

The Partition Of Midnapur

a chiaroscuro in Bengal politics.

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The theme of this paper is Midnapur, a southern district of present West Bengal, and the policy of the British Raj to partition it. Time and again the district had drawn the attention of the Government on various grounds, sometimes administrative at other times security; since it is a well known fact that Midnapur played a very positive roll in anti-establishment activities.

To any and every researcher the partition of Midnapur is a very difficult subject. It is difficult to deal with it because of the paucity of sources. Primary sources particularly Government papers are wanting, and whatever there are in the Archives are of no use as they are not in a condition to be handled by the scholars or the researchers. True, there are some local weeklys. Most of the numbers of *Nihar* and *Medini Bandhab* the two local weeklys which were alert about this sensitive issue, are either not available or beyond one's reach. One secondary source of much importance is Dr. Bidyut Chakrabarty's *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism : Midnapur 1919-1944*. Dr. Chakrabarty discusses however one phase i.e. the middle phase (1915-21) of the partition history. Most probably it is for the dearth of records that he could not give a total history of the partition of Midnapur. Birendra Nath Sasmol, the veteran leader of the partition movement, wrote a number of articles in the English daily *Advance*. The articles were collected and published in a booklet named *Midnapur Partition*. It contains no connected history of the partition. In the *Advance* Sasmol has astutely stated the resason as to why the partition was not feasible in this frontier district of Bengal. The *Advance* contains some letters of Sasmol to the British Prime Minister, the Governor - General of India and the Governor of Bengal and also to M. K. Gandhi while he attended the Second Round Table Conference in London 1931. Here again Sasmol in none of his writings has given a connected and phase - wise history of the partition. Under the above mentioned constraints the present writer attempts to make a review of the partion issue; but is unable to present its phase - wise history along with the currents and cross currents.

To write out the history of the Midnapur partition one has to face at the outset a number of puzzling queries which need clarification : the time and reason of the idea of partition, the design and motive of the government behind it, the reason that led the government to proceed methodically for the execution of the carefully chalked out plan several times and then beat retreat, the reaction of the people of Midnapur to the partition plan, the role of B. N. Sasmol in the initial phase of the partition when he defended the idea and vehemently protested against it in the middle and final phases, the attitude of the Bengal Provincial Congress as well as the people of Bengal towards the plan.

The Midnapur partition plan was not an instant hatching. Its genesis had a long pre-history. Since the devastating Orissa Famine of 1867 there generated the idea of reducing the enormous size of the Bengal Presidency and also the province of Bengal so large in size and so over-grown a charge for a Governor. This time the Government of India had been thinking over the creation of Orissa province. ¹ But as Orissa had not the required economic sufficiency and soundness to bear the expenses of the provincial administration the idea did not progress much, and it was shelved for the time being. But the government's idea of partitioning Midnapur on the pretext of administrative convenience went on ringing in the minds of the people of Midnapur and also in those adjacent to Orissa. This was so because the government officials in accordance with the decision of the District Administrative Committee were pleading for reducing the size of big Bengal districts like Midnapur and Mymensingh as this would establish better personal contacts between the Collector and his people, and would be of much help for the District Magistrate to take particular care over big districts, specially over districts which were politically disturbed.

It is stated earlier that the history of the partition of Midnapur had an earlier history. Long before the announcement of Mr. Hare, the Divisional Commissioner of Burdwan, in 1907 it was a widespread rumour that the District of Midnapur would be divided into two districts. In his address to the town people of Midnapur, Hare pointed out that Midnapur Main (North) Ghatal and Jhargram would form one district with Midnapur as its headquarters, and that Midnapur south along with Tamaluk and Contai would form the other with its headquarters at Higli near Kharagpur. ² 800 bighas of land were acquired for the proposed Higli district. ³ But it is learnt from the *Nihar* that before this announcement of Hare regarding the partition of Midnapur the people of Midnapur were informed by the district authority that the notables and the zamindars of the district must would have to inform the District Magistrate and the Collector of their opinion about it ⁴. It is also stated in the *Nihar* that so large a district with an area of 5,186 square miles and a population of 27,89,114 was too heavy a charge for the administrative authority ⁵. That is why the partition of the district would be a satisfactory and wholesome

solution of all their civil and judicial problems. In this connection the *Nihar* writes that the Sub-divisional Magistrate of Contai was directed by the District Collector to acquire 300 bighas of land for the setting up of the new district.⁶ Hatabari, a place close to Contai town, might be the suitable spot for the purpose.⁷ This caused a sensation and agitation too in different places of the district. Public meetings and assemblages were held to discuss the pros and cons of the governmental design relating to the partition of the district.⁸ The general tone of the meetings was that the government would thus inflict an arbitrary and inhuman punishment on the people of Midnapur, and so this vindictive attitude and sinister design of the government had to be protested with all sorts of vehemence.⁹

Meanwhile the government gained the experience that the anti-Bengal -partition movement though mostly an elite movement in character, had made the people of Bengal politically much sensitive to and mentally furious and uproarious against the government intentions. Probably that is why the plan for the partition of Midnapur was not implemented. In this connection the *Nihar* Writes 'The Government at last has repealed the partition of the district.'¹⁰

The question of partition came up again after a few years. After the first Midnapur Bomb Case Lt. Governor Lord Carmichael on the recommendations of the District Administrative committee announced after his visit to Contai in 1913 that Midnapur was to be partitioned and that the headquarters of the new district town of Higli would be located at Kharagpur.¹¹ Narendra Nath Das writes in this connection, "The Government of Bengal was then engaged in working out the scheme in detail behind the scene, while outwardly the costly buildings were begun to be erected on the outskirts of the Kharagpur Railway Settlement."¹² As a result the district roared in protest. Strangely enough the government of Lord Reading and the then Secretary of State dropped the partition scheme without expressing the government's intention.

Later in January 1915 the Bengal government again raised the issue and in accordance with recommendations of the District Administrative Committee took the decision to partition the two districts Midnapur and Mymensingh as an essential part of the government's anti-territorial strategy.¹³ The Midnapur partition plan was made public on January 26, 1915.¹⁴ The announcement of the partition provoked widespread resentment among zaminders, lawyers, businessmen and so on.

A critical assessment of the anti-partition movement would reveal that it had no popular basis, and it never became a serious threat to the administration. And it seemed to the government that the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Sasmol-led Anti-Union Board Movement in spite of initial successes would subside. Yet the government could not stick to its

plan of partitioning Midnapur. Only just a year ago the government pleaded that the most appropriate step for the introduction of local-self-government in India was to divide up larger districts. But during the heyday of the Non-Cooperation Movement the Bengal government shelved the partition scheme principally for financial reasons. And since then the district became assured of its territorial integrity and solidarity.¹⁵

In 1931 the Midnapur partition question presented itself before the people of Midnapur in a newer and stronger form. Now the question was the incorporation of Midnapur with the newly proposed Orissa Province. The question gained much weight and gravity when it was placed before the Federal Structure Committee.¹⁶ Sasmol and other leaders of Midnapur felt the seriousness of the situation. Protest-meetings were held, Sasmol sent protest letters and telegrams to higher authorities of the British Empire and also of the British India in which he pointed out "Midnapur refuses amalgamation with Orissa to a man. There is no cultural and linguistic unity between the two."¹⁷ Besides he prayed in a telegram to the Prime Minister, to see that Midnapur was properly represented in the Boundary Committee.¹⁸ The writings of Sasmol pregnant with facts and figures and logical arguments bore fruit; the policy of incorporating Midnapur with Orissa withered away.

Thus the rebellious spirit of Midnapur i.e. the spirit of fighting against all odds at all phases was crowned with heroic success, and Midnapur as a result remains to day in her old territorial grandeur holding her heroic ballads to future generations.

The partition of Midnapur resembles the partition of Bengal. But in depth and gravity and by nature they were poles apart: because one was a district affair and the other was a provincial political matter. The protesters including lawyers, zamindars, businessmen and others against the Midnapur partition plan were guided by material interests, and the defenders gave weight to the partition plan only for regional interests. Here one may be reminded of Sasmol who at one point of time defended partition thinking that it would allow the people of Contai to enjoy the benefits of a district town.¹⁹ In the case of the partition of Bengal, despite the prevalence of sectarian and separatist attitudes, such a thing was inconceivable. Though weak in character this agitation against partition had definitely certain important bearings which greatly influenced the anti Union Board movement and the breaking of Salt-Law in Midnapur. It is thus evident that the history of anti-partition movement in Midnapur is a history of histories in the chiaroscuro in Bengal politics.

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