and atrocities of the local police. Surendrabala Roy of Harishchandrapur led a procession of women at Patnitola to hoist the national flag at the Congress office on 26 January 1932. The police ordered them to disperse which was unheeded. Surendrabala Roy and two other women volunteers were arrested. Later she was convicted, sentenced to one year of imprisonment and sent to the Berhampore jail¹⁶⁷. Amongst the other women activists names of Sudharani Misra of Shersahi, Tarubala Sen and Uma Roy of Englishbazar should be mentioned.

To suppress this nationalist upsurge, the district administration intensified its repressive measures. In February 1932, a Congress volunteer named Amulya Ratan Goswami was arrested at Kalipur *hat* while distributing Congress leaflets¹⁶⁸. On 15 May, the police raided many houses in Malda in search of prohibited books and leaflets¹⁶⁹. When Gandhiji started his fast on 20 September 1932 in protest against the proposal for separate electorates for the depressed classes, numerous Congress workers followed suit. In Malda

hundreds of people prayed for Gandhiji's success. Debendranath Jha along with many other Congress volunteers fasted on 20 September 1932. In the afternoon, a large public meeting was held at Station *ghat* where the speakers discussed the Congress programmes¹⁷⁰.

The success of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Malda provoked another kind of movement threatening the multi-class platform so assiduously nurtured by the Congress leadership. This type of movement emerged among the *santal adhiars* of Barind region of Malda led by Jitu Santal. We have discussed this movement in Chapter Seven of our present dissertation. Therefore, instead of going into details, we like to mention some interesting facts about the movement. It is to be noted that the Bengal Congress did not come out with concrete agrarian programmes. On occasions, its leaders thought about and devised plans, but no attempt was made to formulate them as a coherent policy to include the agrarian masses in the Congress by way of forwarding their interests. At times, it did express an inclination to champion the tillers of the soil, but failed to evolve an agrarian strategy of mobilizing peasants¹⁷¹. The Bengal Congress as well as its Malda counterpart continued to be dominated by middle class people with rentier ties, mostly urban Hindus. For this reason, the Bengal Congress never sanctioned a no-rent agitation on fear of disturbing rural social equilibrium.

Nonetheless, when Jitu Santal raised his banner of rebellion in 1932 in Barind region, his first programme was the stoppage of payment of rent to the zamindars¹⁷². The District Congress leaders did not attempt to mobilize the *santal* sharecroppers. The revolt of Jitu was organized independently of mainstream politics. However, it is interesting to note that Jitu called himself 'Senapati Gandhi'¹⁷³. In *Gandhibaba*, Jitu saw a saviour of the poor people

against the oppression of the *zamindar-mahajan*¹⁷⁴. In *Gandhiraj*, as envisioned by Jitu, 'there would be no more zamindars or zamindar's rent...zamindars will be driven away'¹⁷⁵. It was the Raj—the British Raj replaced by the *Gandhiraj*—that had fascinated the *santal* sharecroppers. They mixed up the streams of movement and conceived their own ideas and programmes. Movement continued in the name of Gandhi. He was the overlord, while Jitu would be the king and in his kingdom, a basketful of paddy would be the tax due to the king.

THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT IN MALDA

The Civil Disobedience Movement was called off in 1934 to the great disappointment of the nationalist activists of Malda. The period following the withdrawal of the movement was marked by intense factional rivalry in the Bengal Congress. The Bengal Congress was divided into groups and tried to absorb the district Congress members into it. Like other places in Bengal, clashes were common in Malda between the Bose Group and Sengupta Group¹⁷⁶. After 1938, the Socialists captured the control of Malda District Congress. This left-wing section of the Congress was led by Atul Chandra Kumar, Debendranath Jha, Narendranath Chakraborty, Manik Jha, Ramraghab Lahiri and others. The leaders of the opponent group were Subodh Kumar Misra, Satish Chandra Agarwala, Satyaranjan Sen, Surendrabala Roy, Ramhari Roy, Nikunja Behari Gupta, Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya and others¹⁷⁷. The Bose-Group was led by Atul Chandra Kumar and Debendranath Jha. In January 1939, Subhas Chandra Bose attended the District Political Conference held at Nagharia. On his way to Nagharia, he addressed people at Amanura, Rohanpur and Singhabad¹⁷⁸.

Debendranath Jha joined the Tripuri Session (1939) of the Congress as a delegate from Malda. Subhas Chandra Bose was elected as the Congress President for the second term. At Tripuri, Govind Ballav Pant put forward a proposal that the members of the Congress Working Committee would be elected by Gandhiji. His obvious intention was to curb the powers of the newly elected President, Subhas Chandra Bose. Debendranath Jha opposed the move of Pant. The proposal was however put to vote and Debendranath Jha and others opposing it were outvoted. Since then Debendranath Jha supported the left wing of the Congress or the Forward Block, which was formed by Subhas Chandra Bose¹⁷⁹. Atul Chandra Kumar was the president of the Forward Block and in 1941 when he resigned, Sakuntala Devi, wife of Debendranath Jha, was elected as the president. Most of the Congress members of Malda district sided with the official BPCC. However, inner squabbles in the rank of leadership of the district Forward Block eventually weakened the party. Sudhendu Jha, Kshitish Chandra Das and some others joined the CPI¹⁸⁰.

Therefore, the political scenario of Malda on the eve of the Quit India Movement was one of dissension and disunity. On 8 August 1942, the AICC met in Bombay and approved what became famous as the Quit India resolution. The message, the resolution conveyed, was categorical in the sense that the AICC urged the people to take part in what was identified as 'the last battle for freedom'. Gandhiji appealed to the people to follow the mantra, Do or Die.

"We should either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery. Every true Congressmen or women will join the

struggle with an inflexible determination not to remain alive to see the country in bondage and slavery"¹⁸¹.

Following the adoption of the 8 August resolution at Gowalia tank in Bombay, Indian masses rose into revolt, which became famous as the Quit India Movement¹⁸². The Movement was the ultimatum to the British for the final withdrawal, a Gandhi-led un-Gandhian way of struggle since the Mahatma exhorted to take up arms in self defense and resort to armed resistance against a stronger and well-equipped aggressor¹⁸³. Various social groups, regardless of class, challenged the state despite severe consequences, bringing about a situation in which British rule temporarily broke down

The Quit India Movement started officially with the 8 August resolution; its outbreak in Malda was, however, belated. Part of the reason can be located in the factional fight following the emergence of Forward Block under Subhas Bose's stewardship. The District Congress, as it is already mentioned, was affected seriously due to the BPCC split in the wake of the historic fight between Gandhi and Bose. The members of the ad-hoc committee of Malda were uncertain about the actual plan and programmes of the Bengal Congress¹⁸⁴. A few days after the passing of the Bombay Resolution, an action committee was formed with Atul Kumar as the president, Narain Das Behani as the vice-president and Satish Agarwal as the secretary. However, the intense factional fight between groups led by Atul Kumar and Subodh Misra incapacitated the committee¹⁸⁵. Some members of the Englishbazar Municipality attempted to move a proposal condemning the arrest of Gandhiji, Azad and Nehru. However, this proposal was outvoted as the majority of members opposed it¹⁸⁶.

The members of the ad-hoc committee of Malda viz. Subodh Kumar Misra, Satyaranjan Sen, Surendrabala Roy, Dyutidhar Roy decided that it would not be wise to get involved in direct struggle with the administration at the initial stage. Instead, they paid attention in organizing small meetings both in urban and rural areas. Sourindramohan Misra took initiative in organizing a procession in Malda town. However, in the Malda town the first open demonstration in support of the Quit India demand was organized by Communist activists by picketing government-aided schools and shops selling English products¹⁸⁷. Sourindramohan Misra led a procession at Harishchandrapur on 21 August 1942. Another meeting was held at Balupur *hat* on 30 August. The speakers were Subodh Kumar Misra, Sourindra Mohan Misra and Dyutidhar Roy¹⁸⁸. A meeting was held among the leaders of the rival factions of the district Congress, namely Subodh Misra, Debendranath Jha and Ramhari Roy. At last Jha agreed to participate in the movement and mobilize the *santals* of Gajol¹⁸⁹.

As a result of such intense factional rivalry, the movement in Malda was limited to three pockets only—Harishchandrapur, Bhaluka and Singhabad. Subodh Misra admitted that organizational weakness caused southern Malda inactive in the movement¹⁹⁰. However, as the District Congress was divided, the students became crucial in organizing the Quit India Movement in Malda. The district administration admitted that ‘ the movement caught the imagination of the students’¹⁹¹. At Englishbazar, Harishchandrapur and Kaligram the students urged the people to take part in the movement. On 20 September 1942 seven students were convicted under Defense of India Act for shouting slogans at the Malda Court compound¹⁹².

The movement took a violent turn at Harishchandrapur under the leadership of Subodh Misra. Telegraph wires at Harishchandrapur post office were cut off. At Bhaluka, the local excise shop, the Debt Settlement Board and the Union Board Office were set on fire by the mob. On 31 August 1942 a huge crowd uprooted the railway lines between Bhaluka Road and Samsi Railway Stations¹⁹³. On 2 September 1942, the records of Harishchandrapur Debt Settlement Board was burnt down. An excise shop at Kachala was set on fire¹⁹⁴. On September 4, Subodh Misra was arrested but a mob forced the police to set him free¹⁹⁵. The mob showed its jubilation by destroying all the telegraphic arrangements at Harishchandrapur uprooting a mile of telegraph posts¹⁹⁶. When the SDO arrived in the evening of 6 September, he noticed mounting tension in the locality¹⁹⁷. Subodh Misra was eventually arrested and sentenced to 6 years of rigorous imprisonment¹⁹⁸.

In the Habibpur p.s., Mukutdhari Singh and Harinandan Brahmachari led the movement. Under their leadership, a mob set fire to the liquor shop of Gopalpur village¹⁹⁹. Mukutdhari Singh was arrested on 9 September, but the movement continued. On 11 September, a mob led by Harinandan Brahmachari burnt the Singhabad Railway Station. The villagers gave them shelter and food. The police rushed to the spot, made a search operation and arrested Brahmachari²⁰⁰. Some Congress leaders at Champadighi in Habibpur p.s. organized a meeting of the *santals* on 26 August. The speakers urged for the launching of no rent and no tax campaign²⁰¹.

In regard to the Communists' role in the Quit India Movement in Malda, it may be stated that the Communists did not officially join the movement in accordance with its *people's war strategy*. However, it was not possible for the local Communists to ignore the mass fervour, evinced during the period; as a

result, for them, the call to rally by the Congress was defensible for it challenged the alien state which figured prominently in the mass perception than the distant fascist powers. The District Officer of Malda reported how the local CPI unit initiated procession, demonstrations and meetings demanding unconditional release of the Congress leaders²⁰².

The Quit India Movement was no doubt successful in expanding the constituency of nationalist politics. However, the fact remains that the movement was confined primarily to the Hindus. Although as per the 1941 census, Muslims constituted 54 per cent of Malda population,²⁰³ the Congress largely failed in popularizing the 'do or die' call among the Muslims²⁰⁴.

However, it may be concluded that the 1942 revolt marked a sharp departure from the 1920-22 and 1930-34 outbursts in the pattern of 'radicalisation' of mainstream nationalism²⁰⁵. While on earlier occasions the 'breaking of Gandhian barrier' was associated with anti-landlord outbursts, the Quit India Movement is thought to have been comparatively bereft of peasant militancy. Sumit Sarkar, for instance, remarks: "Unlike in 1919-22 and 1930-34, the radicalization process was on the whole was mainly at the level of anti-British militancy alone, possibly reducing internal class tensions and social radicalism"²⁰⁶.

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