

**SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL TRANSITION OF  
A BENGAL DISTRICT : MALDA 1876-1953**

*Thesis submitted to the University of North Bengal  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History*

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled Social, Economic and Political Transition of a Bengal District : Malda 1876-1953 embodies the result of original and bonafide research work done by Sri Ashim Kumar Sarkar under my supervision. Neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted for any degree or any other academic awards anywhere before.

Sri Sarkar has fulfilled all the requirements prescribed in the Ph.D. Ordinance of the University of North Bengal. I am pleased to forward the thesis for submission to the University of North Bengal for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Arts.

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## DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the content in the thesis entitled Social, Economic and Political Transition of a Bengal District : Malda 1876-1953 is the outcome of my own research work done under the guidance and supervision of Professor Ananda Gopal Ghosh, Department of History, University of North Bengal.

To the best of my knowledge, the sources in this thesis are authentic. This thesis has submitted neither simultaneously nor before either as such or part of it anywhere for any other degree or academic awards.

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Ashim Kumar Sarkar

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AICC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>All India Congress Committee</b>
<b>AIML</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>All India Muslim League</b>
<b>AIKS</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>All India Krishak Sabha</b>
<b>BADA</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act</b>
<b>BLC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengal Legislative Council</b>
<b>BPCC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengal Provincial Congress Committee</b>
<b>BPHM</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha</b>
<b>BPML</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengal Provincial Muslim League</b>
<b>BPKS</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha</b>
<b>BPSF</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengal Provincial Students' Federation</b>
<b>CPI</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Communist Party of India</b>
<b>CUP</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Cambridge University Press</b>
<b>DM</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>District Magistrate</b>
<b>DCC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>District Congress Committee</b>
<b>EPW</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Economic and Political Weekly</b>
<b>FIR</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>First Information Report</b>
<b>FR</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Fortnightly Report</b>
<b>FN</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>File Number</b>
<b>GB</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Government of Bengal</b>

<b>GOWB</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Government of West Bengal</b>
<b>GOI</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Government of India</b>
<b>Home(Poll.) conf</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Home ( Political) Confidential</b>
<b>IB</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Intelligence Branch</b>
<b>IESHR</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Indian Economic and Social History Review</b>
<b>IG</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Inspector General</b>
<b>JAS</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Journal of Asian Studies</b>
<b>KPP</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Krishak Praja Party</b>
<b>MAS</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Modern Asian Studies</b>
<b>MLA</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Member of Legislative Assembly</b>
<b>MLC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Member of Legislative Council</b>
<b>NAI</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>National Archive of India, New Delhi</b>
<b>NBU</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>North Bengal University</b>
<b>OUP</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Oxford University Press</b>
<b>OC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Officer in Charge</b>
<b>PCC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Provincial Congress Committee</b>
<b>RSS</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangha</b>
<b>RCRC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council</b>
<b>SDO</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Subdivisional Officer</b>
<b>SF</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Students Federation</b>
<b>SP</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Superintendent of Police</b>

<b>UCRC</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>United Central Refugee Council</b>
<b>WBSA</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>West Bengal State Archives</b>
<b>WCR</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Weekly Confidential Report</b>
<b>WPP</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Workers and Peasants' Party</b>

## GLOSSARY

<b>adhi</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>half Share</b>
<b>akhara</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>gymnasium, physical culture club</b>
<b>aman</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>winter rice</b>
<b>anjuman</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>association (Muslim)</b>
<b>aratdar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>warehouseman</b>
<b>ashraf</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>(Muslim) nobility</b>
<b>aus</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>autumn rice</b>
<b>atrap</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>(Muslim) commoners</b>
<b>baithak</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>meeting</b>
<b>bania</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>trader</b>
<b>barga</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>sharecropping</b>
<b>bargadar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>sherecropper</b>
<b>bazar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>market</b>
<b>bepari</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>small traders</b>
<b>bhadralok</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Bengali gentle-folk, belonging to upper caste</b>
<b>biplab</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>rebellion</b>
<b>byayam</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>exercise</b>
<b>caliph</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Ruler of Turkey and religious leader</b>
<b>chowkidar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>village police</b>

<b>dadan</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>advance</b>
<b>daroga</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>local police officer</b>
<b>dadal</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>broker</b>
<b>dar- patnidar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>intermediate tenure-holder</b>
<b>dhan</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>paddy</b>
<b>elaka</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>area</b>
<b>ganj</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>commercial centre</b>
<b>gherao</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>surround</b>
<b>gola</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>granary</b>
<b>goladar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>owner of granary</b>
<b>hartal</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>strike</b>
<b>hat-chita</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>hand note</b>
<b>hattola</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>an illegal cess in the hat</b>
<b>ijaradar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>lease holder ( of market)</b>
<b>jatra</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>rural theatrical performance</b>
<b>jehad</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>holy war</b>
<b>jote</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>cultivable land</b>
<b>jotedar</b> <b>landholder</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>holder of cultivable land, often a substantial</b>
<b>kabala</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>sale ( of land)</b>
<b>karja</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>loan, interest</b>
<b>khot kabala</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>conditional sale</b>

<b>khamar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>personal demesne; threshing yard</b>
<b>kholan</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>threshing yard (in North Bengal)</b>
<b>kholan bhanga share</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>breaking open of jotedar's kholans to get two thirds share</b>
<b>krishak</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>peasant</b>
<b>krishak samities</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>peasant organizations</b>
<b>lathi</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>wooden stick</b>
<b>lathial</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>men armed with sticks</b>
<b>mauja</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>village</b>
<b>mela</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>fair</b>
<b>nari bahinis</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>women brigades</b>
<b>pargana</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>administrative unit, revenue district</b>
<b>pat</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>jute</b>
<b>patta</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>lease/ registration of landholding</b>
<b>patni</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>a type of tenure (found in west and central Bengal)</b>
<b>patnidar</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>tenure-holder, usually intermediary between zamindar and raiyat in western part of Bengal</b>
<b>pir</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Muslim saint</b>
<b>praja</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>tenant</b>
<b>sabha</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>organization, meeting</b>
<b>samiti</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>association</b>
<b>sangathan</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>organization</b>

<b>shariat</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Islamic law and code of behaviour</b>
<b>suddhi</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>ritual purification</b>
<b>subah</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>Mughal province</b>
<b>swaraj</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>self- rule</b>
<b>tanka</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>fixed rent in kind in Mymensingh</b>
<b>tola</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>tax/ toll</b>
<b>under-raiyat</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>under-tenant</b>
<b>ulema</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>expert in Islamic training</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The present Dissertation will attempt to look into the significant political, economic and social transition of the district of Malda between the years 1876 and 1953. Malda is the southernmost of the Northern Bengal districts. It is to be mentioned here that Malda as a district was a British creation in 1813. During the years 1876-1905, Malda formed part of the Bhagalpur Division. In 1905, the district was again transferred from Bhagalpur Division to Rajshahi Division on the formation of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. It was included in the Rajshahi Division until August 1947. Before the Partition, the district of Malda was composed of fifteen police stations. In 1947, under the Radcliffe Award the five police stations of Siibganj, Nababganj, Bholahat, Nachol and Gomastapur went to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

## THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Our study proposes to begin with a brief description on the land and the people of the district. I like to mention here that the population of Malda belonged to different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, to various castes and religious communities. A study of these ethnic groups, such as Santals, Rajbansis, Polias, Deshis, Binds, Momins, and Maithiis etc. is necessary because the demographic composition and socio-cultural dimensions along with economic factors came to influence social and political movements in the district in significant ways.

In this connection, we will study the origin and growth of the social mobility movement among the Rajbansi Hindus and the Hinduization movement among the Santal peasants in the Barind region of Malda. The economic scenario of the district in the period of our study will also come under the purview of our research. We will study here tenure and revenue arrangements, agriculture and agrarian system, agrarian structure and differentiation in the agrarian society. The growth of industry, mainly silk, trade and commerce will also be highlighted. One of our major aims is to trace the emergence and growth of nationalist politics in Malda at various levels. It should be mentioned that the nationalist politics in the district may sharply be

divided into two domains. In the domain of elite politics, the principal factors were people belonging to educated middle class. They played an active role in the Anusilan Samiti, Brati Samiti and Jugantar. Later they participated in the movements led by the Congress. In another domain, the principal participants were peasant masses and tribal people. For instance, the revolt of Jitu Santal in 1932 in the Barind region was massive in scope and rich in anti-colonialist consciousness. Apart from this, the origin and growth of the Communist movement in the district will be considered in some details.

About the period, I would like to say something. In the first place, I will explain the selection of the beginning year of our study. Although the district was formed in 1813, I select the year 1876 as the starting point of my study for some reasons. In the year 1876, the district of Malda was transferred from the Rajshahi Division to the Bhagalpur Division. It seems that it was purely an administrative decision. While the district was formed in 1813, the *thanas* of Sibganj, Kaliachak, Bholahat and Gurguribah of the Purnia district were transferred to the newly formed Malda District. Therefore, from the time of its formation, the district had a link with Bihar. Perhaps this thing acted behind the decision of its transfer to the Bhagalpur Division. Whatever may be the reason, the inclusion of the district in the Bhagalpur Division for a relatively short period (1876 – 1905) was to influence the socio-political developments later on. In the first place, an increasing number of people from Bihar began to settle in the adjacent areas of the district. Apart from this, the migration of the *santals* from the Santal Parganas of Bihar after the failure of their '*hul*' in 1855 – 56 began to accelerate after 1876. Thus, a new element was introduced into the demographic composition and social life of the district. Secondly, a difference of opinion centering Malda cropped up among the leaders of Bengal and Bihar. At the time of the partition of Bengal in 1905, a section of the political leaders of Bihar demanded the joining of Malda with Bihar. Their argument was that the district was included in the Bhagalpur Division during the years 1876 – 1905. The same demand was raised again in 1954. On both occasions, the people of Malda vehemently opposed this demand. The reason for selecting 1953 as the ending year of my study is that in this year the zamindari system was abolished. It may be pointed out that the district of

Malda was the land of nearly all the big zamindars of North Bengal and the abolition of the system had far-reaching consequences in socio-cultural and economic life of the district. I would like to mention here that one of the aims of our research is to highlight the contribution of the zamindars of Malda in the socio-cultural life of the district in the proper historical perspective.

## AN OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

The major publications on our study are very few in numbers. Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh has written a number of articles on social, economic and political aspects of the district under colonial rule. Dr. Ghosh has conducted research on the rise and growth of English factories of Malda. Sujit Guha has made a penetrating analysis of the silk industry of Malda and Murshidabad from 1660 to 1833. Ratan Dasgupta has published an article on the urbanization, economy and politics of Englishbazar town. Tanika Sarkar has written an article on the revolt of Jitu Santal in 1932. However, she has not studied the contemporary local newspapers, an important source of information in this regard. Apart from this academic publications, some non-academic researchers have written on some aspects of our study.

## HYPOTHESES

Though geographically Malda belonged to the radius of modern North Bengal, economically the district was separated from the rest of North Bengal, particularly from the northern portion of North Bengal. Because Malda was part of the Permanent Settlement areas, whereas the northern portion of North Bengal i.e. Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling belonged to the category of non-Permanent Settlement areas. Administratively Malda was also separated from the rest of North Bengal. Because the other districts of the northern portion of North Bengal belonged to non-regulated administrative structure. However, Malda was a regulated district like the other districts of Bengal Presidency.

Therefore, from the point of view of land settlement and agrarian structure, Malda was closely connected with the rest of Bengal. In other words, the land revenue and agrarian system of the district was an extension of the zamindari system of Bengal.

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system of the Barendra region of North Bengal and the southern and eastern Bengal. If a student of the agrarian history meticulously studies the rise and growth of the zamindari system in the northern portion of the present day West Bengal, he will find that Malda presented a considerable number of zamindars. In fact, from the point of view of numbers of zamindars, Malda stood next to Rajshahi and Pabna. This issue is going to be one of the major hypotheses of my research scheme.

The second major hypothesis is a corollary of the first one. Because the land revenue system here determined the social structure of the district. Unlike the rest of North Bengal, the zamindars of Malda not only controlled the agrarian affairs of rural areas, but also the rural society and urban politics. In fact, in this respect Malda was prototype of the Rajshahi district. So the society of Malda was more or less based on the structure of the land revenue system.

The third research hypothesis is that the cultivation of mulberry and mango was the lifeblood of Malda district. A popular folk-rhyme indicates the importance of mulberry, rice and mango in the economy of Malda –

Aam resham dhan  
tin Maldar Jann

Aai

During the period of my study, Malda was in fact the producer of mulberry and supplier of it to Benares. In other words, the silk piece goods, which once earned a legendary fame in Bengal, were not made in Malda during our period of study. The merchants and financiers of this business mostly belonged to the *sannyasi* and *giri* community. The *marwari poddar* traders and *tilli* businessmen were also involved in this business. All this trading communities came to Malda from other districts of Bengal. It is stated that these *marwari poddars* started to come to the district from the time of Lakshman Sena. In addition, the *tilli* business community, the most prosperous section of the local business community came to Malda after the bargi invasion of Bengal. Prof. N. K. Sinha stated that some merchants came to Malda after the Great Famine of 1770. One important aspect is to be noticed here. The *marwari poddars* of Malda have been assimilated with the

local people whom we do not find in the case of Jalpaiguri, Siliguri or Coochbehar *marwaris*. This is a unique feature in the social history of Malda. This question is to be studied in proper socio-historical perspectives.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first research question, which greatly preoccupies my mind, is the question of social relation between the Hindus and the Muslims. In respect of religious community-wise composition of population, Malda was the only district of North Bengal in which the Muslim formed a majority. This was a unique feature in the demographic atlas of North Bengal. Another fact may also be mentioned here that Malda was the only municipality where number of Muslim urban settlers was higher than any other towns of the then North Bengal. Despite this variation of Hindu-Muslim population, it is remarkable indeed that up to 1947 Malda remained free from any overt Hindu-Muslim conflict, though tension was not entirely absent. In the present canvas, I would like to trace the forces that operated behind such type of apparent harmonious relations between the two major communities.

The second research question, which draws my attention, is the question of the santal community of the district. After their abortive '*hul*' of 1855-56, a large number of *santals* from the Santal Parganas had left their ancestral home and began to settle in the adjacent areas of Bengal such as Malda. It is assumed by the social historians that this large-scale migration of the *santals* from the Santal Parganas to the district of Malda was mainly because the district was a part of the Bhagalpur Division during 1876-1905. In fact, the geographical and administrative convenience played a very vital role in the migration of *santal* population to this district in comparison with the other districts of North Bengal. Consequently, the local zamindars employed them for clearing of *jungle* lands in Barind regions. They brought under cultivation a large tract of cultivable wasteland in Barind. On the other hand, many *santals* of Chhotanagpur and Santal Parganas came to the northern region of North Bengal as plantation workers. In fact, on many occasions they were forced to work in the tea gardens. With the passage of time, we find that *santal* peasants of Malda region had started a social mobility movement as well as

protest movement against the British Raj and its collaborators, namely the zamindars and *mahajans*. However, such type of socio-political behaviour was absent among the santal plantation workers of Duars and Terai region of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling respectively. It is really an interesting social phenomenon to the students of social science research group.

In fact, this is interesting enough that same group of people behaved in a different manner simply due to their settlement pattern. The *santals* of Malda district were engaged in agricultural pursuit. On the other hand, the immigrant *santals* of Jalpaiguri district worked mainly as wage labour in the tea gardens. The peasant santal violently protested against the oppression of the *zamindars* and *mahajans*. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, an organized revolt broke out among the *santals* of Barind region of Malda under the leadership of Jitu Santal. The magnitude of the incident was overwhelming in the contemporary politics of Malda. On the contrary, the plantation worker *santals* did not raise their voice against the oppressive planters. One more observation needs to be made. We know that a social movement, namely the Tana Bhagat movement had emerged and spread among the *santals* of the Jalpaiguri Duars region. However, curiously enough the Tana Bhagat movement was absent in Malda region.

The third research question that comes to my mind is the near absence of any movement among the sizable Rajbansi community of northern Malda to upgrade their social status. It may be mentioned here that a powerful social mobility movement had emerged and spread among the Rajbansi Hindus of Jalpaiguri district as well as in the other districts of North Bengal, particularly Rangpur and Dinajpur, the princely state of Coochbehar and Goalpara district in Assam. The movement came to be called the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement by its leaders and participants. However, we find a different picture in Malda. This social up gradation movement had little impact on the Rajbansi community of Malda. In other words, the Rajbansi community of Malda was not stirred at all by the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement that became widespread in other parts of North Bengal. This problem requires further research. In this connection, I like to mention here that locally the Rajbansis are known as

*bangals* and the part of the village in which they reside, as the *bangalpara*. They are also known in this district as *deshi* or *polia*.

## METHODOLOGY

One of the very recent trends of the Indian historiography is that a number of historians have concentrated on writing the history from below i.e. the history of the toiling people of our country. An attempt to write people's history has emerged as an effective answer to the traditional approach of writing elite history. This paradigm is followed in my present dissertation. In order to prepare this dissertation I have followed different types of methodology. Materials from the State and National Archives, District Collectorate Record Office and the oldest libraries and institutions were collected and consulted very meticulously. It is unlikely that I will get sufficient materials on my study in the Archives and National Libraries. Being a study on the district of Malda, an important source should be material available there. I have made considerable use of local materials such as the records that has been present at the Collectorate Record office, contemporary weeklies and journals published from Malda and records of business organizations like the Mango Merchant Association, Malda. Apart from this, I have given much importance on oral history study. I have met and interviewed as many people as possible who were either active in or close witness to the social and political life of the district in the first half of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

#### ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY

The district of Malda situated in the north-west corner of pre-1947 Bengal. It was bounded on the north by Purnia and Dinajpur districts, on the east by Dinajpur and Rajshahi, on the south by Rajshahi and Murshidabad, and on the west by Murshidabad, the Santal Parganas and Purnia<sup>1</sup>. In 1947, under the Radcliff Award, the five police stations of Sibganj, Bholahat, Nachol, Gomastapur and Nababganj went to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and remaining ten police stations of Englishbazar, Kaliachak, Old Malda, Gajol, Habibpur, Bamongola, Manikchak, Ratua, Kharba and Harishchandrapur came to India<sup>2</sup>.

It needs to be mentioned here that the partition of Malda in 1947 had far-reaching politico-economic consequences for the district as a whole. Apart from the influx of displaced people from East Pakistan, the partition meant for the loss of a large fertile tract as well as centres of silk manufacture and lac cultivation. All the five police stations mentioned above were rice-producing zones. Nababganj, Sibganj and Bholahat were large centres for rice-trade<sup>3</sup>. Sibganj was famous for its silk cloths, probably the best produced in Bengal<sup>4</sup>. Bholahat was a large centre for silk reeling. Nababganj, a Municipal township, was noted for bell metal and brassware<sup>5</sup>. It is thus evident that the loss of these tracts was destined to affect the politico-economic scenario of the district in significant ways.

In the perspective of administrative history of the Bengal Presidency, Malda was one of the oldest districts of present North Bengal<sup>6</sup>. Until 1813, the district formed part of the Purnia and Dinajpur districts, the Mahananda being the boundary. In February 1813, the Superintendent of Police of the Lower Province informed the administration about the deterioration of law and order in some of the areas of Dinajpur and Purnia. In his report, it was stated that theft, looting and other criminal activities at Kaliachak, Sibganj, Bholahat and Gargariba of Purnia and Malda and Kaliachak P.S. of Dinajpur were on the rampant. The reason for this, according to him, was the extreme distance of these outlying areas from their district headquarters. As for instance, the distance of Kaliachak from Purnia was about hundred miles<sup>7</sup>.

Considering the justification of the report, the company Government set up a new district of Malda in 1813. The new district was consisted of Sibganj, Kaliachak, Bholahat and Gargariba police station of Purnia, Malda and Bamongola police stations of Dinajpur and Rohanpur and Chapai police station of Rajshahi<sup>8</sup>. Kharba and Harischandrapur Police Stations were added to the district in 1896<sup>9</sup>. A Joint Magistrate and Deputy Collector was appointed at Englishbazar with jurisdiction over there police stations. In 1832 a separate treasury was opened. Malda formally became an independent administrative unit in 1859 when the district was placed in charge of a Magistrate and Collector<sup>10</sup>.

The district boundary was published by notification in 1875. Later minor transfers were made, the most important of which was the transfer in 1929 of Bhutni '*diara*', a large island '*char*' in the Ganges from Santal Parganas to Malda<sup>11</sup>. Up to 1876, the district of Malda formed part of the Rajshahi Division and between 1876 and 1905, it formed part of the Bhagalpur Division. In

1905, again the district was transferred from the Bhagalpur Division to the Rajshahi Division on the formation of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam<sup>12</sup>. The district was included in the Rajshahi Division until August 1947.

#### POLITICAL HISTORY PRIOR TO BRITISH CONQUEST

The district of Malda possesses a rich historical heritage. A greater part of present Malda was the centre of civilization and culture in ancient times. The region had the privilege of having many famous capital cities such as Gour, Pandua, Ramabati, Lakhanauti and Tanda<sup>13</sup>. Besides, Deokot (Devikot), the earliest Muslim capital of Bengal and Rajmahal were also adjacent to Malda<sup>14</sup>. These royal courts greatly helped to develop the well-known silk industry of Malda because the dresses of the Imperial Courts were mostly made of Malda silk<sup>15</sup>. Haridas Palit, a renowned scholar and historian of Malda, once opined that a large part of Rajmahal was included in greater Malda<sup>16</sup>.

The oldest reference of the name 'Malda' is found in an inscription at the tomb of Pir Sahagada dated 19 shaban 859 Hizri (August 4, 1455) during the reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Muhammad Shah<sup>17</sup>. The name was again mentioned in some of the inscriptions of Sultan Hussain Shah dated 899 to 938 Hizri<sup>18</sup>. In his '*Ain-i-Akbari*', Abul Fazal also mentioned the name 'Maldah'<sup>19</sup>. However, the '*Akbar-nama*', for the first time, mentioned Malda as one of the important trade and commercial centers of Bengal<sup>20</sup>. Tavernier, the Italian traveler, mentioned the name of Malda in his description<sup>21</sup>. Alexander Hamilton wrote, 'Malda was a large town, well inhabited and frequented by merchants of the different nations'<sup>22</sup>. Rennel informs, 'Malda is a pretty, neat city. This, as well as Cossimbazar, is a place of trade'<sup>23</sup>.

It is thus evident that prior to the coming of the English Company, Malda emerged as a flourishing trade centre of Bengal. Rivers, in fact, played a significant role in the rise of Malda as a centre for trade and commercial activities<sup>24</sup>. The main rivers of the district are all of Himalayan or sub-Himalayan origin and flowed in a southerly direction, their rise being controlled by the Ganges, which formed two-thirds of the western and the whole of the southwestern boundary of the district. Next to the Ganges, the most important were the Mahananda, Kalindri, Tangan and Purnabhaha<sup>25</sup>.

Thus, location and communicational advantage made Malda the pivot of the entire North Bengal and the surrounding areas for trade and commerce. The district, in fact, emerged during the early phase of colonial rule as the centre for the control of the whole of North Eastern Indian trade<sup>26</sup>. It commanded the routes that ran in different directions across Ghoraghat to Kamrup and Tibet over Kajangoi and Bagdi, to Cuttuck and down the Ganges to Dacca while on the west it opened the doors to the cities of Northern India<sup>27</sup>. Contemporary accounts inform that merchants from Agra, Gujrat, Benares and Kashmir came to Malda every year for trading and commercial transactions. The English merchant and traveler Streynsham Master has given a vivid description of the trade of Malda town. He stated that in the 1660s the merchants from Agra, Gujrat and Benares purchased and shipped cotton and silk fabrics to the value of Rs. 15, 00, 00 – 25,00,000<sup>28</sup>. Besides this inter-provincial trade, the region also had commercial transactions with other towns of Bengal, such as Dacca, Murshidabad, and Rajmahal. It is also recorded that in 1577 Sheik Bhiku, a merchant of Malda, set sail for Russia with three ships laden with Maldahi silk clothes, and that two of his ships were wrecked somewhere in the neighborhood of the Persian Gulf<sup>29</sup>.

So prior to the coming of the English Company, Malda was already established as a thriving centre of trade and commerce. In this historical backdrop, the English East India Company established a trade connection with the district in 1676<sup>30</sup>. In 1686, the company established its first factory at Old Malda, but it was seized and plundered by Nawab Shaista Khan, Subadar of Bengal<sup>31</sup>. Although this quarrel was settled for the time being, allegations of ill-treatment by the Nawab's officials were often made by the merchant gomastas of the company at Malda. It was only after the grant of Diwani, a fortified commercial residency was built in 1771 at Englishbazar under George Henschman<sup>32</sup>. In 1813, the Headquarter of the newly formed district was set up at Englishbazar<sup>33</sup>.

#### **ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENT UNDER THE BRITISH**

At the time of its formation in 1813, the district of Malda was placed under the charge of a Joint Magistrate and Deputy Collector<sup>34</sup>. The powers of the Joint Magistrate and Deputy Collector were of an anomalous character. He was, to a certain extent, under the control of the Collectors both of Purnia and Dinajpur<sup>35</sup>. All communications from the Board of Revenue were transmitted to him through one or other of these treasuries. In 1832, a treasury was, for the first time, established at Englishbazar and from that year the separate entity of the district of Malda was recognised<sup>36</sup>. In 1859, the district was placed in charge of a Magistrate and Collector<sup>37</sup>.

The revenue administration of the district was in charge of the Collector, under the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division. The Collector was assisted by a staff of three or four Deputy Collectors and one Sub-Deputy Collector<sup>38</sup>.

The civil and criminal administration was carried on from the district headquarters at Englishbazar. Judicially, Malda was under the jurisdiction of the District Judge of Rajshahi<sup>39</sup>. Civil cases were tried by the District Judge of Rajshahi, two *munsifs* at Englishbazar and one *munsif* at Nababganj. Criminal justice was administered by the Sessions Judge of Rajshahi with the help of the District Magistrate and the Deputy and Sub-Deputy Magistrates. There were benches of Honorary Magistrate at Englishbazar (four members), Nababganj (five members) and Mathurapur (one member)<sup>40</sup>.

### GEO-PHYSICAL ASPECTS

The river Mahananda flowing from north to south roughly divided the district into two equal parts, corresponding by local tradition to the old boundary line of the *Rarh* and *Barendra*<sup>41</sup>. The region to the east of the Mahananda was called Barind. The name 'Barind' was derived from the word 'Barendra'. It stretched into Dinajpur and Rajshahi and formed a marked contrast to the other half of the district<sup>42</sup>. The Barind sub-region of Malda was relatively high agricultural land of red clay soil of the old alluviums. It is a least fertile land<sup>43</sup>.

During the time of the Mughal rule, the Barind was thickly populated and prosperous. It lay within a day's journey of the capital of Gour and Pandua<sup>44</sup>. However, after the removal of the capital to Murshidabad, and the decay of Gour, the Barind must have gradually become depopulated and overgrown with jungle. By the time of the revenue survey in 1880 much of the northern portion, including the whole of Habibpur p.s. and most of Bamongola p.s. was covered with forest and *jungle*, though the southern portion was largely under cultivation<sup>45</sup>. In the 1870s, Hunter noticed the cultivation of winter rice in the region from Kalindri river to the borders of the *jungle*. The remainder of the

tract was entirely occupied by thorny tree *jungle* called '*katal*'<sup>46</sup>. However, by the time of survey and settlement operations in the 1930s the Barind was transformed into a developed agricultural zone mainly due to the efforts of the migrant *santals* from the neighboring district of Santal Parganas<sup>47</sup>. The *santals*, employed by the zamindars of Barind, had cleaned up *jungles*, terraced the slopes and transformed the region into flourishing agricultural zone. The package offered to *santals* was land on extremely low rent, common rights of hunting, fishing, and so on<sup>48</sup>.

To the west of the Mahananda, the region was again divided into two well-defined parts by the Kalindri River flowing west and east from the Ganges. North of the Kalindri the distinguishing natural feature was the '*tal*' land, the name applied to the land which flooded deeply as the rivers rise, and drained by meandering streams into swamps or into the Kalindri<sup>49</sup>. '*Tal*' area covered approximately Harishchandrapur and Ratua p.s. between the Mahananda in the north and the Kalindri river in the south. It is a low-lying area; the water comes in from the Ganges by the Kalindri in the south and from the Mahananda in the north<sup>50</sup>. The '*tal*' area was almost entirely under cultivations. In its northern part, the principal crops were jute and paddy. Mango gardens were fairly common in Harishchandrapur and Ratua. Further south in Ratua, paddy and '*rabi crops*' were chiefly grown. In the south-west of Harishchandrapur, there were still patches of uncultivated land, covered by low jungle and coarse grass. This area was completely under jungle at the time of the revenue survey of 1840<sup>51</sup>. The most fertile and populous portion of the district was known as '*diara*'. It consisted of a strip roughly eight miles in width along the western and southern tracts of the district<sup>52</sup>. Its formation was the result of centuries of alluvial formation by the Ganges. The eastern side of

the 'diara' strip was the older alluvial area. The soil was of a light variety, with a sandy appearance. Mango gardens were common and some mulberry was grown<sup>53</sup>. Further west towards the Ganges, the soil is sandier. The principal crops in the 'diara' were 'aus' paddy, wheat, barley, oats and mustard<sup>54</sup>.

The island 'char' of Bhutni diara lies in the bed of the Ganges. Its southernmost point was just below Rajmahal, from where it extended northwards for eight miles and its area thirty-two square miles<sup>55</sup>. On the higher land, 'aus' paddy and pulses were the principal crops. The soil was sandy and not very fertile on the higher ground, while on the lower 'chars' it generally consisted of a thin deposit of a silt over the sand in which 'rabi' crops such as *kalai* and mustard was grown<sup>56</sup>.

#### DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Since the first census of 1872, the population of the district has shown a regular increase, with the exception of the decade 1911 – 22, when there was a small decrease. At the time of 1872 census, the total population of the district was 6, 76,426 with a density of just 357 persons per square mile.

Table 1.1 Population Growths in Malda District, 1872 – 1951

census Year	Malda district Population	% Increase / Decrease
1872	6,76,426	—
1881	7,10,448	+5.00
1891	8,14,919	+14.4

1901	8,84,030	+8.5
1911	10,01,159	+13.5
1921	10,12,109	-1.3
1931	10,53,766	+4.1
1941		
1951	9,37,580	
Source : Calculated from the census reports of different years.		

The table 1.1 shows that there was a remarkable increase of population between 1881 and 1911. This growth was primarily due to the steady migration of Santals into the barind from the Santal Parganas and 'Shershabadia' Muslims from adjacent Murshidabad<sup>57</sup>. The Santal population was returned in 1901 census as fifty two thousand, compared with twenty one thousand at the previous census. The following decade saw a further increase of over fourteen thousand, but thereafter the movement slowed down. The inflow of *Shershabadia* Muslims continued steadily up until the 1911 census. The Ganges had been moving westward and southward at the expense of Murshidabad and the alluvial formations on the Malda side attracted large number of *Shershabadias*. They settled mainly in the '*diara*' tracts<sup>58</sup>.

The density of the population according to the census of 1911 was 29 per square mile, being greatest in the '*diara*' thanas<sup>59</sup>. The general decrease shown by the 1921 census was due to malaria, which broke out in epidemic form during several years, and was particularly severe in the central part of

the district. In the census of 1931, the only remarkable variation was in the southeast corner of the district, where Nababganj and Nachol showed a considerable increase. This increase was perhaps due to the construction of the new railway route from Nababganj to Abdulpur. Nababganj had a large exporting centre and it was not unlikely that the facilities for transport had developed trade in that area. This might be the reason for the increase of 25 percent in the population of the town<sup>60</sup>.

At this stage, it needs to be mentioned that the population of the district was not a homogenous one. The society was composed of numerous and diverse social groups, of several historically evolved and evolving social collectivities. The population belonged to different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, to various castes and religious communities. Malda is the land of several tribals like *santals* and *oraons* as well as autochthonous groups like Rajbansis, Koch and Polias. Most of these groups went through important social, religious and economic changes during the period of our study.

## SANTALS

Of the agricultural population of Malda, the most numerous among non-Muslims were the *santals*<sup>61</sup>. The census of 1931 mentioned that almost the entire *santal* population concentrated in the p.s. of Bamongola, Gajol, Habibpur, Old Malda, Gomastapur, Nachol and Nababganj. It gives the number of Santal population as 72,145<sup>62</sup>. There are two distinct hypotheses for the *santal* migration in Malda. One states that in the first half of the

nineteenth century the indigo planters engaged them in plantation works of the district. The second mentions that a great number of *santals* crossed the Ganges after their great insurrection of 1885 to escape administrative torture. Consequently, local zamindars employed them for clearing of *jungle* lands of *barind*. Stiff red clay of *barind* was another consideration, which needed sturdy *santal* peasants for cultivation<sup>63</sup>. We assume that the second hypothesis is more close to truth as the *barind*, the seat of *santal* migrants, was never noted for indigo plantation.

The *santals* of Malda were divided into four sects – Christian, Hindu, Kheroars and the *santals* proper who followed the aboriginal customs<sup>64</sup>.

The Christian *santals* were comparatively few in number and were the converts of Protestant or Catholic missionaries. There were a few churches in the area where the Christian *santals* resided. The Hindu *santals* were commonly identified with the Satyam Sibam sect. Kasishwar Chakraborty, a pleader of Dinajpur who was also a local leader of the Congress, formed the sect in or around 1905. its object was to conduct the process of Sanskritisation<sup>65</sup> among the *santals* or bringing them into the fold of Hinduism<sup>66</sup>. The *santals* belonging to Satyam Sibam sect gave up eating pigs, fowls and other 'forbidden' food<sup>67</sup>. In marriage and social customs, this sect had nothing to distinguish it from ordinary *santals*<sup>68</sup>.

The Kheroars were followers of a Hindu religious leader from Bihar who visited *barind* at regular intervals. They were generally fairer in complexion than the ordinary *santals*, and did not eat any flesh, or drink toddy or '*pachai*'. In other respects, there was no appreciable difference between them and the ordinary *santals*<sup>69</sup>.

The *santals* proper were divided into twelve castes: Murmu, Kisku, Hemrom, Hansda, Soren, Mardi, Tudu, Besra, Baske, Chore, Bedea and Pauria. Their legend was that the first two human beings, Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Burhi, sprang from two eggs laid by a wild goose (hasdak)<sup>70</sup>. They had seven sons and seven daughters. The sons were given the first seven names of the castes mentioned above, and married the seven daughters. Seven castes thus arose, and later five others were added<sup>71</sup>. The eighth caste, Baske, at first belonged to the seven, but by reason of their offering their breakfast (baske) to the Gods while the *santals* were still in Champa<sup>73</sup>, they were formed into a separate caste under the name of baske. The Besras were separated on account of the immoral behaviour of their eponym, who was called Besra, the licentious one. The tenth sect Pauria, were called after the pigeon, and the eleventh, Chore, after the lizard. The story was that on the occasion of a tribal hunting party the members of these two sects failed to kill anything but pigeons and lizards, so they were called after the names of these animals. The twelve sects, the Bedea, was left behind and lost when the *santals* went up out of Champa. They had no farther, so the story goes, at least the mother of their first ancestor could not say who his father was, and for this reason they were deemed of lower rank than the other sects<sup>72</sup>.

## RAJBANSIS

The Rajbansis were numerically the next largest community<sup>73</sup>. The Rajbansis<sup>74</sup> were a Hindu social group spread over a vast tract extending from the districts of Malda and Purnia to Goalpara in Assam<sup>75</sup>. The Rajbansi population of the district were concentrated mainly in Gajol, Habibpur, Bamongola p.s.<sup>76</sup>.

The precise origin of the Rajbansis, their status and folk history in detail remain obscure<sup>77</sup>. The basic debate is around the question of their association

with the Koches. Whatever may have been their actual origin, there is no dispute about the fact that the Rajbansis were one of the early settlers in North Bengal as well as in Malda<sup>76</sup>. Their religio-cultural practices were simple and free from Brahmanical rigidities. Economically agriculture was their basic occupation and their representation in other professions was not very significant<sup>79</sup>.

In Malda, the Rajbansis were known as Bangals and the part of the village in which they reside, as the Bangalpara. The name was derived from their indigenous origin, as distinguished from the *santals* and others who were immigrants<sup>80</sup>. Family was the basic unit of the Rajbansi community. They normally lived in joint families. The head of the family was generally the eldest male member<sup>81</sup>. They were a socially homogenous community, in the sense that there was no sub-caste among them. The Rajbansis were not divided into exogamous clans or *gotra*, but constituted a single endogamous group. They had only one *gotra*, i.e. *Kasyap*. Marriages within the same *gotra* was therefore a common practice<sup>82</sup>. Both Saivism and Vaishnavism were popular among the Rajbansis, though the latter was adhered to by more people<sup>83</sup>. The language in which the Rajbansis generally spoke was a local dialect of Bengali, which Grierson has described as the 'Rajbansi dialect'<sup>84</sup>.

#### PALIAS, DESHIS AND KOCHES

The Palias, Deshis and Koches were ethnically allied to the Rajbansis. Buchanan Hamilton considered that though they were distinguishable castes, they came from the same origin<sup>85</sup>. Their claim to *kshatriya* status was not admitted by the Rajbansis who consider themselves a superior caste<sup>86</sup>.

Among the Palias there were two subdivisions — the Babu Palias and the Sadhu Palias. The Babu Palias are akin to the Rajbansis in manners and customs. The Sadhu Palias tried to follow the manners of higher caste Hindu. They claimed themselves as *kshatriyas* and wore the sacred thread. The Palias were concentrated mainly at Gazole- Bamongola-Habibpur region<sup>87</sup>.

The Deshis called themselves Gaur Deshis. It was not unlikely, M.O carter stated, that after the abandonment of the capital of Gaur they settled in the

surrounding region and continued to call themselves Gour Deshis. Their customs and habits were similar to those of the Rajbansis<sup>88</sup>. The Deshis were found in large numbers at Bamongola, Habibpur and Old Malda<sup>89</sup>.

The Koches were described by the Colonial scholar-administrators as the most backward of all the castes which were of Mangolian origin. They were worshippers of Shiva. Polyandry was prevalent among them<sup>90</sup>.

## OTHER HINDU CASTE

The other Hindu caste or castes of semi-aboriginal origin within the district were many and varied. Therefore, reference has only been made to those castes whose customs contain any interesting and noteworthy features.

Of the indigenous Hindus, the weavers-Tanti and Ganesh- were one of the most populous communities. The Ganesh caste was slowly decreasing in numbers, largely owing to its own custom that the marriage dowry had to be paid by the bridegroom. For this reason, the number of unmarried persons was high. Widow remarriage was also forbidden among them<sup>91</sup>.

The milkmen, Goals and Gopes, were another fairly large community. They were mainly concentrated in Old Malda and Englishbazar areas. The Gopes were divided into four classes- Majrote, Kishnota, Maghaia and Kanoje. There was no intermarriage between these subdivisions<sup>92</sup>.

The same division into sub-castes was found among the Mandals and Telis also. The Mandals were divided as follows:

- I. Nagar Mandals--again subdivided into a) Deb Nagar b) Kanhai Nagar c) Palas (Paras) Nagar and d) Bholahatia Nagar.
- II. Chasi Mandals, III. Gangat Mandals, IV. Chasat Mandals

Similarly the Telis were subdivided into Maghaia, Tirhtia, Barkapia and Bhatia Telis<sup>93</sup>.

There was no intermarriage between the sub-castes of Nagars or Telis. The first three Teli sub-castes could dine at each other's house, but even this was

not permitted among the Nagar Mandals. The Tirhatia Telis allowed widow marriage<sup>94</sup>.

Another interesting Mandal caste were the Chain Mandals who were found mostly at Kaliachak, Manikchak, Ratua and Englishbazar. They were engaged mainly in agriculture and fishing<sup>95</sup>.

The Binds were another caste who were found at Manikchak, Ratua, Englishbazar and Kaliachak region of the district<sup>96</sup>. They were a non-Aryan caste originating from Bihar and Upper India. They were employed in agriculture, fishing, making saltpetre and collecting medicinal herbs<sup>97</sup>.

Among the castes of semi-aboriginal origin, the Mushahars were found in large numbers in Malda than in any other district of Bengal. They came from Santal Parganas and were employed mainly as earth cutters and day labourers<sup>98</sup>.

## ISLAM AND THE LOCAL PEOPLE

The second largest component in the population of the district was composed of Muslims. With the exception of a few high-class families of Saiyids, Mughals and Pathans all the Muslims were *Sheikhs*. Almost all of them were Sunnis, and with the exception of the *Shersabadias*, of the Hanafi persuasion<sup>99</sup>. Amongst the cultivators, however, the *Shersabadias* form a distinct group; there was also a small endogamous body known as the *Darbhanga Sheikhs*, who migrated from the district of Darbhanga<sup>100</sup>. In local dialect they were called '*Darbhagaiya*' who were found at Englishbazar, Manikchak and Ratua p.s. They considered themselves as *ashrafs* or aristocratic Muslims<sup>101</sup>. Of the functional groups, mention may be made of *jolahs* (weavers), *dhuniyas* (carders), *naluas* (reed sellers), *nikaris* (fisherman) and *kunjras* (vegetable sellers)<sup>102</sup>.

## SHERSABADIAS

Among the Muslim agriculturists, the most noteworthy people were those known as the Shersabadias, or more generally as the Badias. The name is derived from Shersabad Pargana of Murshidabad district, from which they were forced to emigrate owing to the erosion of the Ganges. They were found mostly at Kaliachak, Manikchak and Ratusa p.s.<sup>103</sup>.

There were several theories about the origin of the Shersabadias. One was that they were originally Marathas, who come to Bengal with the Maratha invaders. It was said that a number of them were made prisoners and forced to accept Islam. Their physical appearance, however, was unlike that of the typical Marathas. It seems more likely that they were descendants of the army of Sher Shah who came to Bengal to defeat and oust Humayun from Gour<sup>104</sup>. Physically they were very strong and robust and were extremely hard-working<sup>105</sup>.

The Shersabadias were very good agriculturists and spent much time and labour on the reclamation of land which the ordinary cultivator were prone to avoid<sup>106</sup>. Most of the Tal area in Ratusa and Harishchandrapur p.s. was brought under cultivation by them. In cultivating methods, they were superior in every respect to their neighbours. They seemed to understand better the nature and properties of the soil and how to get the best results from it<sup>107</sup>.

The Shersabadias were often considered by their Hindu neighbour as people prone to criminal activities<sup>108</sup>. However, as Asok Mitra stated, this was rather oversimplification. As their main profession was agriculture, they sometimes got indulged in land crimes<sup>109</sup>. The Shersabadias, as M.O. Carter comments, were land grabbers and frequently encroached on their neighbour's land especially if he was a weaker part. In this way, they sometimes forced neighbour to sell his land to them. In fact, it was a regular practice of some zamindars to employ Shersabadias to oust certain tenants<sup>110</sup>. But in no way the Shersabadia Muslims could be considered criminal as a class<sup>111</sup>.

In social matters, their unity was remarkable. They obeyed the orders of their village headman with almost military precision<sup>112</sup>. In religious matters, they were pious and orthodox. Marriage with any other Muslim sect was prohibited,

which was possibly one reason why their social unity and fine physique had been preserved<sup>113</sup>.

## THE NADEGUSTIS

Another peculiar Muslim sect, who lived in the Mirataluk area of Englishbazar p.s., and along the western bank of the Mahananda towards the south of the district, were known as Nadegustis<sup>114</sup>. They were said to have been Hindus of Nadia district who were converted to Islam centuries ago, and migrated to the Natore Subdivision of Rajshahi district. Being unable to get land there, they came to Malda district in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hearing from the travellers to Gaur and Pandua that there was land available for settlement<sup>115</sup>.

Since then they had increased in numbers and spread over a wide area. They had still retained some of their Hindu customs; for example, they wore new clothes and decorated the walls of their house with *alpana* on festive occasions<sup>116</sup>. They also respected Hindu Gods. In the month of Baisakh, hundreds of them went to Dal Dali village to offer puja to the Goddess *Burima*. Like the Shersabadias they did not allow marriage with any other Muslim sect<sup>117</sup>.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SOCIO – ECONOMIC SETTING I: PROCESS OF AGRARIAN CHANGES, 1876 – 1939

The district of Malda, as we have already mentioned, was created in 1813 with parts of the Dinajpur, Purnia and Rajshahi districts. It is, therefore, not possible to give a coherent account of the history of the land revenue administration of the district. Nevertheless, it might not be out of place to mention some important facts<sup>1</sup>. With regard to the early revenue history of Malda, our main source of information is *Ain-i-Akbari*<sup>2</sup>. Abul Fazal, in his *Ain-i-Akbari*, while describing the Subah of Bengal mentions Jinnatabad, i.e., Lakhnawati or Gour as an ancient city. There was a *sarkar* of the same name in the Subah of Bengal. The district of Malda contains a major portion of this *sarkar* of Jinnatabad. Malda was one of the *mahals* in the *sarkar* of Jinnatabad or Lakhnawati. The revenue of this *sarkar* of Jinnatabad, which consisted of 66 *mahals*, was fixed at 1,88,46,967 *dams*<sup>3</sup>.

At the time the English commercial factory was opened at Malda, a *krori* was stationed at Malda. A *krori* was a revenue official who was in charge of the collection of revenue amounting to one *crore* of *dams*. During the viceroyalty of Shaista Khan, Malda was included in his personal jagir<sup>4</sup>.

Malda came under the British administration with the acquisition of Diwani by the East India Company in 1765. As the district of Malda did not exist as a separate entity at that time, it would not be useful to recount here the details of the revenue administration that prevailed between 1765 and 1793. One rather peculiar arrangement that was adopted by the Committee of Circuit in regard to Malda may, however, be mentioned here. It appears that certain

areas contiguous to Malda were formed into a unit of revenue collection and was put in charge of the Commercial Resident at Malda, because a number of weavers and other dependants of the factory resided in such areas. It was felt that this arrangement would not only contribute to promote the success of the investment but also would provide a fund for such investment<sup>5</sup>.

In 1793 the Permanent Settlement of land with the zamindars was introduced in Bengal Presidency. Although the aim of this chapter is to trace the process of agrarian changes that took place in Malda during the years 1876 – 1939, it would not be irrelevant here to mention some of the important consequences of the Permanent Settlement. Because the settlement not only restructured the rural social and agrarian scenario of Malda but also Bengal as a whole. The Permanent Settlement meant a very sharp rise in the land revenue obligation of the zamindars<sup>6</sup>. It produced two immediate consequences. First, land as an income-bearing asset could not become very attractive immediately after the Settlement. This, in turn, slowed down the process of land becoming an easily marketable asset. Second, there was an unprecedented element of risk in the land-holding system. The zamindars had to adjust to the new situation by devising some sort of an 'insurance policy' to hedge against risk<sup>7</sup>. Regulation VII of 1799, giving landholders the right to attach and dispose of the property of their tenants for arrears of rent marks the beginning of this process of adjustment. It has been observed that this was particularly resorted to by the new zamindars that had come to hold land through auction purchase and were not inhibited by the traditional tenant-landlord relation<sup>8</sup>.

Far more important, however, was the emerging system of under-tenures which possibly became the most important component in the policy of

insurance against risk adopted by the zamindars. A large number of under-tenures became a feature of the land-system of Bengal as a consequence of the Permanent Settlement<sup>9</sup>. The development of this intricate system of extensive sub-letting of land created an emerging market in the sub-tenurial rights in land<sup>10</sup>. The Patni System, particularly Patni Regulation VIII of 1819, legally recognized the sub-letting right of the superior tenure-holder. And, during this process, a significant market in the sub-tenurial and sub-letting rights of land developed which made such rights an easily marketable commodity<sup>11</sup>. Perhaps, the most serious implication of this commercialization of sub-tenurial rights in land was the tendency for rapid growth in the number of intermediate rent-receivers (between the zamindar and the direct cultivator) which accompanied the process<sup>12</sup>.

It is against this backdrop of broader provincial scenario, we would now make an attempt to trace the process of agrarian changes in the district of Malda during our period of study. In the year 1832 – 33 the total number of estates on the rent-roll of the district was 95; in 1850-51 the number of estates was 489; in 1870-71 the number of estates was 536; and in 1873 the total number of estates was returned at 560. Of these, 51 were either under direct government management or under the Court of Wards; the remaining 509 were subdivided according to the amount of revenue paid<sup>13</sup>. In 1873 the land revenue demand from permanently – settled estates was Rs. 3,15,444 payable by 560 estates<sup>14</sup>. In 1912 the demand was Rs. 4,00,658 payable by 618 estates<sup>15</sup>. M.O.Carter in his Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda, 1928-35 gives the number of permanently settled estates in the district as 626, the total annual revenue being Rs. 3,83,694<sup>16</sup>.

## REVENUE SURVEYS:

In Malda the earliest revenue survey of a few isolated *parganas* was taken up in 1840-41, 1841-42 and 1844-45. The major portion of the district was surveyed in 1848<sup>17</sup>. It was based on a rough survey called the Thak Survey, as the surveyor on arrival at the place to be surveyed, began by marking the boundaries of the estates, and *mouzas* on the ground, with clay mounds along the boundary lines, as signs of resolving boundary disputes. Mapping followed the erection of the mounds which were locally known as Thak<sup>18</sup>. Apart from the Thak Survey, the diara survey of the bed of the Ganges was done in 1866 with a view to finding out new formations of land not assessed to revenue at the Permanent Settlement<sup>19</sup>. In Bengal the first cadastral maps by air survey were drawn in the Habibpur and Bamongola p.s in the district of Malda in 1928 by M.O. Carter, Settlement Officer of the district, assisted by his Technical Advisor. They undertook the survey over 100 sq.miles. In the year 1931, 783 sq. miles were air surveyed and mapped cadastrally and completed with the record-of-rights<sup>20</sup>.

## A TYPOLOGY OF AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY MALDA.

The 'zamindari system' in its deceptive legal mould has continued to provide a basic framework for the study of Bengal's rural economy and society<sup>21</sup>. Even those who are aware of the problems of making too easy an equation between ownership of revenue right and actual possession of land have nevertheless seen Bengal's agrarian structure primarily in the context of the colonial land-revenue administration. A recent essay on pre – 1947 Bengal opens with the statement: 'We must begin with a consideration of the

conditions imposed on Bengal's agrarian economy by the fact of colonialism. The primary and abiding interest of the colonial government in the agriculture of Bengal, or for that matter anywhere else in India, was the extraction of a part of the surplus in the form of land revenue<sup>22</sup>. The arrangement by which a class of persons designated 'proprietors' were assigned the property in revenue collection in 1793 together with late nineteenth-century amendments 'to protect as far as possible the predominant organizational form of agricultural production, viz small-peasant farming'<sup>23</sup> is still the main context within which the evolution of Bengal's agrarian structure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is analysed.

Keeping this background in view, we now like to proceed to present a scenario of agrarian social structure from late nineteenth century Malda. The population of Malda was distinctively agricultural. Like any other agrarian society, in Malda too, it was the control of land that was the crucial determinant in locating political power. It will however be a mistake to assume that rural society in Malda was divided into two well-defined categories: with a parasitic zamindar at the top and a body of landless labourers at the bottom. Between these categories was an intermediate stratum of non-zamindar tenure-holders with varying degrees of income and influence. Unlike certain Bengal districts such as Bakarganj where there often existed 20 different intermediaries<sup>24</sup>, the land-tenure system in Malda, as Asok Mitra has shown, was relatively simple: there were rarely more than two or at least three intermediaries between the zamindar and the actual cultivator<sup>25</sup>.

W.W.Hunter in his Statistical Account of Malda, published in 1876, noticed four classes of land tenures, viz. (1) estates paying rent direct to government; (2) intermediate tenures; (3) cultivating and miscellaneous tenures and (4)

rent-free tenures<sup>26</sup>. In his Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928 – 35, M. O. Carter gives an elaborate account of the land tenures in the district. The system of land-tenures, as Carter stated, was extremely simple. In many estates the cultivating tenants paid rent direct to the zamindars. In others, where tenures existed, there was little sub-infeudation, and it was uncommon to find more than two grades of tenure<sup>27</sup>.

The larger first grade tenures were generally known as Patni<sup>28</sup>, but this was in most cases a misnomer as very few were actually governed by Regulation VIII of 1819<sup>29</sup>. It was common form of tenure under zamindars who hold proprietary rights. The Patni was a tenure by which the Patnidar was bound to pay the landlord the share of the government revenue payable by the land let under the tenure, over and above a fixed sum yearly to the superior landlord<sup>30</sup>. The Patni system was a perpetual lease, the condition being punctual payment of dues, hypothecation of land as security for payment and liability of the tenure to summary sale in case of default<sup>31</sup>. After the Patni Regulation of 1819 legalised and systematised the Patni tenure, it gained very wide currency in Bengal. This Patni system has been dubbed by Sirajul Islam as the 'Second Permanent Settlement' between the zamindar and the Patnidar<sup>32</sup>. A considerable number of Patnidars sublet part of their interests to *darpatnidars*. In Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, these interests were mostly in the hands of the upper-caste gentry but it was not unusual for a few members of the agricultural and intermediate trading castes to make their way into these ranks<sup>34</sup>.

The number of ordinary tenures was considerable, but the statistics show that their average area was only about 8 acres. About two-thirds of them were

permanent and held on fixed rents or at fixed rates of rent and the remainder were permanent and liable to enhancement of rent. These tenures were commonly known as *jotes*, and their sub-tenures as *dar-jotes*. Permanent tenures were called *marurashi jotes*, and those held on fixed rents *kaemimaurashi or istimrari jotes*<sup>35</sup>.

In the 1870s Hunter noted that *hal hasila* was an extremely common form of holding chiefly in the less advanced tract in the northern part of the district, and especially in the Chanchal estate. The peculiarity of this tenure was that the cultivator only paid rent for such lands as he might have cultivated during the year and the rate was proportional to the kinds of crop that he raised. There was no written agreement, but the tenant was recognised to have a sort of claim to continuance. No right of occupancy accrued to the tenant of such lands. In the opinion of Hunter, the source of this tenure can be traced back to the old Hindu Village System. It was probably a relic of the days when the lands of the village were annually divided afresh among the villagers. According to Hunter, this was the simplest form of tenure but for its proper working two requisites was necessary. The village community must retain its traditional influence over its member and there must be abundance of spare land. But Hunter noted that even at that time the *hal hasila* tenure was losing its primitive character on account of pressure of population<sup>36</sup>.

Another form of tenure was the *ijara* which was, in fact, lease for the collection of rent and expired when the period of the lease terminates. *Dar-ijaras* or sub-leases, Hunter noted, were not known in the district. Of *ijaras*, the most common form was called *miladi*. This lease was for a term of years varying from one to fifty and was commonly offered by the larger zamindars and by the absentee landlords to avoid the expenditure and trouble of making

collections themselves. The properties of indigo planters were often held by the same form of lease for years which was locally termed *thok*<sup>37</sup>. In the 1920s, Carter noted, this form of temporary tenure was comparatively small in number. At that time there was only one large *ijara* held by the Raj Banaili estate<sup>38</sup>.

*Adhi*, *trikuti* and *pharani* were the names of sub-tenures created by cultivators themselves, who for various reasons wanted a certain portion of their holdings to be taken off their hands. In the *adhi*, as is implied by the name, the produce was shared in equal proportion between the two parties. The owner of the land i.e., the cultivator had to provide seed and all other expenses of cultivation and the *adhiar* merely supplied his labour<sup>39</sup>. The *trikuti* was similar to the *adhi*, the difference being that in this system two-thirds of the crop was assigned to the owner of the land and only one-third to the actual tiller of the soil<sup>40</sup>. The land was generally of inferior quality and labourers did not agree to cultivate at the usual *adhi* rate. In the *pharani*, the tiller agreed to pay to his landlord a definite number of *maunds* for each *bigha* independently of the actual produce he might reap<sup>41</sup>. *Chakran* or service tenure was another type of tenures in the district consisted of lands granted by the proprietors as rent-free or at a nominal rent, in return for police and other service performed by the grantee. These tenures were not permanent, heritable, or transferable, and their existence continued so long as the service was required by and rendered to the grantor. The area covered by this type of tenancy was small. The following *chakran* tenancies were found in the district<sup>42</sup> : *napit jaigir*, *dhobi jaigir*, *paik jaigir*, *astoprohari jaigir*, *pujari jaigir*, *behara jaigir*, *khadem jaigir*, *kumar jaigir* etc. The lands granted to the barbers were called *napit jaigirs*; lands granted to the dhobi or washermen were called *dhobi jaigir*; lands

granted to the *paiks* or peons were called *paik jaigir*; lands granted to watchmen or *astoprohari* were called *astoprohari jaigir*; lands granted to the earthen-pot-makers were called *kumar jaigir*; lands granted to the *palki*-bearers were called *behara jaigir*; lands granted to *pujari* for the performance of *puja* were called *pujari jaigir*; and lands granted to a caretaker of a *darga* or saint's grave were called *khadem jaigir*. Such tenures and others of similar nature existed in almost all principal zamindari estates of the district<sup>43</sup>.

Among *lakhiraj* or rent-free tenures Hunter found the following classes:

- i) those created by the paramount authority of the country,
- ii) those created by a subordinate government, and
- iii) those created by Muslim and Hindu landholders.

Of the class (i) there were two examples in the district, one of the Mughal Emperor and the other of the English. *Taraf Pirigpur* of *Pargana Shershabad*, with an area of more than 5,000 acres, was conferred by the Emperor *Aurangzeb* on his priest *Sayyid Niamatulla* for charitable purposes. This was known as *badshahi altamgha* or an imperial grant under red or purple seal. The other case was a plot of land in *mauza Mohanpur* within *Pargana Shikarpur* containing about 1127 acres which was assigned in the time of Lord *Cornwallis* for the support of an invalid sepoy establishment. Of class (ii) there were three estates in the district which were created by *Nawab – Nazims* and were all of considerable extent. The *Pargana Baishazari* was conferred in 1709 on the supervisor of the monument of *Pir Mukdam Shah*. *Pargana Shathazari* was granted in 1648 for the support of religious persons and for alms to the poor. These tenures were called *ausat madamash* or subordinate

grant for charitable purpose. One such *jaigir* in north-western part of the district was said to have been granted by Nawab Mir Jafar to the *fakir* who betrayed Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah after his escape from the battle of Plassey. The class (iii) rent free tenures were the types of ordinary Lakhiraj tenures which were rather common in Bengal<sup>44</sup>. Based on the report prepared by Mr. Reily, then the District Magistrate, Hunter furnished the following statistics for the rent-free tenures existing in two large parganas belonging to the Chanchal estates. In pargana Hatanda, 5226 acres of land were held by Lakhirajdars, thus classified<sup>45</sup> :

	<u>Names of Lakhiraj</u>	<u>Acres</u>
1.	Devottar (for the service of deities)	1,318
2.	Brahmottar (for the support of Brahmins)	2,726
3.	Bhatottar (for the support of bhats or heralds)	50
4.	Vishnottar (for the service of Vishnu)	77
5.	Ganakottar (for the support of astrologers)	138
6.	Jogisan (for the seat of devotees)	1
7.	Baidyottar (for the support of physicians)	26
8.	Inami (given for rewards)	12
9.	Mandallan (for the support of head-men)	2
10.	Mahatran (given to men of rank)	319
11.	Aima (for the subsistence of Musalmans)	160

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 12. | Piran (for preserving the memory of Muslim saints)       | 160 |
| 13. | Fakiran (for the support of Muslim religious mendicants) | 23  |

Total: 5,226

In Pargana Gaurhand the lakhiraj tenures amounted to 1789 acres or 6.31 per cent of the total area. They were thus arranged:

		<u>Acres</u>
1.	Debottar	398
2.	Brahmottar	1,219
3.	Vishnottar	3
4.	Ganakottar	3
5.	Mandallan	79
6.	Aima	10
7.	Piran	57
8.	Fakiran	20

The tenure holders of various descriptions as detailed above were normally subservient to the zamindar class and gradually they formed another sub-feudal class under the patronage of the zamindars. Although they were in minority, but, having been combined with the zamindars on the one hand and alienated from the ordinary peasant class on the other, they tended to serve as a safety valve of the zamindars' interest in the rural area. Besides small

tenure holders indirectly championed the cause of the zamindar class, as a class of benevolence, philanthropy and paternalism, which helped brighten the public image of the zamindars in the rural areas<sup>46</sup>.

## STATISTICS OF LAND TENURE

The following statement shows the different classes of estates with their areas and percentages:

Table 2.1 Different classes of Estates with their areas and percentages:

	Class of Estates	No.	Area	Percentages of total area
1.	Revenue-paying estates	750	1,022,349.65	80.50
2.	Permanently settled estates	626	976,904.72	76.92
3.	Government estates	19	13,750.60	1.08
4.	Temporarily-settled-estates	105	31,694.25	2.50
5.	Revenue – paying foreign estates	150	100,691.77	12.65
6.	Revenue-free estates (B.I)	174	19,130.15	3.87
7.	Revenue-free estates (B. II)	15	5,339.32	0.44
8.	Revenue-free foreign estates (B.I)	7	474.40	0.04
9.	Area outside the record	----	12,552.05	0.09

10.	Area acquired for public purposes	-----	19,175.85	1.51
			1,269,723.19	

Source : M.O.Carter, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928-35, op.cit., p-76

The *raiya*s of Malda district were differentiated more or less. A great majority of them had small holdings and consequently paid lesser amount of rental than the superior *raiya*s or *jotedars*. Differentiation among the peasantry with the predominance of the small peasant was thus focussed in the agrarian structure of the district in the nineteenth century and the same picture can also be found in the twentieth century. So below the rich peasants or *jotedars* was the other members of the working peasantry – ordinary *raiya*s, under – *raiya*s, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers.

The table below shows the proportions of agricultural population in Malda with some other adjoining districts:

Table 2.2 Proportions of Agricultural population: Landlord, Tenant, Labourer (%)

Districts	Landlords	Tenants	Labourers
Malda	2.12	75.99	21.89
Dinajpur	1.00	87.28	11.72
Rajshahi	4.60	84.18	11.22
Jalpaiguri	3.18	91.84	4.98

Rangpur	1.37	91.68	6.95
Darjeeling	1.65	96.26	2.09
Source: Census of India 1921, vol. 5 Bengal, pt. 2, Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5.			

Table 2.2 shows that the proportion of landlords was greater in the districts of Rajshahi and Jalpaiguri than Malda. At the same time the number of tenants with some sorts of right to the land which they tilled was also less in Malda (75.99%) than the other four districts of northern Bengal. Correspondingly, the proportion of 'labourers', i.e., tillers without any sort of legal rights to land (under *raiya*s without any tenancy rights, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers) in the district of Malda was much higher (21.89%) than the other four districts.

In the 1931 census the agricultural population was classified by economic categories. Table 2.3 shows the result of this classification:

Table 2.3 Classification of Agricultural Population by Economic Categories, 1931(Percentages)

	Rent-receiver	Owner cultivators	Tenants	Labourers	others
Malda	6.22	42.71	8.29	41.54	1.24
Rajshahi	7.99	56.27	5.74	28.99	1.01
Dinajpur	3.67	46.88	14.62	34.22	0.61
Jalpaiguri	6.60	36.25	25.83	31.09	0.23

Rangpur	4.65	52.41	18.94	23.53	0.47
Darjeeling	15.20	36.55	24.79	23.03	0.43

Source: Computed from Census of India, 1931, vol. 5 (Bengal), Part ii, Tables 2, 3, 4, 5.

It is to be mentioned here that the proportion of those who qualify as 'rent-receivers' under the 1931 definition exceeds the 'landlords' in table 2.4 by a significant margin in Malda and Darjeeling. This is indicative of the presence in these districts in large number of those who were not proprietors or tenure holders under the Tenancy Act, but who had in effect become pure rentiers. Secondly, 'labourers', working for hire in cash or kind and thus including, besides agricultural labourers and farm servants, a large number of *bhagchasi* who were not regarded as independent tenant cultivators under the census definition, form large proportions of the agricultural population in Malda than the other five districts of northern Bengal.

Partha Chatterjee has, in this context, cited the findings of the Land Revenue Commission of 1938-39<sup>47</sup>. The Commission conducted a survey in selected villages to find out the manner in which the land was cultivated in different districts of Bengal: The results are shown in table.

Table 2.4: Proportions of Land Cultivated by Family Members, Bargadars and Labourers.

	by family members	by bargadar	by labourers
Malda	89.3	9.6	1.2

Rajshahi	81.0	15.0	3.9
Dinajpur	72.0	14.5	13.6
Jalpaiguri	70.4	25.9	3.7
Rangpur	72.2	22.8	5.1

Source: Report of the Land Revenue Commission; vol. 2, Bengal, pp. 118-19, Table VIII (e).

It is clear from the table that the predominant mode of cultivation was by the labour of the owner himself and his family in the district of Malda and Rajshahi. On the other hand, in comparison to other four districts of northern Bengal, a small proportion of land was cultivated by sharecroppers or labourers in Malda.

#### OCCUPANCY RAIYATS

The table below shows the average area of occupancy holdings in the district of Malda :

Table 2.5: Average area of occupancy holdings.

	Thana	Average area (in acres)
1.	Kharba	2.00
2.	Harishchandrapur	2.32
3.	Habibpur	3.40

4.	Old Malda	2.78
5.	Gajol	3.00
6.	Bamongola	2.40
7.	Englishbazar	1.40
8.	Kaliachak	1.40
9.	Bholahat	1.40
10.	Gomastapur	2.80
11.	Nachole	3.56
12.	Sibganj	2.05
13.	Ratua	2.45
14.	Manikchak	2.40
15.	Nababganj	2.25

Source : M. O. Carter, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928 – 35, op.cit., p. 76

The figures indicate that the average is largest in Gajol and Habibpur *thanas* where extensive areas have been reclaimed comparatively recently. When the area in a tenant's possession was too large for cultivation by his family, or was situated at an inconveniently long distance from his home, it was either sold, wholly or partly, or sublet; and in the case of holdings situated at a distance an exchange was often effected with another tenant. When holdings

were sublet, the under-*raiyat* sometimes pays the rent for the occupancy holding direct to the landlord, and the balance to the *raiyat*<sup>48</sup>.

Carter in his Survey and Settlement Report has shown the number of holdings of the various classes of cash-paying *raiyats* and their respective areas:

Table 2.6 Number of Holdings of the Various Classes of Cash-paying *Raiyats*

Class of raiyat	Number of holdings	Total area thus held (in acres)	% of the total area surveyed
Raiyats at fixed rent or rate of rent	20,633	58,299	4.58
Settled and occupancy raiyats (on cash rent)	399,351	912,768	71.87
Service raiyats	2,319	4,583	0.36
Rent-free raiyats	3,516	4,591	0.36
Total	125,819	980,244	

Source : M. O. Carter, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928-35, op.cit., p. 77

It was in 1938-40 that an attempt was made to establish the number of families in different acreage classes for Bengal as a whole. This was done at the instance of the Land Revenue Commission.

Table 2.7 Distribution of areas held by a family in Malda. Proportion (%) of land held by families of different acreage categories.

Number of families enquired into	332
Average area per family in acres	3.34%
Less than 2 acres	54.2%
2 – 3 acres	7.8%
3 – 4 acres	8.4%
4 – 5 acres	6.9%
5 – 10 acres	15.9%
Above 10 acres	6.8%
Source: Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal, vol. 2, 1940, pp. 114 – 15.	

#### QUESTION OF RENT: LANDLORD – TENANT RELATIONSHIP

Now, let us examine the relationship between the zamindar and the tenants of Malda, especially the *raiya*s, from the point of view of rent collection. Traditionally in Bengal, the rate of rent payable by different classes of *raiya*s was regulated by *pargana nirikh* or rate in the neighbourhood, not by the market price. Moreover, there were many varieties of *raiya*s who customarily

enjoyed special privileges, and their rents were not enhanceable. The *raiya*ts mostly mounted a legal and physical resistance to all attempts by zamindars to enhance rents. The resulting agrarian tension led to the enactment of Act X 1859<sup>49</sup>. Chittabrata Palit has observed that the Act was a compromise between custom and the abstract theories of political economists<sup>50</sup>. The most notable innovation of this Act was the enhancement of rent in the wake of the enhancement of prices. Under section 5 of the Act X of 1859, the zamindars could enhance rent if they could prove that land resources had improved independently of tenants' exertions, or that a rise in produce prices had occurred. Revenue Courts were established to give speedy judgements on rent suits enhancement. The officers of the Revenue Courts were firmly convinced that prices of agricultural produce had definitely gone up and that landholders therefore had the right to take a share of the profit<sup>51</sup>. Most zamindars served notices for enhancing the rate of rent, and the Revenue Courts very promptly disposed of those suits in favour of the zamindars<sup>52</sup>. Obviously, tenants resisted the zamindar's attempts to enhance rent. Peasant resistance movements were cropped up in various parts of Bengal, especially in East Bengal districts. A Rent Commission was established in 1880 to suggest ways and means for restoring agrarian peace. The Commission repudiated the utility of theories of political economy on rent for Bengal<sup>53</sup>. Since "the majority of the tenancies in Bengal and Bihar depended upon custom rather than contract", the Commission resolved to respect the customs of the country and accordingly draw up details of the Draft Bill which formed the basis of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885<sup>54</sup>. The Act provided that *raiya*ts should not be ejected for arrears of rent, but that their holdings must be sold in the Civil Court.

Keeping this historical background in mind, we would now proceed to portray a picture of landlord – tenant relationship in rural Malda. In Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, rent consisted of two parts, viz., legal rent and illegal cesses. The latter were usually called *abwabs*. It is true that the landlords did not always enjoy unrestricted control over land, especially after the passing of the Tenancy Acts. However, the landlords were still left with considerable power to increase the rate of rent without taking initiative in agricultural development. Indeed, the tenancy laws left sufficient scope for the landlords to increase the rate of rent payable by *raiyats*. It may be safely assumed that, under conditions of growing pressure of population on land, the landlords took the advantage to increase rent per unit of land<sup>56</sup>.

It is difficult to estimate the extent to which rent per *acre* of land increased in Malda in the nineteenth century. Based on the Collector's report, Hunter had furnished the following list of the average rates of rent prevailing in the district in the year 1842 : Rs. 1 per bigha for homestead land, 4 *annas* per bigha for two-crop land, and 3 *annas* per bigha for winter rice land. Hunter further noted that during thirty years after 1842 rates of rent were undoubtedly enhanced. It was particularly noticeable in *pargana* Shershahabad where rent was increased by one-third<sup>56</sup>. In 1888 the prevailing rates in the north of the district, were Rs. 3 for homestead land, 8 *annas* to Rs. 1 for paddy land, giving for an average holding of 15 *bighas* an all-round rate of 13 *annas* per *bigha*<sup>57</sup>. In the second decade of the twentieth century the prevailing rates were Rs. 4 for homestead land; 12 *annas* to Rs. 1 for winter rice land; 8 *annas* to 10 *annas* for boro land; Rs. 1 to Rs. 4 for mulberry land; 8 *annas* to Rs. 1-8 per bigha for two-crop land; 4 *annas* to 10 *annas* per *bigha* for one crop *rabi* land<sup>58</sup>.

The figures show progressive enhancement of rent. Illegal enhancement of rent, in fact, was the order of the day<sup>59</sup>. The tribal people were the most susceptible to pressure by the landlords. Competitive rates and rack-renting were noted specifically in areas where there was an influx of tribal migrants. In Malda the average rate of Rs. 2 per acre went up to Rs. 3 and more in the Barind tract, which was colonized by the *santals* and other tribals. The Deputy Commissioner of the Santal Parganas wrote in 1888: "The district (Santal Parganas) has now been filled up, and is overflowing into Malda. Symptoms of pressure are appearing as inferior land is being taken up" <sup>60</sup>. The usual practice was to carry out an estate survey to reduce the existing standard of measurement and to assess rent at the same or slightly increased rate. For instance in the estate survey a *bigha* would be measuring 80x80 cubits, whereas the earliest measurement had been 90x90 cubits; thus increasing the plot under survey in area on paper though the tenant did not actually get any increase. The same result might be obtained by altering the lengths of the cubits<sup>61</sup>. In some estates, the cubit measured 18 inches, but by adopting the cubit equivalent of 16 inches would effect an increase in area on paper. The Chanchal Estate derived benefits this way in 1904 and the increase in rent amounted to eight *annas* a rupee. The Talanda Estate in Gomastapur and Nachol *thanas* was surveyed in 1917, excess rent was demanded for the excess area and an illegal enhancement was made<sup>62</sup>. In the absence of any registered *kabuliyats*, there was no proof that the original settlement of rent was based on an area found after survey and the enhancement was cut down under section 29 of Bengal Tenancy Act, as it was excess of the allowable limit.

A concerted movement resulted out of the problem, leading to stoppage of paying taxes, and the tenants availed of the opportunity of the attestation work in 1931-32. The Monakosha estate owned by Moulvi Jahur Ahmed Chowdhury was surveyed and effected an enhancement in 1931, which was resisted by the tenants. News of oppression and torture on the tenants by the landlord's agents reached the district administration and it asked the zamindar not to enhance the rent arbitrarily<sup>63</sup>. The Taherpur estate of Sashisekhareswar Roy caused illegal enhancement by circumventing the provisions of section 29 of Bengal Tenancy Act by amalgamation or splitting up of tenancies. Two enhancements were made in twenty years, but the landlords safeguarded themselves by taking *kabuliyats*. Many holdings that had been made *khas* by rent sales were lying uncultivated. Deeply aggrieved at the attitude of the landlords on the question of enhancement of rent, the tenants socially boycotted the estate employees in Gomastapur and Nachole *thanas* for about six months<sup>64</sup>.

In most estates, rent receipts were not properly issued which proved to be a source of future trouble. The most common form of illegality was to accept part payment of rent and to refuse rent receipts until the full payment was made. Even if payments were made, along with *abwabs*, rent receipts were often issued after a few days. Fines were imposed on the Singhabad and Bulbuli zamindars under section 58 of the Bengal Tenancy Act, but the situation hardly showed any signs of improvement. The rent receipts suffered from other irregularities like not mentioning the area, or showing the year for which payment was made. This was aimed at realizing arrears having long been time-barred in some estates, particularly the Bulbuli estate, as such estates continued to carry over such unrealized rents in registers<sup>65</sup>. The

Bulbuli estate had claimed enhancements, which were denied by the tenants. The unpaid enhancement were entered as 'arrears' in estate accounts for many years, interest was charged on it and consequently it was not uncommon to find a tenant with an annual rental of Rs. 5 showing an outstanding rent to the tune of rupees two thousand. As such, it was not possible for the tenant to know which year the payment had been credited to. The system allowed the landlord to credit all payments to the oldest arrears, keeping a holding perpetually in arrears of rent and liable to be sold away at any moment. The Bulbuli estate was also guilty of the deliberate destruction of rent receipts, obtained from tenants on various pretexts<sup>66</sup>.

Some other oppressive practices strained the relation between the landlords and the tenants. One of the most common practices in the Barind was the increase the area of the *kamat* or farm of the landlord by forcibly adding land from tenants' holdings. Of course, no reduction of rent was given in exchange for this land grabbing<sup>67</sup>. The Shah zamindars of Porsha conceived the device of taking away the tenants' rights by bogus settlement with various relations, and issuing rent receipts to the tenants in which they were shown as under-*raiyyats*. When the relationship between the landlord and the relatives was examined, the fraud was exposed. It was then become known that no rent was actually paid and that there was no relationship existing<sup>68</sup>. In the Habibpur *thana*, the *ejmali* estates – those of Bulbuli and Singhabad used to realize the full rent of holdings instead of part rent according to their shares. These estates were partitioned amicably based on the record of rights<sup>69</sup>. Many landlords in Barind distrained the crops of their tenants, though formal complaints hardly came to the administration. 'Begar' or forced labour was also in vogue in Barind where the tenants seemed to be under the impression

that they were legally bound to submit to it. Even during the days of Carter, the tenants in Barind used to work at the landlords' houses on festive occasions, and in some other estates they were required to cultivate the landlord's *khamar* land<sup>70</sup>.

#### FURTHER EXACTIONS IN THE FORM OF ABWABS

What has been said above only relates to legal rent collections. Over and above the rental shares, landlords of Malda were able to demand more produce in the form of *abwabs*. Sashisekhar Ghosh in his 'Jamindari – darpan' (Narail : Manager's office, 1896) gives a list of *abwabs* prevalent in different parts of Bengal. These include, besides the usual impositions on ceremonies, office charges, unpaid labour, etc. an income-tax *kharcha* to cover the income tax payments of the zamindar, professional charges on barbers, cobblers, midwives and prostitutes, an *ankora salami* for allowing illegal trade in salt, and *rasad kharcha* for entertaining government officials visiting the estate<sup>71</sup>. In Bengal rent consisted of two parts, viz., legal rent and illegal cesses. The latter was usually called *abwabs*. *Abwabs* were widespread, paid by both cash and produce paying tenants, dating back to Mughal times<sup>72</sup>. Landlords were strictly prohibited by the colonial government from imposing them. Nonetheless, it was an open fact that they never stopped exacting *abwabs*. Of course, as Nariaki Nakazato observes, one may well condemn landlords for collecting these arbitrary and oppressive exactions and the government for not taking stringent measures to prevent it. However, the fact remains that *abwabs* were deeply rooted in the realities of landlord-*raiya*t relationship in rural Bengal<sup>73</sup>. On balance, however, the importance of the *abwabs* appears to lie more in their role as a medium for framing rural social relationships than in its role as a lever of economic extortion. In fact, they afford the key to a

deeper understanding of the zamindari system. In studying *abwabs*, J.C.Jack's following remark must always be kept in mind<sup>74</sup>:

'Above all the *abwabs* is sweet to the landlord himself, because he tastes in it the joys of royal power. He feels that as the recipient of rent he is merely the lord of land, but as the recipient of Sadiana, Nazar, fines and other levies he is the lord of subjects'.

Anyway, we shall, refraining from criticizing the *abwab* system, try to carry our discussion on the landlord-*raiyyat* relations forward by examining different types of *abwabs* prevailing in rural Malda.

*Abwabs* at varying rates were imposed by all estates in the district. It was estimated that the total amount realized as *abwabs* would not be less than the land revenue of the entire district<sup>75</sup>. The greater part of the *abwabs* went in pockets of the *gomastas*, but in some cases, the landlords also took their shares. M.O.Carter has left an illuminating record of these *abwabs* prevailing at the time of the settlement operations<sup>76</sup>. Tahuri, the perquisite of the *gomasta* or *naib*, amounted to not less than two *annas* in a rupee; and *peadagan*, the perquisite of the underlings of the *naib*, to one *anna*. In many estates, one *anna* was also realized as the cost of rent receipt and various levies were made because of social or religious ceremonies. Some estates realized the cost of their rent-collecting agency; one estate levied a tax when marriage ceremony took place in a tenant's house, the rate being Rs. 5/- for a son and Rs. 2 – 8 for a daughter. The Harishchandrapur zamindars realized one *anna* in the rupee as a contribution to their dramatic club and the Chowdhury estate of Englishbazar collected a tax in Gazol p.s. on each plough. Some estates realized *abwabs* in the name of deities, but

appropriated the major portion themselves; and most estates made special levies on various ceremonies in the landlord's house, such as marriages or funeral ceremonies, or for the purchase of a motor car, an elephant, or a gun. The Chanchal estate realized *tahuri* at one *anna* in the rupee. Generally speaking, Carter stated, there was little complaint against the imposition of small *abwabs*; it was only when the landlord's agents became too greedy that the tenants complained, and in Malda their rapacity in some estates was perhaps unequalled<sup>77</sup>.

*Abwabs* were universally realized by every landlord of the district but the rates were, however, higher in Barind. Ignorance of the tenants facilitated the realization. In many cases the tenants, particularly the *santals* did not even know the actual rent they were supposed to pay; the amount realized as *abwab* was totalled with the rent and the reckoning was on the total amount paid<sup>78</sup>. Barman, in his 'Report on the Condition of Santals in Malda, 1934' stated, 'A Santal's legal rent was Rs. 12. For years, he used to pay Rs.18 to the *gomasta* and he knew that Rs.18 was the amount payable for that particular holding. When a newly appointed *gomasta* asked for the legal rent, the Santal replied that Rs.12 must be the rent of some other holding and not of his'<sup>79</sup>. Carter's estimate was that a *santal* paid at least one-third of his legal rent in additional *abwabs*<sup>80</sup>. Carter identified systematic under payment to the zamindari staff as one of the potent causes for the development of the system of *abwabs*. With the exception of well-managed estate like Chanchal, most estates paid their *naibs* or *gomastas* a monthly salary of ten rupees, five rupees, or even less. 'Such underpayment was nothing but a deliberate incitement to realize *abwabs*'<sup>81</sup>.

Therefore, in the light of above discussion, it may be stated that the zamindars of Malda levied every sort illegal cesses or *abwabs* on the most frivolous pretences. The demands of the zamindar upon the *raiya*s were almost endless, and they had to meet them one by one. This prevented the economic development of the peasantry and prolonged the *mahajani* or usurious money-lending business. Payment of *abwabs* was illegal, yet government officials like Hunter, Lambourn and Carter repeatedly complained that the practice continued in rural Malda. The *abwabs* were a means of exacting even more from the sharecropper over and above the share of the crop. Along with deductions for loans, this could mean that the sharecropper walked away from the threshing floor virtually empty-handed<sup>82</sup>. This was an inherent characteristic of sharecroppers' circumstances and propelled the sharecroppers towards indebtedness.

#### RURAL CREDIT RELATIONS, INDEBTEDNESS AND LAND ALIENATION

No aspect of Indian economic history has been more written about and none left in a more confused state than the subject of rural moneylending<sup>83</sup>. Indebtedness was, in fact, a chronic problem in Bengal rural scene. A hierarchy of sub-infeudatories with the zamindar at the top and the actual cultivator at the bottom created the rural structure. Money economy was nurtured where cash payment, high value and scarce supply of money led to the continuous development of usury in the agrarian scenario of Bengal<sup>84</sup>. The Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, Bengal reported that the moneylender was a necessity in the agrarian system of Bengal. "He alone is in a position to provide the bulk of the capital required for current agricultural needs and on a recurrence of severe distress, he will continue, as in the past, to support the people by timely loans"<sup>85</sup>.

During our period of study, the professional village moneylender was not a common phenomenon in Malda. According to the 1921 census, in Malda the number of persons whose principal source of income was money-lending stands at 76 per lakh of the population<sup>86</sup>. If the accounts of Buchanan-Hamilton are taken under consideration, it can be stated that most of these *mahajans* in Malda were Bengalis, but a good number of Marwaris particularly in Old Malda, were engaged in the business<sup>87</sup>. For a brief period in the later nineteenth century, the *mahajan* was able to siphon off the peasant's surplus through usury interest, while the landlord was unable by either law or the *lathi*, to collect the full rent<sup>88</sup>. Abdul Hamid Shah in his Bengali tract, 'Krishak Bilap' published in Mymensingh in 1921, has graphically portrayed this type of professional *mahajan*: 'The debtor who regularly made his interest payment from the year's income from agriculture, the *mahajan* loved more than his eldest son. However, he damned that debtor, the poor wretch who in three years would have been unable to pay a pice towards interest or principal. After three years, having impatiently waited through the period of limitation, he would eventually calculate the compound interest and put in a claim in the court for more than ten times the principal, and obtain a decree towards principal, interest and costs amounting to fifteen times the original outlay'<sup>89</sup>. In the 1870s, Hunter noted the presence of a money lending class in rural Malda whose main business was shop keeping and trade. They were mainly drawn from the intermediate castes like Sahas, Tilis and Baniks<sup>90</sup>. Lending out money on bonds to the debtors was an ordinary feature. A good number of such types of *mahajans* in Malda were involved in Jute and paddy \ rice trade<sup>91</sup>. The expansion of rice and jute trade in Malda enlarged the credit needs of the peasantry. They needed the cash in the lean period before a

harvest. The trader-moneylenders used a form of credit known as *dadān* or advances on the security of the crop<sup>92</sup>. It is to be noted here that in 1939, eight districts in Bengal were 'surplus' in rice and paddy and Malda was the one among them (the other seven districts were Chittagong, Bakarganj, Dinajpur, 24 Parganas, Birbhum, Midnapore and Burdwan)<sup>93</sup>. Moreover, nearly 90 percent of all big rice mills in Bengal were located in the six districts of Malda, 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Birbhum, Midnapore and Hooghly. It was in these districts of Bengal, plus Dinajpur and Rangpur, that rice played an important role as a cash crop<sup>94</sup>. In an economy where the subsistence crop was also the principal commercial crop, paddy as the currency of lending continued to be of considerable importance<sup>95</sup>.

At the turn of the century, a new money lending class appeared on the scene of Malda as well as of Bengal as a whole. They were joteder rich peasants who also engaged in money lending and agricultural processing industries, such as rice mills<sup>96</sup>. As Sugata Bose observes, there can be little doubt that landlords – large, medium and small – owning *golas* (barns) of various sizes, together with a small segment of surplus peasants, were the chief rural creditors in the early twentieth century<sup>97</sup>. In Malda, Carter observes, loans were granted on promissory notes and on hand notes. The moneylenders entered repayment towards the principal and the annual interest on the back of the bond or in the *hat-chita*, and separate receipts were not given<sup>98</sup>. Mahajans insisted on punctuality in interest payment because that was their main liquid capital<sup>99</sup>. As Carter noted, in Malda 'the local *mahajan* has a limited clientele and it is more profitable to him to keep on collecting interest, as far as he possibly can, than to realize his capital. Taking interest on smaller loans at 36 percent, and allowing for the accounts being made out half-yearly, he can get

back his capital in a little over two years. He therefore endeavors to screw as much interest as possible out of the debtor, and is even content to forego interest in bad years, if he sees a fair prospect of resuming collections later on<sup>100</sup>.

B. B. Chowdhury has identified payment of exorbitant interest to the *mahajan* as the basic cause of the increase of indebtedness<sup>101</sup>. Usurious rates of interest were commonly charged in all the districts, but the rates were even higher in east and north Bengal than in west and central Bengal<sup>102</sup>. It was observed that interest on loan to agriculturists given on the security of land generally varied from  $18\frac{3}{4}$  percent to  $37\frac{1}{2}$  percent per annum. Interest on loans given without security was much higher, sometimes as high as 300 percent per year<sup>103</sup>. As regards Malda, Hunter observed in the 1870s that local *mahajans* usually charged an interest of 12 – 18 percent per annum on loans given to cultivators when his land was mortgaged. In the case of petty advances to cultivators, whether the lender has only the personal security of the borrower, the rate of interest was from  $37\frac{1}{2}$  percent to 75 percent per annum<sup>104</sup>. In the late 1920s, the Report of the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee gives the following comparative estimate of the rates of interest charged in the different districts:

Table 2.8 Moneylenders and Rates of Interest on Loans Charged in some Selected Districts of Bengal 1929 – 30.

Districts	Number of moneylenders per lakh of population	Rates of Interest (%)
Malda	76	$10\frac{3}{4}$ – 75 p.a.

Murshidabad	45	18 – 120 p.a.
Rajshahi	68	$18\frac{3}{4}$ – 75 p.a.
Dinajpur	60	24 – 75 p.a.
Rangpur	82	$37\frac{1}{2}$ – $66\frac{1}{4}$ p.a.
Jalpaiguri	56	10 – 50 p.a.
Darjeeling	70	30 – 60 p.a.

Source: Report of the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1929 – 30, vol. I, Bengal Government Press, Alipore, 1930, p. 198

In spite of this high rate of interest, the agriculturists in Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, had no other option but to borrow money from the *mahajan*. As Lambourn observed in the second decade of the twentieth century, most of the people in the district had dealings with the moneylender and a succession of bad harvests would throw them in difficulties. In this way numbers of occupancy *raiya*t in the scarcity of 1874 became *adhia*r on their own land, particularly in the poorer parts of the Barind<sup>105</sup>. Now two pertinent questions arise:

- i) Why the rates of interest in Malda and Bengal as a whole were so high?
- ii) What led the peasants to borrow in spite of this extortionate rate of interest?

As regards the first question, the following reasons furnished by the Central Banking Enquiry Committee and the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee may be quoted here:

- a) Absence of any substantial asset on the part of the cultivators to be offered as security for loans.
- b) Paucity of credit facilities from any other source.
- c) Shortage of capital on the part of the moneylender himself.
- d) High expenses of collection and management of loans.
- e) Unwillingness of the cultivators to go to the cooperative societies for fear of publicity and unlimited liability.
- f) Lack of awareness and timidity on the part of the cultivators<sup>106</sup>.

M. O. Carter, in his Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928-1935, advanced more or less the same reasons. He stated that the cooperative movement had done something to provide credit on reasonable terms, except in Barind where the *mahajan* was still supreme. The work of cooperative societies was constantly being misrepresented by *mahajans*, who ascribed to the system various imaginary pains and penalties in the event of non-payment. In fact, in Barind the *mahajans* enjoyed almost monopolistic position due to absence of any other source for credit, which was one of the important reasons for such high rate of interest not only in Barind but also in the district as well<sup>107</sup>.

Regarding the second question, it may be stated that in spite of high rate of interest the cultivators of Barind and other parts of Malda as well had to

borrow from the local *mahajan*. With reference to Bengal as a whole, it was observed by the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee in 1929 that the conditions of borrowing were such that a big share of the income of agriculturists was eaten up by interest and other charges, making repayment of loans very difficult. Debts were often repaid by further loans<sup>108</sup>. It has been often argued by the British officials that litigation, expenditure in social and religious ceremonies were the major reasons for indebtedness. Branding the Malda cultivators as extravagant at times of good harvest, M. O. Carter held the view steadfastly that the performance of social and religious ceremonies and idleness on the part of the cultivators lay at the root of agricultural indebtedness. 'More than half of the cultivators' debts (in Malda) are incurred for expenditure in social ceremonies. Idleness and social extravagance are inherent in the character and customs of the region. If the *santals* get a good crop of winter paddy, they are perfectly happy to sit idle for the next six months. This is largely true of other classes also, especially those who live in the Barind, and are almost entirely dependent on one crop.... The Barind, although less fertile than other parts of the district, is quite capable of producing other crops such as vegetables, potatoes, sugarcane, and so forth. The same slothfulness is apparent in the entire of the district, where the area under mango garden steadily increased, until it received a setback during the years of depression. The reason for this increase that a mango garden, once it is laid out and bearing fruit, provides a regular income with the minimum of labour and expenditure. As a general proposition, it may be said that the average cultivator loses a considerable annual income through no other reason than his own idleness"<sup>109</sup>.

However, the reasons put forward by Lambourn, Carter or other British officials to explain agricultural indebtedness in Malda in the first four decades of the twentieth century are not tenable in the light of later researches on the agrarian history of modern Bengal, which, we presume, may be equally applicable to Malda as well. It has been established beyond doubt that extravagance, improvidence and idleness on the part of the cultivators did not play any remarkable role in the aggravation of rural indebtedness<sup>110</sup>. The assumption that social ceremonies and litigation were the main causes of agrarian indebtedness was further challenged in the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee Report, which declared that, 'paradoxical as it may seem, the real cause for improvidence is poverty, very little surplus is left to the Bengal agriculturist after meeting his bare necessities, so much so that it is difficult even for the necessary depreciation on capital, not to speak of specially unfavorable circumstances among men or cattle, absence of seasonal rainfall and unusually low prices of jute.... In fact, conditions are so uncertain that the agriculturist is compelled to discount his future income in any terms to relieve present necessity'<sup>111</sup>. Debts were incurred principally by peasants mainly for:

- i) Payment of the rent of the zamindars.
- ii) Payment of old debts and interest.
- iii) Maintenance of the family until the next harvest.
- iv) Purchase of agricultural stock, such as seeds, cattle and implements<sup>112</sup>.

Indeed, agricultural debts in Bengal were predominantly for purposes of maintaining a minimum level of subsistence<sup>113</sup>.

#### VOLUME OF RURAL INDEBTEDNESS IN MALDA

It is not easy to ascertain the volume of indebtedness in rural Malda due to paucity of evidences. Nevertheless, it is reasonably clear that indebtedness was widespread and that its volume was steadily increased during the first three decades of the twentieth century. It was observed in the Report of Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928 – 35 that the vast majority of cultivators were in debt, though no statistics was given<sup>114</sup>.

The Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee made the first estimate of the total agricultural debt in Bengal in 1929. It suggested a figure of Rs.100 crore, including Rs.6 crore worth of paddy loans. It further determined the average debt of rural families at Rs.175<sup>115</sup>. In 1933, The Bengal Board of Economic Enquiry calculated the total debt of the occupancy *raiyats* and *raiyats* at fixed rent at 97 crores and the family average at Rs. 187. As to the extent of indebtedness, it had estimated that 77% of all Bengal agriculturists were in debt in 1933<sup>116</sup>. From the report of the Bengal Board of Economic Enquiry, we get an estimate of the volume of agricultural indebtedness in Malda. It is to be mentioned here that the Board of Economic Enquiry classified the agricultural debtors in the following categories: group 'A': Solvent – whose debts do not exceed twice their income after deducting the food they consumed; group 'B': doubtful solvency – those whose principal debts do not exceed from year's income; and group 'C': whose debts exceed the latter figures<sup>117</sup>.

## LAND ALIENATION IN MALDA

Therefore, it may safely be concluded that a large number of agriculturists, not only in Malda but also in Bengal as a whole, became dependent on a regular supply of credit, which had in turn led to the surrender of a large part of produce to the creditors. On the other hand, in substantial number of cases such credit transactions ultimately resulted in alienation of landed property from the debtors to the creditors. By the time of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, the sale of peasants' holdings was a fairly well established custom throughout the province<sup>118</sup>. Partha Chatterjee argues that 'indebtedness was the principal mechanism through which transfers took place'<sup>119</sup>. B. B. Chaudhury describes a stark 'process of depeasantization' in Bengal and Bihar between 1885 and 1947 – occupancy tenants in debt being reduced to sharecroppers and agricultural labourers without any rights on their own land. Most alienations, he asserts, can be traced not to the stresses and strains produced by occasional famines, but to the more permanent conditions of rural debt<sup>120</sup>.

Transfer of land from the hands of the poorer peasantry was occurring in large numbers from the early years of the twentieth century, which, however, had increased significantly in the 1920s. The Great Depression of 1929 brought about a much greater indebtedness and pauperization of the poorer peasantry in Bengal. Thus the rate of transfers of *raiyyati* holdings again picked up from the mid -1930s<sup>121</sup>. The 1928 Amendment of the Tenancy Act legalized for the first time the sale and transfer of *raiyyati* occupancy holdings with the stipulation of a 20 percent landlord's fee and the landlord's right of preemption. It put a temporary halt to the customary sales. In spite of this, there were many other subterfuges available for the intending purchasers and

distressed sellers<sup>122</sup>. Cases were found in Malda of 'transfer by granting a sub-lease and making a negligible increase in rent. Cases were also found in which the parties to the transaction applied jointly to the landlord for mutation of the purchaser's name. The landlord accepted a transfer fee less than 20 percent of the sale price, and granted a rent receipt to the purchaser'<sup>123</sup>. Partha Chaterjee, quoting Registration Department sources, gives us the following figures of the rate of transfer of occupancy holdings in Malda.

Table: 2.9 Percentage of Occupancy Holdings in Malda Transferred Annually by Registered Sales, 1929 – 38.

1929 – 30	0.99
1930 – 31	1.19
1931 – 32	1.10
1932 – 33	1.22
1933 – 34	1.07
1934 – 35	1.04
1935 – 36	1.10
1936 – 37	1.04
1937 – 38	0.84
Total : 1929 - 1938	8.60

Source: Partha Chatterjee, Bengal 1920 – 1947 : The Land Question, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta 1984, pp. 146 – 47.

In Malda land transfer from agriculturists to non-agriculturists took an alarming proportion in the Barind region where almost all the *santal* population of the district resided. Their ignorance, improvidence and illiteracy made them easy prey for the landlords' unscrupulous agents and the moneylenders<sup>124</sup>. The attitude of the Hindus in the neighborhood to the *santals* was a contemptuous tolerance. To cheat a *santal* out of his land was considered a smart piece of work for which nobody had ever been assailed by moral qualms. The method which was commonly practiced and was easy also was to use the civil court, and by suppressing its processes to get an *ex-parte* decree. Carter mentioned a case where a *santal* had actually lost his holding because he had borrowed some salt from his mahajan<sup>125</sup>. Instances of deliberate cheating were also in galore. A *khoskobala* was a sale deed, and a *khot kobala* was a form of mortgage. By substituting the word *khos* for *khot* in a mortgage deed, the transaction would become an outright sale. The net effect of 'rapacity, indifference and exactions had disastrous effect on the *santals* in Barind'<sup>126</sup>. The *santals* lost occupancy rights on not less than one-half of the area held by *santals* to moneylender and other non-agriculturists and in the majority of the cases, they became *adhiars* without any rights. According to the estimate of Carter, at least in 25,000 acres, the *santals* had lost their occupancy rights<sup>127</sup>.

The cultivators were thrown into the tentacles of debt leading to loss of landholdings due to crop failures, natural disasters and price fluctuations. The moneylender might retain the holding or put a relative as a nominal *raiyyat* and the erstwhile *raiyyat* became under-*raiyyat* or sharecropper. Carter explained

the process of land alienation in this way: 'Let us suppose that a tenant has three holdings. He falls into debt and mortgages one of them, which are eventually sold up. The *mahajan* takes possession, and, according to the general custom, allows the tenant to continue on the land as an *adhiar* (sharecropper). The tenant bears all the expenses of cultivation and receives half of the produce as his share'. Subsequently further borrowing jeopardized another holding, until the cultivator became a sharecropper, : 'Cases were commonly found in which lands cultivated by *adhiars* were previously their occupancy holdings but had been sold up in rent or mortgage sales'<sup>128</sup>. Chapter VIIA of the Bengal Tenancy Act was extended to the *santals* in Malda in 1923 and to the *oraons* in 1927. Under its provisions, no aboriginal can transfer land by sale or mortgage without the collector's permission in writing. This enabled the collector to look into each such case. Unfortunately, law did not empower the collector to impose his decision on the moneylender who denied advancing money in most cases, and there was no law under which he could be compelled to do so<sup>129</sup>. There was nothing to prevent him from taking a note of hand (*hatchita*), suing in the civil court, obtaining a decree and dispossessing the *santal* of his holding<sup>130</sup>.

Numerous cases were mentioned in the government reports narrating how the sharecroppers of Barind were being dispossessed of their landholdings due to their ignorance and illiteracy. K. C. Barman in his report mentioned a case where a *santal* was advised by the *gomosta* that he owed the zamindar fifteen rupees by way of arrear taxes. Not being able to pay forthwith, the tribal requested for time. The *gomosta* told the *santal* that he would be kind enough to permit the *santal* to repay the arrear rents in weekly instalments of three *annas* on the weekly *hat*- day if the *santal* offered him a turban of *mulmul*. The

*santal* agreed and bought the turban on loan, worth five *annas*, from the shop of a *mahajan*, and continued to pay rent as agreed to the *gomosta*. After about seven years, the tribal was dispossessed of his holding of seven bighas by a decree of the civil court for an accumulated loan of Rs. 200/- - this land was taken over by the *mahajan* himself<sup>131</sup>. Some other glaring cases of cheating the *santals* of land were also mentioned. "A *santal* had to lose 15 *bighas* of land for purchasing a dietz lantern on credit. Another borrowed Rs.25 in 1925 and in 1928 paid back Rs. 26, and 1930 Rs. 45. But this year the *mahajan* has obtained against him a decree from the civil court of Nababganj for Rs. 195 plus costs"<sup>132</sup>.

In fact, the easiest way to dispossess the sharecropper of his land was to use the civil court, and by suppressing its processes to get an *ex parte* decree. This practice was generally followed in the Barind, particularly against the *santals*, whose utter ignorance of law and procedure made them easy victims<sup>133</sup>. *Mahajans*, *tahsildars*, *touts* – all resorted to this practice. Pleaders living in Englishbazar were also known to have purchased *santal's* holding in rent sale after suppressing notices. Carter, quoting the circle notes of Habibpur and Old Malda P.S., stated: 'In due course the mortgage is foreclosed, in the majority of cases suppressing the notice, and the property sold only to be purchased by the *mahajans*. The tenants in happy ignorance continue to till the land for sometime, when the *mahajan* takes mutation from the landlord, and proceeds to possess the land. .... Cases have been found where rent was paid but not credited to the accounts. Suits were instituted for the notices were suppressed, and the land was ultimately sold. The *tahsildars* did this in collusion with some in the locality to purchase the land in auction'<sup>134</sup>.

The following three statements, recorded in the Report of K. C. Barman in 1934, would offer a clear picture of the working of the civil court<sup>135</sup>:

Table 2.10 Statement of rent suits against the tribals and terms of their disposal.

Name of the court	Year	Total No. of suits	Terms of disposal			
			Ex-parte	On contest	Compromise	Dismissed
1st court	1928 – 29	48	40	--	1	7
	1929 – 30	225	198	3	--	24
	1930 – 31	51	47	--	--	4
	1931 – 32	93	78	8	5	2
	1932 – 33	123	105	1	14	3
	Total	540	468	12	20	40

Name of the court	Year	Total No. of suits	Terms of disposal			
			Ex-parte	On contest	Compromise	Dismissed

2nd court	1928 – 29	58	54	3	1	--
	1929 – 30	56	41	8	5	2
	1930 – 31	78	68	1	2	7
	1931 – 32	140	122	14	2	2
	1932 – 33	145	128	1	14	2
	Total	477	413	27	24	13
	Grand Total	1017	881	39	44	53

Table 2.11 Statement of money-suits on *hatchittas* against the tribals and terms of their disposal.

Year	Total No, of suits	Terms of disposal			
		Ex- parte	On contest	Compromise	Dismissed
1928 – 29	45	28	1	3	13
1929 – 30	74	39	6	12	17
1930 – 31	64	42	2	10	10
1931 – 32	50	38	3	9	--

1932 - 33	46	35	6	3	2
Total	279	182	18	37	42

Table 2.12 Statement of money-suits on mortgage deeds and terms of their disposal.

Year	Total No. of suits	Terms of disposal			
		Ex- parte	On contest	Compromise	Dismissed
1928 - 29	25	21	1	2	1
1929 - 30	21	16	4	1	--
1930 - 31	9	7	1	1	--
1931 - 32	20	17	--	3	--
1932 - 33	13	11	--	2	--
Total	88	72	6	9	1

It thus appears from the above figures that in the cases of rent suits, money-suits on *hatchittas* and money-suits on mortgage deeds, the percentages of *ex-parte* decree were 88, 65.3 and 82 percent respectively. It may safely be

concluded that the large number of *ex-parte* decrees was indicative of either suppression of notices or perfunctory execution of the same. This trend of land alienation, as observed by K. C. Barman, continued to exist even in 1934. The necessity of empowering the officials with legal powers to stop land alienation from the *santals* was recommended in his Report. K.C. Barman estimated that not less than 20 percent of the land belonging to *santals* had been expropriated from them over the years<sup>136</sup>.

### ECONOMIC DEPRESSION AND INTENSIFICATION OF LAND TRANSFER

As in other districts of Bengal, agriculture in Malda was based on loans from moneylenders because condition of the ordinary cultivator was a wretched one. The global Depression of 1929 further increased the indebtedness of the cultivators in Malda. As Saugata Mukherjee observes, indebtedness (in Bengal) rose quite sharply from the 1929 level over the next few years, because of the widespread distress caused by the Depression; although institutionalized credit had dried up to a large extent<sup>137</sup>. The fall in prices of agricultural produce during the years of Depression dramatically reduced the income of the agriculturists in money terms. As the Collector of Malda reported in 1932, 'the fall in prices made the agriculturist unable to meet expenditure from his income. The price of necessary articles to cultivator like cloth, oil etc. has not gone down in the same proportions'<sup>138</sup>. As a result, the old debts of the agriculturists along with their interest piled up. The debts exceeded far beyond their capacity to repay. It is reported from an enquiry made in a village at Old Malda p.s. in 1933 that of the 20 families of that

village, 72 percent were in debt. In almost every case, there was interest outstanding, which amounted to more than one-fifth of the principal<sup>139</sup>.

According to Mahalanobis' calculations, the burden of debt, excluding unpaid debt and interest thereof, rose by 67 percent for the whole of Bengal between 1929 and 1934<sup>140</sup>. Omkar Goswami, however, considers Mahalanobis' figures as gross underestimates for (i) they did not take into account unpaid loans before 1928 – 29 and interest thereof, and (ii) they excluded sharecroppers from the picture<sup>141</sup>. Nevertheless, Mahalanobis found that in 1933, when the Depression had not yet worked its way out of the system, 43 percent of the rural population in Bengal were indebted up to twice their annual income; 16 percent up to four times; and another 18 percent more than four times their annual income<sup>142</sup>. The poorest sections of the Bengal Peasantry were undoubtedly the worst sufferers in the Depression and post – Depression periods. The following table illustrates that income-debt ratio fell in all districts shown in 1933 from the 1928 level:

Table 2.13 Income-Debt Ratio for Average Agricultural Families in Selected Districts of Bengal for 1928 and 1933.

District	1928 Ratio	1933 Ratio
Malda	7.83	2.63
Rajshahi	2.05	0.62
Murshidabad	3.80	1.24
Rangpur	2.16	0.67

Birbhum	1.46	0.71
Source: S. Mukherjee, Agrarian Class Formation in Modern Bengal, op.cit., Table 2, P. PE 12.		

The Depression, moreover, led to the virtual disappearance of the professional moneylenders from Bengal countryside. The rate of repayment was decreased due to the growing insolvency of small and marginal cultivators. It made the business of money lending less profitable. The professional moneylenders usually lent money on the security of land mortgages. However, as the price of land and its produce fell sharply, it became extremely difficult for these creditors to realize either the interest or full payment in complete settlement of their loans<sup>143</sup>. The professional *mahajans* had no interest in cultivation. To them land was only a transferable asset. In Malda they became increasingly wary of lending money to the cultivators<sup>144</sup>.

After the passing of the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act in 1935, all *mahajani* credit stopped altogether. The ground was prepared for the entry of better-off peasants into the field of rural credit left vacant by erstwhile *mahajans*. These were clearly men who were directly interested in control over agricultural land<sup>145</sup>. By virtually controlling land and moving into the rural credit, they swiftly consolidated their power at the expense of *mahajans* and zamindars on the one hand and the poorer peasants on the other. A number of contemporary accounts of Malda vividly describe this new genre of jotdar-mahajan and method of their operation in Malda countryside<sup>146</sup>.

Thus the Depression, fall in the prices of agricultural produce and price-rise of essential commodities had the cumulative effect of large-scale land alienation in Bengal. Defaulting on cash obligations led to debt, mortgages or sale of *raiya* and under-*raiya* land holdings. Government officials' fears proved to be true that, 'through the Depression, a large proportion of cultivator's land will be irrevocably lost to them'<sup>147</sup>. The following table will illustrate the manner in which the *raiya* areas in Malda and some selected districts were transferred between 1928 and 1940.

Table 2.14 Transfer of *Raiya* Holdings during 1928 – 40 in Some Selected Districts.

District	Area enquired into (acres)	Transferred during 12 year		Transferred area cultivated			
		Area	%	Purchaser's family	Bargadars	Labourers	Under-tenants
Malda	1107.93	77.02	6.9	48.51	17.95	--	10.56
Dinajpur	6512.22	250.84	3.8	147.31	87.23	16.13	0.17
Rajshahi	5617.84	196.78	3.5	68.62	37.85	--	99.31
Jalpaiguri	4645.06	439.96	9.4	66.06	185.59	14.93	173.38
Rangpur	7964.30	380.60	4.7	80.60	144.92	10.73	144.35

Source: Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal, B. G. Press, Alipore, 1940, vol. II, pp. 120-21.

## LEGISLATIVE INTERVENTION IN THE DEBT PROBLEM

The widespread economic distress, caused by the Depression, led the peasantry in many districts of Bengal to riotous action against landlords and moneylenders. In Malda also, discontent among the poor cultivators were clearly visible. Barind region, in particular, were seething with unrest. On 10 November 1931, there was an armed conflict between the agents of the Shah zamindars of Porsha and the *santals* of Kulandanga and Gopalnagar. Amin Shah, zamindar of Porsha had purchased land measuring 448 *bighas* in auction from Malda court. When his men came to take possession of the land, a riot took place in which Bhakta Santal, Bharat Santal, Barka Santal, Jagu Santal and others attacked the zamindar's men with bows and arrows and injured a few of zamindar's men. The zamindar, in retaliation, opened fire on the santals injured few of them<sup>148</sup>.

In 1932, an open revolt broke out in Barind under the leadership of Jitu Santal against *zamindar-mahajan* and the British *raj*. Such types of peasant movement broke out in other parts of Bengal as well which caused alarm in the official circle. The government was forced to initiate a series of debt legislation aiming to provide relief for the peasant debtor.

It needs to be mentioned here that the Government had already passed in 1919 the Usurious Loan Act. The Act authorized courts, in cases when interest rate was excessive and the transaction between them was substantially unfair, to reopen the transaction and to relieve the debtor all liability in respect of any excess interest. Nevertheless, the Act failed to give specific relief it had intended to afford. The next legislative measure for protecting the agriculturists from *mahajani* oppression was the Bengal

Moneylenders Act of 1933. The Act tried to limit compound interest, suggest maximum rates of interest recoverable in courts, and made registration compulsory for non-resident moneylenders<sup>149</sup>. This Act, however, failed also to provide adequate relief for the agriculturists, as the prescribed rates of interest were too high for the debtors to pay. It was further alleged that it had upset the traditional basis of rural credit and accelerated the process of squeeze on *mahajani* credit. As Sirajul Islam observes, this legislation could not change the general economic law of demand and supply as the agriculturists' demand to credit was too high compared to its supply; and hence they had to pay a high rate of interest for credit, notwithstanding the protective legislation<sup>150</sup>.

A new dimension was added to the Bengal political scene after the passing of the Government of India Act of 1935. The extension of the suffrage to peasantry made the members of the Legislative Council or Assembly more vocal for the interests of the peasantry. On 2 March 1934, in the budget speech, it was declared that 'the time has come to devise measures for composition and relief of the heavy load of agricultural debt ..... The debt problem must be immediately trackled'<sup>151</sup>. Therefore, in 1935 The Bengal Agricultural Debtors' Act was passed aiming to relieve the burden of the debtors. It provided for the establishment of debt settlement boards to scale down debts according to the debtors' ability to pay. It was thought that the creditors would be benefited from the Act also, since in recent years 'the moneylenders as a whole had failed to collect any interest, much less any part of the capital of their outstanding loans'<sup>152</sup>.

Under the terms of this Act, Debt Settlement Boards were set up in rural areas in 1936. After Fazlul Huq's ministry took office in April 1937, Debt Settlement

Boards were set up district by district all over the province. By December 1938, the Boards had judged creditors' claims amounting to Rs. 367 lakhs and scaled it down in their awards to Rs. 179 lakh<sup>153</sup>. Table 2.15 gives a comprehensive picture of the amount of debt reviewed by the boards in Malda from 1937 to the end of September 1945, and the extent to which debtors and creditors respectively made use of the debt settlement facilities.

Table 2.15 Operations of Debt Settlement Boards in Malda: 1937 to September 1945.

District	Appication received		Total amount of debt shown in applications	For all cases disposed of	
	Filled by creditor	Filled by debtor		Creditors claimed	Debt determined
Malda	32,831	25,358	2,07,67,258	69,61,362	49,92,494
Dinajpur	74,235	56,452	2,04,92,519	1,76,12,876	1,21,30,137
Jalpaiguri	8,017	9,800	61,34,726	43,00,732	36,26,287
Rangpur	1,28,750	76,375	2,29,99,197	1,88,57,949	1,36,15,382

Source: Cooperative Credit and Revenue Department Credit Branch, April 1947 B. Progs. 557 – 653 File IR – 14 / 46, WBSA.

The establishment of Debt Settlement Boards caused the moneylender to take alarm and throughout the period from 1937 to 1941 facilities for credit

had become progressively constricted. Since early 1938, there had been complaints from landlords' that the operations of the Debt Settlement Boards were seriously hampering their collection of rent. In the year 1940, the Malda Landholders' Association observed that, "The Debt Settlement Boards have completely failed to deal with the problem of agricultural debts. The defects are – (a) the Boards are inefficient and unable to interpret the law; (b) it is understood that the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act has been enacted to evade payment; (c) the costs are enormous; (d) it has practically made it impossible for the *mahajans* to realize their dues and for the landlords to realize their rents from the tenants"<sup>154</sup>. The Association further complained that in Malda agriculturist debtors flocked to the Debt Settlement Boards not for conciliation of debts, but for defrauding the creditors and landlords by abusing the rules of the Act. 'An impression has been firmly rooted in the minds of the agriculturists in Malda that they have been released from all liabilities of payment of debts as well as the rents due to their landlords. The Boards, on ordinary debts, rents and even decreed rents, allow unreasonably long-term installments, sometimes for twenty years or more. These installments are seldom paid and on failure of one installment the whole amount does not become due (as in the case under the ordinary law), but for each default of instalment the creditor or the landlord will have to pay for execution in a court of law within thirty days of the default and this fun of fruitless running after the debtor will continue for a good number of years, of course, the Act was conceived with the intention of helping the agriculturists, but it is so one-sided and is carried to such extremes, that the effect has been disastrous to the moneylenders and the landlords'<sup>155</sup>.

To make Debt Settlement Boards' operation effective, the Bengal Tenancy Act was amended in 1938 with a view to restricting the usufructuary mortgage. In 1940, the Bengal Moneylenders' Act was passed aiming to impose further restrictions on loan transactions by the *mahajans*. All these legislative measures greatly helped the process of a squeeze on *mahajani* credit. The Malda Landholders' Association, in their reply to the questionnaire circulated by the Flood Commission specifically portrayed the rural scenario of Malda in this way. 'In times of difficulty, specially in case of failure of crops the agriculturists used invariably to get loans from their *mahajans* and sometimes from their landlords. But these Acts have compelled the *mahajans* and the landlords to stop any such advances, because, nobody can be expected to make advances of money when they knew full well that the money advanced will have little chance of being realized so long as these Acts are in force. During the last rainy season (1939), there has been abnormal flood in Malda and the people were in great distress. Government could not, and cannot, under the present circumstances, fully relieve this distress. Help from the *mahajans* and the landlords were necessary, but the people got much less help in the form of loans etc. this time than they used to get on such occasions before'<sup>156</sup>.

However, debt was integral to the agrarian economy because of the credit squeeze in rural areas more rich peasants took advantage of the credit scarcity and turned to moneylending. They profited extensively from being able to charge high rates of interest. The causes of debt were never dealt with. The legislative measures introduced were inadequate or limited to short-term solutions. In fact, a qualitative change in the forms and nature of land transfer took place. The number of sale increased in a great degree, whereas

the rate of mortgage fell sharply. This ultimately helps depeasantization not only in Malda but also in Bengal as a whole.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SETTING – II: GROWTH OF INDUSTRY, TRADE AND COMMERCE

The economic importance of Bengal was due mainly to her extensive and varied manufactures of cotton and silk. From time immemorial, Bengal had developed silk manufacture into a great art. Indeed, silk and muslin fabrics were the two outstanding features of Bengal's past civilization and trade. At a time, when several modern civilized races were living in a state of barbarism or using the bark of the trees as their apparel, Bengal was producing these valuable stuffs and was sending them to the well-known marts of Dacca, Sonargaon and Satgaon for the uses of princes and noblemen. However, the fame of these silk fabrics was not confined to the shores of India, but spread to the countries bordering on the Mediterranean. Ever since that period, the reputation of Bengal's silk fabrics remained unstinted<sup>1</sup>.

Malda was one of the important centres of silk manufacture and trade in Bengal from ancient times. It has been mentioned in the Arthashastra of Kautilya that the silk cloth manufactured in the Paundra (Pundravardhana or Gauda) country was black in colour and was as soft as the surface of a gem. The Paundra country was also famous during Kautilya's time for the production of the Kshauma cloth, which was another variety of silk cloth<sup>2</sup>. In discussing the place of origin of the silk called Patrona, it is stated in the Arthashastra that 'it comes from the Magadhas, the Paundras and Suvarnakudya<sup>3</sup>. Hunter wrote that there could be no doubt that there were silk in these parts during the reign of the last Hindu dynasty at Gaur. It appears that *patta bastra*<sup>4</sup> silk cloths were then exported to the important cities of

Dacca, Sonargaon and Saptagram<sup>5</sup>. Thus, it may safely be concluded that the manufacture of silk textiles in the district was carried on from ancient times.

The earliest reference to the manufacture of Malda is found during the time of Sher Shah who "gave to Sheikh Khalil (an envoy of Emperor Humayun) money and rich cloths and manufactures of Malda...and captivated his heart by these presents and favours". The next reference to the silk manufacture of Malda is available in the Ain-i-Akbari in which it has been stated that in the Sarkar of Barbakbad a fine silk cloth named Gangajal used to be produced<sup>6</sup>. It is recorded that Mirza Nathan, the Imperial Admiral in Bengal during the viceroyalty of Shaista Khan, bought a rare piece of silk cloth at Malda for himself at a cost of Rs. 4,000<sup>7</sup>. The products of Malda were highly prized in the overseas markets. There is evidence that in 1577, a Bengali trader named Sheik Bhik, who used to trade in Maldahi clothes took the sea-route to Russia with three ships laden with silk articles and that two of his ships were wrecked somewhere in the neighborhood of the Persian Gulf<sup>8</sup>.

The advent of the Europeans in the Malda silk market began in the early seventeenth century. The Dutch had established two business establishments<sup>9</sup>, one each at Cossimbazar and Malda. These establishments procured various silk articles from local markets as well as from the artisans<sup>10</sup>. The earliest mention of an English factory in Malda was in the year 1686<sup>11</sup>. A piece of land was purchased in 1686 from the zamindar in Makdumpur, a *mouza* situated in the present Englishbazar town. Here the company carried out their silk rolling, packing and despatching, thereby avoiding the levy of a tax on merchandise, which were the principal source of contention with the Fauzdar of Malda<sup>12</sup>.

Hunter gives further interesting details about the history of the manufacture of silk in Malda. According to him, a French whose name was not preserved, gave a great impetus to the raising of silk worms and the manufacture of silk around 1760. He was probably the precursor of the French factory, which was soon afterwards established in Englishbazar town<sup>13</sup>. It is reasonable to assume that due to the insecurity prevailed in the province during the reigns of the last Nawabs, silk manufacture along with other economic activities had received a setback and that with the restoration of some sense of security in the minds of the people after the battle of Plassey, it became possible for the Frenchman to revive the silk trade in Malda. The very fact that he went to Malda for reviving the manufacture of silk shows that at that time Malda was well-known as a centre of silk manufacture. The first silk filature factory in the district was built by Mr. Udney at Singatola. In 1770, Mr. Thomas Henschman built the Residency House of Englishbazar as a manufactory for sufeda or lace work on cloth. It was subsequently turned into an ordinary silk factory<sup>14</sup>. Buchanan Hamilton in 1810 recorded that the peculiarity of the cloths manufactured in Malda was that silk and cotton were used in almost equal proportions in making the cloths. According to him, the manufacture of cloths made entirely of silk was confined to the immediate vicinity of the town of Malda and was probably introduced into the district by Mr. Thomas Henschman who was the Commercial Resident for the English East India Company in Englishbazar<sup>15</sup>. Because of these efforts, there was a boom in the silk trade between 1760 and 1790; and the rearing of silk worms and the manufacture of silk fabrics became the general occupation of a large section of the people on both banks of the Mahananda in the neighborhood of Englishbazar<sup>16</sup>. This prosperity however was of short duration; and when Buchanan Hamilton

visited the region in 1810, the manufacture had already fallen into decay. At that time, only 4,000 looms were employed in manufacture of silk cloths<sup>17</sup>. Buchanan Hamilton also recorded the existence of about 120 houses of weavers in Malda and its immediate vicinity who used to make thin *muslin* (*mulmul*). The total value of *mulmul* produced did not exceed Rs.50,000. A substantial number of women were engaged in the town of Malda in embroidering flower on cotton cloths. The businessmen, who paid wages for the labour, supplied the cloths. These women were mostly Muslims and were known as Butadars<sup>18</sup>.

In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a complete diversion of the silk industry of Malda into the production of Khamru silk for the Indian market and filature and waste silk for the European market<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, the demand for Bengal silks had declined in the global market. In the global silk market, the re-emergence of China, Japan, Italy and France in the late 1860s with advanced technology reduced the demand for Bengal silks. The resultant fall in prices led to a chain of effects that caused its decay<sup>20</sup>. The fall of the raw silk branch adversely affected the economic viability of silk weaving in Bengal, and the latter was further constrained by the deficient demand in the wake of changes in preference patterns, both in Europe and in India, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century<sup>21</sup>. The change was from the pure silk, which Bengal supplied, to mixed silk. The new market was quickly grabbed by China and Japan while Bengal could not adjust. The new technology<sup>22</sup>, which was embedded in large-scale mechanization, ensured larger durability and brighter colours for finished products, reducing, at the same time, the cost of production. These product features suited the contemporary preference patterns, and extended the market to relatively non-affluent consumers.

Bengal did not adapt, and consequently Indian consumers, especially the poorer ones, began to prefer imported silks<sup>23</sup>.

Such was the picture of Bengal silk Industry in the 1870s from when we proposed to begin our study of the silk industry of Malda. At the beginning of our period, as we have seen, several factors were responsible for the decline of the Bengal silk Industry and Malda was of no exception. In the 1870s, as W. W. Hunter noted, the weaving branch of the silk industry was in a very dismal state, and the annual value of the manufacture was estimated by the Collector at not more than Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 6,000<sup>24</sup>. From this time onwards, the weaving of silk cloth from raw material became a small industry and the main industry was the production of raw silk.

Hunter supported this fact as he observed, 'the manufacture of raw silk or silk thread is, on the other hand, in a flourishing condition'<sup>25</sup>. It was largely carried on both with European and native capital. The European working concerns were seven in numbers, and the majority belongs to Messrs. Watson & Company of Rajshahi. The French firm of M. M. Louis Poyen & Cie of Lyons had recently established a factory and had introduced steam power in working the filature<sup>26</sup>. The European concerns, as estimated by Hunter, produced 620 *maunds* of raw silk per annum valued at Rs. 6,20,000. The number of filatures under indigenous management were as many as 3000. These were estimated to produce 1,500 *maunds* of raw silk per annum valued at Rs.9,00,000<sup>27</sup>. In addition, 25,000 *maunds* of cocoons were exported to Jangipur in Murshidabad and Benares. The annual produce of cocoons in the district was nearly 60,000 *maunds*. To rear this quantity of cocoons, as Hunter estimated, nearly 20,000 *acres* of land was used for mulberry cultivation. The silk reeled off in the European factories was exported almost entirely to Europe. The silk

thread produced under indigenous management, on the other hand, was purchased mainly by local *mahajans*, and sold in Calcutta, Benares and other large towns<sup>28</sup>.

## VARIETIES OF SILK CLOTHES

There were many varieties of silk clothes woven in the district of Malda. Buchanan Hamilton recorded in 1810 that there was a special type of cloth available in Malda, which was known as '*Maldehi cloths*'. This fine cloth was made of silk and cotton threads, the warp being silk and the woof cotton<sup>29</sup>. At that time, there were 120 houses of weavers in the district who could produce fine *muslins*(*mulmul*).Moreover, there was also one weaver in Malda who was expert in weaving Jamdani cloth<sup>30</sup>. In 1820, Walter Hamilton noted that Gulthishi, Bulbulchasm, and other patterns of silk cloths were made at Shahpur and Shibganj, the two important silk-weaving centres of Malda. Besides, silk *saris*, *dhutis*, *rumals*,as also *matka* and *garad* were manufactured in various centres of the district<sup>31</sup>. In 1876, Hunter noted that four principal types of silk fabric were manufactured in the district of Malda.

These were:

- i) Mazchhar, or riplets of the river;
- ii) Bulbulchasm, or nightingales' eyes;
- iii) Kalintarakshi, or pigeons' eyes;
- iv) Chand Tara, or moon and stars<sup>32</sup>.

The other cloths made in the Malda district were *dhutis*, *saris*, *koras*, *alwans* (thick wraps worn in winter), *chadars* (ordinary wraps), *rumals*<sup>34</sup> and *jors*. *Jors*

had a considerable sale throughout India as they were required for ceremonial purposes, marriages, *pujas* and religious festivals. Malda and Murshidabad *saris*, *dhutis* and *matkas* had a great demand in Bengal<sup>35</sup>. The weavers of Malda produced three kinds of *taffetas*<sup>36</sup>, fine ordinary and brown. *Taffetas* and *rumals* were prominent among the exports to Europe from Malda and Murshidabad<sup>37</sup>. *Rumals* were also exported from Malda in large quantities to Northern India<sup>38</sup>.

### IMPORTANT CENTRES OF SILK MANUFACTURE

In Malda, cocoon rearing and reeling were conducted throughout the district, but silk weaving was carried on at Shibganj, Shahpur and Old Malda in the beginning of twentieth century<sup>39</sup>. In 1810, Buchanan Hamilton observed that silk weaving was concentrated at Shibganj, Bholahat, Sujapur near the ruins of Gaur, Shahpur and at Old Malda<sup>40</sup>. In 1820, Walter Hamilton observed that in Malda, Shahpur and Shibganj were two important silk-weaving centres<sup>41</sup>. That these silk producing centres were also active in the second decade of the twentieth century is testified by G. E. Lambourn. He noted that at Shibganj there were nearly 140 families of silk weavers with 180 looms, of whom nearly 50 families were engaged in producing *matka* and the rest *garad* of pure silk. At Shahpur nearly 200 families who manufacture Gulthishi, Bulbulchasm and other patterns of Malda silk cloth<sup>42</sup>. Towards the end of our period, Shersahi of Kaliachak became an important centre for silk weaving<sup>43</sup>.

## Thana-wise location of important sericulture villages of Malda

1. Kaliachak	Alinagar, Sujapur, Nabinagar, Jalalpur, Birampur, Kaliachak, Madhughat, Kadamtala.
2. Englishbazar	Amriti, Piasbari, Mahadipur, Milki, Jote Arapur, Kotwali, Chandipur, Ajamtola, Nagharua.
3. Manikchak	Mathurapur, Manikchak, Kalindri, Lalbathani.
4. Old Malda	Bachamari, Mangalbari, Sahapur, Old Malda, Muchia.

## SIZE OF THE POPULATION ENGAGED IN THE SILK INDUSTRY : THEIR SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Silk was manufactured in three separate branches. These were cocoon rearing or sericulture, winding and spinning of the raw silk branch and weaving. A large number of people of Malda were engaged in all the three branches of the industry. In 1810 Buchanan Hamilton noticed about 15,000 looms in Malda and if five persons were needed per loom the total number of persons engaged in weaving (both cotton and silk) would come to around 75,000<sup>44</sup>. However, the total number of *Tantubaya* i.e. weavers, traders etc., given in the census of 1872, was only 4,791<sup>45</sup>. However, this statistics is doubtful as the census of 1911 estimated that about 20,127 people were engaged in silk production<sup>46</sup>. A census of the people engaged in various branches of silk industry was taken in 1925-26 and showed that 18,324 families were occupied in silkworm rearing. The majority reside in Kaliachak *thana* and the remainder principally Englishbazar and Bholahat *thanas*. It also showed that there were 596 silk weavers in the district and 230 weavers of

*matka* or waste silk<sup>47</sup>. It is, however, to be noted that the number of persons given in the census report as engaged in the rearing of silkworms and production of cocoons and raw silk related to those persons only whose principal means of livelihood consisted of the rearing of silkworms and production of cocoons and raw silk. It was likely that these were persons whose principal means of livelihood was either cultivation or some other branch of economic activity but whose secondary means of livelihood was the rearing of silkworms and production of cocoons and raw silk. The total number workers employed in this industry as given in the census report did not take into account this latter class of persons.

Four classes of people were engaged in the silk industry of Malda:

- i) The cultivators of the mulberry plants.
- ii) Silkworm rearers.
- iii) Silk winders.
- iv) Silk weavers<sup>48</sup>.

Both the Hindu and Muslim people were engaged in cultivating mulberry trees and rearing the silkworms. In the medieval period, the mulberry cultivators were mainly Hindus and the rearers were Muslims. Even today, cocoon rearing was limited to the lower caste among the Hindus and the higher caste Hindus like Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas considered it derogatory to rear cocoons<sup>49</sup>. In Malda, Muslims in general and among the Hindus Pundas rear silk-worms<sup>50</sup>. The Punda caste was the hereditary silkworm rearing caste and they lived mainly in Malda and in parts of Bogra, Rajshahi and Murshidabad. They were the 'the best, the most intelligent and most

prosperous of all cocoon rearsers<sup>51</sup>. In Bengal, the synonym of mulberry was 'tunt'; and the cocoon rearsers were known as *tuntias*, *tuntia kaibartas* and *tuntiachasas*<sup>52</sup>. In Malda, there were over 25,000 silk weavers and majority among them belonged to the *tanti* caste. Muslims also took part in silk weaving in this district, especially in Kaliachak p.s.<sup>53</sup>.

## FINANCING THE SILK INDUSTRY

Silk reeling and weaving required a comparatively large capital, which was difficult to obtain from the ordinary moneylenders. It was not possible for the independent silk producers of Malda to cope with the increasing demands, which were also getting more and more sophisticated. For, production on wider scale necessitated larger capital resources to be penetrated into production, which they were unable to provide. Since the producers of silk of Malda always remained on the subsistence level of existence, they most urgently required advances regularly for each silk *band*<sup>54</sup> or even frequently<sup>55</sup>.

What was the economic condition of the weavers of the mixed goods and cotton piece goods? The data regarding this are meager. The Danish records inform us that a cotton weaver was generally estimated to earn three *sicca* rupees and in good times upto three rupees a month. During our period of study, the Marwaris of Englishbazar<sup>56</sup> mainly financed the silk industry of Malda. The silk producers were largely dependent on the Marwari merchant class for obtaining necessary advances, and for the marketing of their produce<sup>57</sup>. Indeed, this money lending Marwari merchant class had much control over the debtor silk producers. The reelers and weavers used to approach the Marwari merchants, who advanced money to purchase cocoons and yarns on the understanding that the products must be sold to them<sup>58</sup>. The

silk producers who had received advances were always given rates much lower than the prevalent market rates. This was designed to keep them in balances, and the defaulters were not allowed to work for others. Up to the third decade of the twentieth century, the silk producers of Malda had to bear the load of outstanding balances much to their irritation<sup>59</sup>.

Consequently, there was a regular loss to the producer who found himself heavily indebted to the merchants. Mr. Peddie, then the collector of the district, realized that the introduction of a collective system was essential to save the producers from the clutches of the silk merchants. It was due to his efforts the Malda Cooperative Silk Union Limited was formed in 1927<sup>60</sup>. The Union had a nominal capital of Rs. 1 lakh. It was financed by loan from the Provincial Bank, loans from the Government, interest on loans granted to rural societies, and the profit on sales on manufactured goods<sup>61</sup>. The principal object of the Union was to extend the system of rural cooperative societies and assist them in the production and marketing of their products. In 1930, the number of societies affiliated to the union was thirty three<sup>62</sup>.

The rural societies were helped by advances either in cash, implements on materials. The interest on loans was fixed at a general meeting and approved by the Registrar, Cooperative Societies, Bengal, but it cannot exceed 12.5 percent<sup>63</sup>. Loans were limited to a maximum of ten times the value of the share capital paid up by societies. The societies were under regular supervision, and provision was made for the recovery of cash or goods advanced in the event of a default in repayment<sup>64</sup>.

During the years 1928-30, the union purchased annually silk yarn and cloth to the value of Rs.1 lakh. This was sold in the most favourable markets through

the agency of *dalals*. The Union extended its business to almost all the silk districts of Bengal, as well as to the important silk centres outside Bengal – in the United Provinces, Madras and Bombay<sup>65</sup>.

## GOVERNMENTAL EFFORTS TO PROMOTE SERICULTURE

It has already been pointed out that the export trade of Malda silk began to decline after 1874. It was mainly due to the increased demand for *tasar* and wild silks and the technological and commercial improvements, which were being made in France and Japan<sup>66</sup>. Writing the District Gazetteer in 1918, G. E. Lambourn observed that the prices of manufacture were dropped and the industry was in a danger of stagnation<sup>67</sup>.

To meet this situation the Government attempted to stimulate the production of cocoons. Trained overseers were deputed to instruct the rearers how to use microscopes for the detection of diseased seed, and seed-raising establishment for the supply of pure seed, under Government supervision, was established in Rajshahi and Murshidabad<sup>68</sup>. Sons of silkworm rearers were given stipends to get training in the sericulture school in Rajshahi and if they completed the course successfully, they were supplied with capital to start their business as seed-raisers. By these measures, Lambourn observed, the district had been largely saved from diseased seed, the chief source of loss, and the industry appeared to be on a sound footing as far as the production of *khamru* silk is concerned<sup>69</sup>.

In 1920, the Sericulture Department was established in the district. Its chief aim was to revive the industry by educating the silk rearers in scientific methods, and by providing them with disease-free seed cocoons<sup>70</sup>. A useful innovation of the Sericulture Department was the introduction of the mulberry

tree to supplement the cultivation of mulberry bush. The mulberry bush was one of the most expensive crops to cultivate because the land required continual attention and regular manuring<sup>71</sup>. In 1929-30, the sericulture department proposed to spend Rs.35 per *bigha* on manure alone, because it was found that good manuring resulted in a marked increase in outrun. This was a sum, which was beyond the means of the average cultivator, and represented approximately his total cost of cultivation at that time. The mulberry tree, however, cost almost nothing to maintain and used to produce leaves after four years' growth<sup>72</sup>. Up to 1939, over two thousand mulberry trees were planted in the Piasbari and Amriti nurseries by the Sericulture Department. It was recommended that its use should be extended as far as possible among silk rearers in order to cut down the cost of production and correspondingly increase profits<sup>73</sup>.

It was not sufficient, however, merely to produce and sell disease-free seed. The knowledge of scientific methods should be imparted among the cultivators. With this object, a sericulture school was attached to the Piasbari nursery with a course of one year. Monthly stipends of Rs.10 were granted to the selected sons of professional silk-rearers for training in sericulture. Apart from this, Rs.250 was allotted to each passed student for the construction of a model rearing house and the conduct of sericulture on scientific methods under the supervision and guidance of departmental officers<sup>74</sup>. Primary sericulture schools attached to both the Piasbari and Amriti nurseries imparted elementary instruction in sericulture with practical demonstrations. A contribution of Rs.10 per month was made to the Kaliachak Middle English School, and Rs.5 to the Rustamnagar Upper Primary School for conducting sericulture classes<sup>75</sup>.

Apart from silk, some other indigenous handicrafts also existed in Malda district in the period under review. Mention may be made of cotton weaving industry, indigo manufactures, metal works, lac production and mango industry.

## COTTON WEAVING

Cotton cloth weaving occupied an important place in the traditional indigenous cottage industry of the district. Buchanan Hamilton mentioned that the weavers of cotton were numerous in the region. Most of them were employed in weaving coarse cotton cloth for country use<sup>76</sup>. The only fine manufacture was that of a beautiful white calico called Khasa, the cost of which was from 6 to 15 rupees a piece. This cloth had a great demand and the company used to advance money to the weavers on a regular basis. Apart from the company, several private Indian traders used to make advances to the weavers. They sent these fine piece goods to Dinajpur and Patna, and a good deal was consumed in the district. These weavers of calico lived mainly in the divisions of Kharba, Nehanagar, Dangrikhora and Gargariba, that is, on the low lands near the Mahananda and Nagar<sup>77</sup>. Buchanan Hamilton estimated that about 3,500 looms were employed in weaving these Khasa calicos in the area. Moreover, about 10,000 looms were employed in weaving ordinary cloth for country use. Among these weavers, there were in the north-west corner of the district about 80 houses of Chapals who were said to have employed 90 looms in weaving checkered cloth. Besides these professional weavers, there were more than 500 farmers in the area adjacent to Dinajpur who, in spare time, weave cotton cloths<sup>78</sup>.

This situation, however, began to change under colonial pressure. With the influx of machine-made Manchester cloth, the decaying process of this indigenous industry started not only in Malda but also in the province as a whole. The district reports in 1870s indicate towards the decadence of cotton-weaving industry in Malda. A large number of weavers gradually abandoned their looms to take up other pursuits<sup>79</sup>. As we have already noted that Buchanan Hamilton, in his survey of Malda in 1810, recorded that there were as many as 13,500 looms were employed in weaving cotton cloth. The number of looms came down to 4,000 when Hunter was visiting the district in the 1870s. A number of 4,654 persons only were engaged in different sections of cotton weaving industry in Malda at the time of the first census of 1872<sup>80</sup>. G. E. Lambourn, writing the District Gazetteer in 1918, noticed that the industry had declined owing to the competition of factory goods. It was, he observed, purely a cottage industry and most of the weavers took agriculture as a secondary occupation<sup>81</sup>. The District Board established a weaving school where boys were trained to use improved looms. The effort, however, produced no significant result<sup>82</sup>.

In 1920 on the recommendation of the Indian Industrial Commission, a permanent Department of Industries was set up in Bengal. It focused its full attention to cottage and small industries. However, it made a little headway as it suffered from fund-crunch from its inception<sup>83</sup>. However, on its instruction the district authority of Malda attempted to rejuvenate the weaving school already established in 1916 and drew up programmes of demonstrations in the art of efficient weaving with improved applications for improving the quality and standard of the finished products.

These improved appliances included the introduction of fly-shuttle looms, the supply of fly-shuttle sleys for pit looms, warping machines etc. Because of the activities of the department and due to inter-communication among the people themselves, the use of fly-shuttle looms and other improved appliances increased to some extent<sup>84</sup>.

However, financial problems and difficulties of marketing individual items of handlooms stood as barriers on the path of progress. The district administration attempted to organize Weavers' Cooperative Societies to solve these problems. However, it failed miserably due to financial reasons as well as due to lack of sustained effort on their own part<sup>85</sup>.

Until 1929, there were only 15 Weavers' Cooperative Societies having a total membership of 300 persons, which was only percent of the total number of weavers in Malda<sup>86</sup>. The industry in Bengal along with Malda thus remained, according to the Bengal Industrial Survey Committee, 'generally under the grip of the *mahajans* who in most of the cases act as creditors and suppliers of yarn to the weavers and also market the finished stuffs. The *mahajans*' interposition between the weaving community and the market is primarily due to the lack of any organization amongst the workers, whose principal difficulty is want of funds<sup>87</sup>.

## INDIGO

W. W. Hunter, writing in 1876, noticed that indigo also formed an important production of the district of Malda<sup>88</sup>. In fact, indigo was a new cash crop in Bengal at the time of its introduction by the European planters in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>89</sup>. With the passage of time, however, Bengal indigo firmly established its position. By 1810, as the court of Directors found, the

Bengal indigo 'supplies much of the consumption of Europe, and no rival to it seems likely to arise'<sup>90</sup>. The rate of growth of in Bengal indigo exports was, indeed, striking: from 4,952 Factory *maunds* in 1788-89 to 1,32,946 Factory *maunds* in 1829-30<sup>91</sup>. The biggest blow to the industry was the indigo revolt of 1859-60, which engulfed the whole of the indigo belt<sup>92</sup>. There was a sharp decline of indigo exports of 44.3 percent between 1855 and 1861.

In the beginning year of our study, there were twenty indigo factories at work in Malda. These factories belonged to seven different concerns, and the total production was about 4,000 *maunds*. At the prevailing price, the value of total production amounted to about Rs.8,00,000<sup>93</sup>. According to Hunter's estimate, to produce this quantity of indigo not less than from 23,000 to 26,000 acres of land must have been used. In Malda, Hunter noticed, a few wealthy local people owned indigo factories. The greater part of the indigo was, however, grown and manufactured by European capital and under European supervision<sup>94</sup>. The mode of cultivation and the processes used in the manufacture were the same in Malda as in other indigo growing tracts of Bengal.

Table 3.1 Average area, Annual Outlay and Out-turn of Four Indigo Concerns in Malda District.

Names of Concerns	Area under cultivation (in acres)	Annual outlay (in rupees)	Annual out-turn (in <i>maunds</i> )
Kaliachak	9,333	1,60,000	1,100
Mathurapur	4,333	75,000	500

Tantipur	5,000	1,00,000	600
Singatala	1,666	30,000	250
Source: W. W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol. vii, London, 1876 (Indian Reprint 1974), p. 99			

## LAC PRODUCTION

It is not known when the lac industry originated in the district. From the absence of any mention of it in Hunter's Statistical Account, it may be presumed to be later than 1875<sup>95</sup>. This small industry seemed to have been established by the Santal immigrants after 1888<sup>96</sup>. The lac growing area was a strip, six or seven miles broad and about seventy miles long, following the bank of the Ganges. Commencing from Ratua p.s. in the north, it extended southwards through Manikchak and Kaliachak. The soil in this diara tract contained a large proportion of sand, and *babul* trees. The *pakur*, *peepul* and *dumur* trees were also suitable for *lac* production, but in Malda its cultivation was confined entirely to the plum tree<sup>97</sup>. The production itself was a resinous incrustation secreted by the *lac* insect (*Iaccipir lacca*). The method of cultivation was simple, and consisted of infecting the plum tree with brood *lac*. There were two crops – the *kartiki* and *baisakhi*. For the former the trees were selected in the latter part of February; for the latter they were generally pruned in the second half of April<sup>98</sup>. When the crop was ready the resinous substance was scrapped off the branches and collected for the first refining process. This was carried out by malting the *lac* and passing it through melting bags. The bag was held at either end and twisted in opposite directions, so that the molten *lac* was squeezed out, and the impurities remained.<sup>99</sup>

There was no market for *lac* in the district. The crude *lac*, or stick *lac*, was sold mostly at Kotalpukur, Pakur and Barharwa in the Santal Parganas; and on a small scale in Murshidabad district, where it was further refined and sent to Calcutta for foreign export<sup>100</sup>. Of the various industries, which consumed *lac*, mention may be made of gramophone record industry, spirit, varnish and electric paint trade, wax manufacture, leather and rubber finishing, photographic work etc.<sup>101</sup>. During the period following the First World War, *lac* industry of Malda leaped into prominence. At that time, *lac* was sold for Rs.80 per *maund* that was ten times of the price in 1935. The value of total production of the district was as much as Rs.32 lakhs<sup>102</sup>. However, this boom period was, however, short lived. The *lac* industry of Malda begun to decline rapidly since the Second World War. In 1935 the value of total production stood as low as Rs.1 lakh only, the price being Rs.8 per *maund*<sup>103</sup>. In the census report of 1951, it was observed that the *lac* industry of Malda was in a danger of total extinction<sup>104</sup>. The same views was expressed by M. O. carter in 1935 as he observed, the present condition of the industry was due to two factors – adulteration, resulting from the crude form of production (and sometimes deliberately carried out) and the competition of synthetic products. The commonest form of deliberate adulteration was to mix sand, ashes or even sugar with the grain *lac* in the melting bag, thereby increasing the weight of the product. Crude packing and refining tended further to produce an article that was unreliable in quantity; and this coupled with the great fluctuation in prices, had increased the demand for synthetic resins at the expense of natural *lac*<sup>105</sup>.

## BRASS AND BELL-METAL INDUSTRIES

Malda was also known for its metal work<sup>106</sup>. Englishbazar, Nababganj, Kaligram, Majpara and Arapur were the chief centres of the brass and bell – metal industries in the district<sup>107</sup>. Brass and bell metal articles manufactured in the district had a fair sale in and outside Bengal. The main articles were water vessels like *gharas* and *kalsis*, dishes or *thalas* and *jambati*<sup>108</sup>. The braziers of Malda had a great reputation all over Bengal for their spoons, ladles and *dabars* for keeping betel vine. The district, in fact, used to supply the bulk of Bengal's demand of brass and bell-metal spoons and *dabars*<sup>109</sup>. The artisans were mostly Musiims<sup>110</sup>.

Brass and bell-metal works were the only indigenous manufacture, which had not suffered from foreign competition, because these products were not imported from abroad. The primary reason for absence of this competition seems to be the fact that bulk of these articles would involve high cost of transport and would, therefore, raise the supply-price of any foreign competitor<sup>111</sup>. The condition of artisans and workers in this manufacturing works of Malda was better than that of others employed in other branches of cottage industry<sup>112</sup>. The number of persons, Lambourn estimated, depended on this industry was about 2,161, of whom 653 were actual artisans<sup>113</sup>. In 1939 Englishbazar was estimated to produce about 840 *maunds* of brass articles valued at Rs.22,000; Arapur produced about 1,200 and 1,800 *maunds* of brass and bell-metal articles valued at Rs.36,000 and Rs.1,40,000 respectively. Majpara produced about 110 *maunds* of bell-metal articles valued at Rs.6,600. In 1939, there were 70 family factories at Englishbazar employing 200 Hindu workers; Arapur had 100 family factories employing

about 1,000 Muslim workers, Majpara about 16 family factories with almost equal of Hindu and Muslim workers<sup>114</sup>.

## MANGO

In the economic development of the district of Malda, the cultivation and trade of Mango played a very vital role. Malda, in fact, has long been famous for its mangoes. It is recorded that the Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan used to send armed guards for the trees, the fruits of which were reserved for his use<sup>115</sup>. Writing of Nawab Mir Jafar, the author of *Riyaz-us-Salatin* observed that the Nawab employed a superintendent of mango-supplies who was posted in the Chakla of Akbarnagar (in the west of Malda district) and he sent delicious mangoes from Malda, Kotwali, Husainpur, Akbarnagar and other places to the Nawab<sup>116</sup>. Buchanan Hamilton wrote in 1810, 'the mangoes of Malda have a high reputation, and may be considered as one of the finest fruits in the world. The produce of the mango trees, even in its present state, is one of the most valuable in this district, for it cannot be of less annual value on an average than Rs. 4,50,000'<sup>117</sup>.

Mango was extensively grown over the whole district, with the exception of the *barind* tract where the red alluvium was not suitable for its cultivation, and the *diara* strip along the Ganges, where the proportion of sand in the soil was excessive<sup>118</sup>. Englishbazar was by far the largest and best mango-growing thana. The area covered by mango gardens was 15 square miles, or one-sixth of the total area of the thana. The other centers of mango cultivation were Ratua, Sibganj, Kaliachak, Kharba, Malda, Harishchandrapur, Gomastapur and Bholahat. The most thickly grown area situated along the banks of the Mahananda and Kalindri rivers<sup>119</sup>. The total areas covered by

mango orchards were roughly estimated at 15,000 acres<sup>120</sup>. In 1958, 44,000 acres of land were used for the mango plantations.

The planting of a mango garden required initially a certain amount of labour and attention. There was, in fact, a saying in the district that the nurture of young mango plants was as difficult as that of children<sup>121</sup>. The ground was first ploughed up thoroughly, and sometimes had to be drained by excavating ditches round it. It then had to be fenced to prevent damage by cattle. Transplantation took place in July, when the rainfall was ample, and each plant had to be separately fenced with a circular wall of bamboo matting. The plants were arranged in straight rows at intervals of about 10 yards<sup>122</sup>. During the first year they required regular watering and constant attention, and up till the sixth year, when the young trees began to bear fruit, the ground had to be regularly weeded or dug up to keep it clear of undergrowth. During the first few years, it was possible to grow crops on the same land; but thereafter the cultivation had to be stopped, in order that the trees might receive the full benefit of the soil. The initial cost of planting a mango garden was between Rs.40 and Rs.50 per acre. The rate for mango gardens, where separate rates prevailed, was generally Rs.6 per acre, which was distinctly higher than the average rate of rent for paddy land<sup>123</sup>. There were in the main two varieties of mango – the *guti* or ordinary mango grown from seed, and the *kalam*, which was grown from graftings. The latter was a superior quality, and fetched a higher price<sup>124</sup>. A good year of mango cultivation brought prosperity to a large section of the population. The owners of orchards made a handsome profit when prices were good, because once the trees had started bearing fruit, the cost of maintenance was negligible. The poor people also benefit, because there was a custom that windfalls were the property of the first comer. A good

season was of no small importance to the common people, as mangoes comprised half of their diet for about two months in the year<sup>125</sup>. They could also make a small income by selling various preparations such as *amchur*, which consisted of slices of green mango dried in the sun and *amsatwa*. It was made from the juice of ripe fruit, which had been pressed, spread out and solidified by the application of a drying agent. This preparation was exported in large quantities as far as Punjab and Madras. The mango trade was one of the most important in the district, and one, which had an important economic effect on the district<sup>126</sup>.

#### THE ACTIVITIES OF MANGO EXPORT COMMITTEE OF MALDA

Mangoes produced in Malda were exported chiefly to Eastern Bengal and Assam<sup>127</sup>. In 1948, the mango dealers of the district submitted a proposal to the District Magistrate for the formation of an association to securing facilities for exporting mango to the newly created East Pakistan and elsewhere. Asok Mitra, then the District Magistrate, saw in this proposal the opportunity to build up a local fund not only for the benefit of mango cultivation but also to undertake improvements of public institutions in the district<sup>128</sup>. Accordingly, in August 1948 a committee called the Mango Export Committee was formed of which the District Magistrate was made the president, the committee itself remaining purely non-official<sup>129</sup>.

It was decided that the district administration would endeavor to foster the export facilities for mango in recognition of which the Association of Mango Dealers would pay to the fund of the committee a voluntary contribution to the extent of one *anna* per basket of mangoes exported. In this way an amount of Rs.3,35,000 was collected by the Malda Mango Export Committee between

the years 1948 and 1952<sup>130</sup>. In 1949, the committee was renamed as Malda Mango Improvement Committee. The Committee decided to employ this fund for making grants to various public institutions according to their needs, and for keeping a part of this fund for the improvement of the mango industry<sup>131</sup>. In 1949, the Committee donated Rs.3,000 to the Jadavpur College of Engineering and Technology for carrying on research work on Malda mangoes<sup>132</sup>. The plans of the committee were:

- i) to start an industrial organization for manufacture of mango product.
- ii) to establish schools for vocational training including training in manufacture of mango products.
- ii) to make grants to public institutions<sup>133</sup>.

In 1948, the Committee made the following grants: District Hospital – Rs.2500; amenities for the police force of the district – Rs.1000; Barlow Girls' H.E. School – Rs.7000; Malda College – Rs.25000<sup>134</sup>. In 1949, a grant of Rs.15000 was made to Malda College and a grant of Rs.20000 was made to the Fruit Preservation Scheme. In addition, 9 H.E. Schools were helped with Rs.1000 or more. A sum of Rs.1000 was paid to the Association for the prevention of blindness in West Bengal<sup>135</sup>.

In 1950 and 1951, a sum of Rs.33500 was paid to the Fruit Preservation Scheme and a sum of Rs.28500 to the Malda College. There were 21 other recipients, mainly H. E. Schools, which received grants varying from Rs.1450 to Rs.2450. In addition, grants of Rs.1000 each were made for special purposes to the District Board, to Englishbazar Municipality and to the

B.R.Sen Public Library<sup>136</sup>. In 1952 Rs.30,000 was donated to the Malda College and Rs.20,000 to the Fruit Preservation Scheme. Grants varying from Rs.1,250 to Rs.2,000 were made to eleven H.E.Schools. A special grant of Rs.2,000 was made to the Old Malda Municipality and another special grant of Rs.1,000 to the District Board<sup>137</sup>.

## TRADE AND COMMERCE

The trade of the district of Malda was facilitated by its command over the trade routes up and down the Ganges and those linking the chief cities of Bengal. Indeed, Malda was well placed for both internal and external trade due to the great river highways of the district, their tributaries and canals. The biggest trade of the district was the mango trade. Perhaps a more profitable trade than mango in Malda district was silk<sup>138</sup>. The principal exports were raw silk and cocoons, mangoes, rice, pulses, oilseeds, brass and bell-metal utensils and jute, while imports were cotton piece goods, cotton yarn, sugar, salt, metals, timber and various articles of European manufacture<sup>139</sup>. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Indigo also occupied an important place in the export trade of the district<sup>140</sup>.

## SPREAD OF TRANSPORT NETWORK

From the earliest time rivers have been the most important means of communication in Malda on which the roads have converged. From November to July, however, nearly all parts of the district were accessible by bullock carts over a network of fair-weather tracks. In the rainy season, all the roads became largely impassable for wheeled traffic and communications were mostly by boat or with pack bullocks and ponies<sup>141</sup>.

## RIVER TRANSPORT

Until the introduction of railway in 1909, the export trade of Malda district was carried through the waterway and the country-boats and in some cases, the steamers were the only conveyance. Commodities were brought from the villages to the trading marts and there-from to the river ports by carts from where they would be exported to various places<sup>142</sup>. Parts of the district were well provided with river communications. The four main rivers – the Ganges, Mahananda, Kalindri and Purnabhaha were navigable throughout year for boats up to 100 *maunds*. Three others, namely, the Tangan, Pagla and Bhagirathi were navigable only during the rainy season for boats up to 50 *maunds*<sup>143</sup>.

The country boats were also used for carrying intra-district as well as inter-district passenger and goods traffic at different public *ferries* within Malda under the management of the local Boards, the District Boards and the government<sup>144</sup>. The District Board maintained a large number of *ferries* on its roads and there were a number of zamindari *ferries* as well. The larger *ferries* of Nababganj, Old Malda and Rajmahal were owned by the government<sup>145</sup>.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, a line of steamboats ran throughout the year from Lalgola in Murshidabad to Nimasarai opposite Old Malda up the Mahananda in connection with the Ganges Steamer Service and the Eastern Bengal Railway Service. A steam ferry used to ply from Manikchak across the Ganges to Rajmahal, which in the rainy season became a ferry service from Rajmahal to Englishbazar via the Kalindri<sup>146</sup>. Indeed, it was the Ganges river system, which shaped the human geography and economic life of the district of Malda.

## ROAD TRANSPORT

The chief road was from opposite Nababganj through Sibganj, Gaur, Englishbazar, crossing the Mahananda at Malda and thence to Dinajpur. It connected with the *diara* from Kaliachak and Panchanandapur and with Gomastapur from Kansat. Outside Englishbazar it connected with what was, till the opening of the railway in 1909, the most important road in the district that from Englishbazar to Manikchak, called the Rajmahal road. Opposite Old Malda the road connected with a road running from that point through the Rajmahal road and connecting with the latter near Amriti; at Gajol it crossed a road which connected to the west across the Mahananda with the Ratua-Chanchal road at Samsi, and to the east across the Tangan at Bamongola, to Pakuahat, branching thence north to the Dinajpur district, and south via Habibpur to Aiho on the Mahananda<sup>147</sup>. The road from Murshidabad to Darjeeling via Dinajpur passed for a short distance through the district, connecting to the west with the marts of Nababganj, Gomastapur and Rohanpur on the Mahananda. From the Rajmahal road at Amriti a road crossed the Kalindri to Ratua and thence by a cold weather track across the Tal to Samsi, Chanchal, Kharba, to Churaman in Dinajpur in the east and to the Purnia border in the west. These roads were for the most part embanked<sup>148</sup>.

Therefore, it may be stated that pre-rail transport of Malda was in fact weak and insufficient. Apart from the natural advantages of water transport in a riverine region, the dilapidated state of the roads account for heavy dependence on boats for cargo carrying.

Panchanan Majumdar, a noted literati of the contemporary Malda, has left a graphic account of the condition of roads in the district in the beginning of the twentieth century: 'I came to Malda in February 1901. It was pre-railway time. The usual route was via Rajmahal, which was a railway terminus. One wishing to come to Malda from outside had to detrain at Rajmahal and cross the Ganges there. It took less than hour to cross the Ganges in a boat. On reaching the Malda side of the river passengers used to get down on a vast tract of land known as the Manikchak *diara*. A large number of bullock carts would remain in waiting in diara tract for the purpose of carrying passengers to the town of Englishbazar and other places. The usual fare for a bullock cart carrying passengers from Manikchak *diara* to Englishbazar town varied from Rs.1 – 8 to Rs.2. On leaving the Manikchak *diara* the cart would proceed in a northeastern direction and would pass through *diara* tracts and the village of Manikchak, and would halt at the village of Enayetpur situated at a distance of 15 miles from the town of Englishbazar. There was a *dhap* or sheet of water at Enayetpur where the passengers would bathe and prepare their midday meal in some shop. There were a number of such shops at Enayetpur where rice, *dal*, *ghee* and other eatables and fuel were sold. People prepared their midday meal and took it and after a short rest, the bullock carts started again and would reach Englishbazar, covering a distance of 15 miles at a stretch, in the course of about 6 / 7 hours. A good bullock cart would reach Englishbazar from Manikchak diara in about ten hours. Between Manikchak and Englishbazar the road passed among others through the villages of Mohona, Chowki, Nathinagar, Milki and Amriti. There was *dhap* at Amriti, the road bifurcated there, and one branch went towards Kotwali. The distance between Rajmahal and Englishbazar was generally taken to be 24 miles. There was a

man named Ganesh Gonri living at Baluchar who had several sons who possessed bullock carts. During the rainy season, a steamer plied from Rajmahal to Englishbazar. It was run by Sew Sahay Singh and after him by his nephew Rai Bahadur Chandraketu Narain Singh, the lessee of the Rajmahal Ferry under the Malda District Board. They enjoyed a subsidy from the Malda District Board for the purpose. The steamer started from Rajmahal and went up the river Ganges for some distance and it entered the Kalindri, and running along the Kalindri throughout its whole course entered the Mahananda at Old Malda and then reached the town of Englishbazar. On its way it stopped at Nurpur, Araidanga, Kotwali and other places'<sup>149</sup>.

## INTRODUCTION OF RAILWAYS

Introduction of railways in Malda in 1909 was an important landmark in the mode of transport and communication of the district. It had a great impact on the trade and commerce of the district as well. India's railway transport started in 1853 and expanded so rapidly that by 1910 it became the fourth largest in the world<sup>150</sup>. Once in operation, the railways offered substantial advantages over more traditional modes of transport such as pack-bullocks, bullock carts, camels, boats and human carriers. Not only were railways more readily available, faster and more reliable, they also provided substantial reductions in cost per ton kilometer. By reducing transport costs railways brought significant economic benefits to India<sup>151</sup>.

Bengal entered the railway era in 1854 with the East Indian Railway connecting Howrah and Hoogly<sup>152</sup>. In 1872, there were less than 900 miles of railway in the whole of Bengal. During the next nine years 407 miles were constructed. The total length of the railway lines completed during the decade

1881-91 was 1051 miles. By 1901, no less than 1614 miles of railway were opened linking up important trade centres with the existing railway system<sup>153</sup>.

The district of Malda came within the purview of the railway transport system in 1909 when the Katihar-Godagari meter gauge railway was opened<sup>154</sup>. From the south it runs northwards as far as Singhabad, then westward to Nimasarai, the station for Old Malda, and finally northwest into Purnia district. The length of the line within the district was seventy-five miles<sup>155</sup>. In 1929, the construction of the Chapai Nababganj – Abdulpur broad gauge section was completed. Amanura, the southernmost station in the district, was made the junction for the new line. Its length within the district was 9 miles.

Table 3.2 Railways in Malda in 1951

Name of Railway line and station	Distance from Old Malda (in miles)
Singabad	16
Bulbulchandi	10
Muchia	8
Malda Court	4
Old Malda	--
Adina	4
Eklakhi	8
Kumarganj	12

Samsi	18
Bhaluka Road	24
Harishchandrapur	30
Kumedpur	35

Source: Asok Mitra ed., Malda Census 1951, Government of India Press, Calcutta, 1954, P. 152

#### TRADE ROUTES AND STRUCTURE OF THE MARKETS: HATS, BAZAARS, FAIRS ETC.

The main trade of the district followed two routes: the railway and the rivers. M. O. Carter mentioned that until the construction of the Chapai-Nababganj-Abdulpur railway line in 1929, the produce from the Barind region was transported chiefly by boat and steamer; and that from the remainder of the district chiefly by rail<sup>156</sup>. Information is not available to show what was the position after the opening of the new railway line. But it was probable that the main export trade in rice and paddy by steamer up to the Ganges to Bihar had been largely unaffected, while that of jute and other commodities to other parts of Bengal had been partially captured by the railway<sup>157</sup>.

The most significant change in the markets during our period of study was their rapid growth in comparison to the earlier period. It reflected the changing nature of the demand for the articles of consumption as well as a pressing need for converting every bit of surplus into cash. The other notable change in

this regard was the penetration and control of traders and trading capital in the process of distribution. Apart from these, the basic structure of markets remained simple in nature.

Buchanan Hamilton, writing in 1810, mentioned that nearly all commercial transactions were carried on in market places called *hats*. Hats were used to meet once or twice a week where both wholesale and retail trade was conducted. There were also provisions of shops and *golas* in some of these markets. The wholesale trade consisted mostly of articles like rice, sugar and molasses, extracted of sugar cane, oil and tobacco. The retailers were usually vegetable sellers, potters, blacksmiths, weavers of cotton cloths and *gurwalas* or retailers in extract of sugarcane<sup>158</sup>. In the *hat*, the peasant sold his product directly to the consumers as well as to intermediaries. In Bengal, in the articulation of simple peasant marketing at the *hat* level with the superior market places, crucial roles were played by the itinerant trader (*phirwala*), the village based trader who might also have been a wealthy farmer (*bepari*), and the buyer-up and merchants' agent (*paikar*)<sup>159</sup>. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have this graphic description: at the *hats* - "all those from the neighbourhood who wish to buy or sell, assemble and dispose of their commodities by retail. The farmer brings the produce of his lands, the artist that of his workshop, and the fisherman that of his snares. Numerous small traders who attend to buy up goods for exportation, to sell those which have been imported, or to act as intermediate agents between the producer and the consumer... For this purpose is reserved a space of ground, divided by narrow paths into plots like the parterres of an old garden, and each plot is occupied by two or three venders, while the buyers walk about in the path"<sup>160</sup>.

A larger volume of trade in towns and large villages in the district led to the growth of a regular daily *bazaar* with traders' permanent establishments selling provisions and daily necessities. At the level above that was the mart (*ganj*) and river mart (*bandar*) containing warehouses (*golas, arats*) of wholesale dealers<sup>161</sup>.

During our period of study, the basic structure of the market underwent very little changes. From the account of W. W. Hunter in 1876, it is evident that *hats* were still the most popular place for marketing transactions. These were mostly held once or twice a week and were the meeting ground for the primary producer and the intermediary or *bepari* beside the buyers<sup>162</sup>. Attendance at these *hats* depended on the importance of the locality. A well-frequented *hat*, for example the Sunday *hat* at Balia-Nababganj in Old Malda, used to be visited about 6,000 to 8,000 people<sup>163</sup>. Villagers from a distance of 25 miles used to visit this *hat* with their produce and transactions used to be carried on in grain, vegetables, fish, betel nut and coarse homespun cotton cloth. Several big paddy dealers attended the *hat* and the annual sale of paddy and rice together amounted to about 35,000 *maunds*<sup>164</sup>. This is one example of an interior *hat* with a wide range of articles for transaction.

The chief silk mart in the district was Amaniganj-*hat* where buyers from the neighbouring districts of Rajshahi and Murshidabad used to come and make their purchases. Tuesday was the usual *hat* day and on that day, silk was often sold, according to the collector's estimate to the value of from Rs.20,000 to Rs.50,000<sup>165</sup>. In the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Amaniganj *hat* became the chief centers for silk trade and virtually controlled the prices of silk in the whole district. During this time, the daily turnover at Amaniganj *hat* amounted to a lakh of rupees<sup>166</sup>. Minor silk markets were also held at

Bholahat and Kasimpur<sup>167</sup>. Bholahat itself was a large centre of silk reeling on the right bank of the Mahananda. It was a calling station of the Lalgola Steamer Service and was a considerable centre of general trade for the surrounding villages<sup>168</sup>. Bholahat began to lose its importance as a trade centre after the introduction of railway in the district in 1909<sup>169</sup>. Because of the partition of Bengal in 1947, Bholahat went to East Pakistan.

One of the principal markets, which dealt with the river-borne trade, was Meha *hat* on the Kalindri in Harishchandrapur p.s. Extensive trade was carried on in paddy, pulses and jute, which were exported entirely by boat. Much of these articles transported to Dhulian in Murshidabad district<sup>170</sup>. Another important trading centre in the district was Aiho situating on the junction of the Mahananda and Tangan rivers. In pre-partition times, it used to be an important centre commanding the trade of both rivers<sup>171</sup>. At Aiho, the usual *hat* day was Sunday. The chief items of trade were rice and paddy transported by bullock-carts from the Barind and by boat down the Tangan river<sup>172</sup>.

Of the market where produce was carried chiefly by the railway, the most important was the Samsi *hat*, which was held on Thursdays. The principal exports were jute, pulses and paddy and the total export of these commodities was the largest of any market in the district. The amount of pulses exported, consisting chiefly of *kalai* and gram, was remarkable. *Gur* (molasses) was another product, which was largely dealt in<sup>173</sup>. The dealers made their purchase on *hat* days took their consignments by train. The rise of Samsi as an important trade centre in the district began after the introduction of railway in 1909. In the 1930s, Samsi was rapidly becoming a small town near the railway station. At that time, a large number of Marwari traders who were

engaged in business and moneylending, inhabited Samsi.<sup>174</sup> Samsi retained its importance as a trade centre also in post-partition days. During this time, Samsi emerged as the chief market for jute. The annual turnover of jute at this *hat* amounted to 1,00,000 *maunds*, pulses accounting for another 40,000 *maunds*<sup>175</sup>.

Further, up the railway line, the principal *hats* were Tulsihata, Malior and Mashaldaha. The commodities sold consisted chiefly of paddy, pulses and jute, and the biggest buyers were the Marwari traders. The produce was sent for export to Harishchandrapur and Bhaluka Road station<sup>176</sup>.

Apart from these, there were some other smaller but locally important *hat* in the *barind* region. At Pakuahat, there was a *hat* on Tuesday to which people come in from long distances. At Pakuahat the chief trade was that of cattle. There was also considerable trade in mustard seed and paddy, which was mostly taken for retail to Aiho. Cotton cloth, earthenware articles were also sold<sup>177</sup>. Twenty five thousand *maunds* of paddy and ten thousand heads of cattle were estimated to be sold at Pakuahat annually<sup>178</sup>. There was also a big *hat* at Gajol on Thursday. The staple article for business at Gajol was paddy; and cloth, pottery and other articles were sold<sup>179</sup>. The annual turnover of paddy at this *hat* amounted to 30,000 *maunds*<sup>180</sup>. Another large *hat* met at Nachole on Sundays. Rice and pulses were the principal agricultural products for business. There was also a cattle market; and agricultural implements, brass work and earthenware were sold<sup>181</sup>.

Apart from these *hats*, there was a larger volume of trade in some towns and large villages in the district. This led to the growth of a regular daily *bazar* with traders' permanent establishments selling provisions and daily

necessities<sup>182</sup>. Hunter mentioned that the most important seats of commerce in the district where trade was extensively carried on were Englishbazar, Old Malda, Rohanpur and Nababganj<sup>183</sup>. Lalbihari Majumdar, a local literati, mentioned in his *memoirs* that most of the trading houses were established around these market towns. The bulk of the exports containing foodstuffs, raw silk, cotton cloth, jute, mango and the imported goods, used to pass through these towns. The imports were often unloaded there and sold<sup>184</sup>. Some of these towns had built-in *golas* or warehouses thereby facilitating transactions in such articles as salt, seed, lac, grain mango etc., which involved storing. Since long distance trade was carried on via these port-towns, they grew in importance with resident businessmen, mainly Marwaris and Tilis combining trade with petty usury in and around the town<sup>185</sup>. In Prabhudayal Agarwal's *memoirs*, there are references to a hundred of shops near the Mahananda river in Old Malda town from where rice and paddy were supplied to different directions down the river<sup>186</sup>. Being an enterprising businessman, Prabhudayal Agarwal had himself established big warehouses on the bank of the Mahananda for the transaction of rice and jute<sup>187</sup>.

As already stated, Englishbazar was one of the important seats of commerce in the district. This headquarters town of Malda district was situated on the right bank of the Mahananda. Hunter observed that this town consisted of a series of trading villages, which lined the bank of the river for a considerable distance<sup>188</sup>. Being an open elevated site on the riverbank in a mulberry-growing region, it was chosen at an early date as the site of one of the English East India Company's silk factories. The French and the Dutch had also settlements at Englishbazar<sup>189</sup>. Stewart, in his *History of Bengal*, stated that there was an English factory in Malda as early as 1686<sup>190</sup>. In 1770, George

Henchman built the commercial residency and factory of the company at Englishbazar. The modern town gradually grew up around it as the business in silk attracted people to reside at Englishbazar<sup>191</sup>. Englishbazar controlled a number of waterways and was accessible almost throughout the year to boats coming from most parts of the district. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Englishbazar became one of the chief trading centres of Malda, supplying the district with provisions and other necessaries from all parts of Bengal<sup>192</sup>. If the pre-1857 period Englishbazar, along with Dacca, Luckipore, Baranagar and Khirapai, became the chief cotton weaving centers in Bengal<sup>193</sup>. That Englishbazar continued to flourish as an important trading centers of the district in the beginning of the twentieth century is evident from the *memoirs* of two contemporary local man of influence, one was a businessman and the other a local literati. At that time, the principal trade in the town was in silk, mangoes, jute and cotton piece goods and the town had a considerable population of weavers<sup>194</sup>. The importance of Englishbazar was further increased after the introduction of railway in the district in 1909. The railway station (Malda Court Station) was set up on the opposite side of the Mahananda River and the town was a calling station for the railway steamer service. All these factors combined to help Englishbazar to become as one of the chief market towns not only in the district but also in Bengal as a whole<sup>195</sup>.

Another important market town in the district was Old Malda, which was situated on the left bank of the Mahananda at its confluence with the Kalindri. Old Malda was the most important town in the district prior to the coming of the British in 1680. It had an admirable position for river traffic, and probably rose to prosperity as the port of Pandua<sup>196</sup>. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was a thriving centre of cotton and silk manufactures

and the French and Dutch had factories there as well as the English. A Dutch report on (Old) Malda states that textiles worth Rs.0.8 to 1 million were sold in the district for export to places like Pegu, Agra, Surat, Persia etc.<sup>197</sup>. A similar report by Richards Edwards of the English East India Company in 1676 states that the 'chief trade' in the district was carried on by the 'factors of Agra, Gujarat and Beneres merchants who yearly send them 15 to 25 Patella (a large flat-bottomed boat) whose lading consists of *cossaes*, *mulmuls*, .....*mundils* and *elaches* (All piece-goods produced in Malda) of all sorts valued at about Rs. 1 lakh each patella and about the half of that amount by landing said goods and raw silk'<sup>198</sup>.

The prosperity of Old Malda, however, began to wane with the rise of Englishbazar. The English factory was transferred to Englishbazar in 1770 and by the time the district of Malda came into existence, its decline had almost become complete<sup>199</sup>. The town of Old Malda had lost its glory of a thriving centre of business in silk and cotton piece goods. In the second decade of the twentieth century, it was remained only as a distributing centre of manufactured goods of Barind and did a large export trade in rice and jute<sup>200</sup>.

The other chief market town was Nababganj on the east bank of the Mahananda in the south of the district. Buchanan Hamilton noticed ten market places at Nababganj from where a considerable quantity of goods, mainly rice, was exported<sup>201</sup>. In the 1870s Nababganj was a calling station of the Lalgola Steamer Service and a great centre of the rice traffic from Dinajpur and Rajshahi to the *diara* tracts. The town was noted locally for its bell metal and brass-ware<sup>202</sup>. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Nababganj was known as Barogharia-Nababganj. Baragharia, adjacent to Nababganj, was an

important centre of silk weaving and jute cultivation. Later with the decline of silk business of Barogharia, Nababganj became a separate entity<sup>203</sup>.

Nababganj was, M. O. Carter stated, a large market for winter rice, which was dispatched by cart from all over the Barind to the north and east of the town. Carts even come in from the Barind areas of Dinajpur and Rajshahi. A large quantity of jute from the southern part of the district – Shibganj, Kaliachak and Nababganj *thanas* – was marketed at Nababganj<sup>204</sup>. Mangoes were another important export-item of Nababganj. Barogharia, Kansat and Rohanpur of Nababganj were the chief centres for export of mangoes. Mangoes were exported from Nababganj to Khulna, Faridpur, Dacca, and Mymensingh on riverine routes<sup>205</sup>. Hunter mentioned Nababganj as the centre for manufacture of brass and bell-metal articles<sup>206</sup>. K. M. Mullick has pointed out that the best brass articles in the district were produced at Nababganj<sup>207</sup>. In the late nineteenth century, brassware valued at Rs. 20,000 was manufactured annually at Nababganj<sup>208</sup>. The brass articles of Nababganj were continued to be exported in considerable quantity to various parts of Bengal and to Agra and Benares in the third decade of the twentieth century as well<sup>209</sup>.

Apart from these three trading centres, the Rohanpur market was one of the biggest in the district and one of the biggest centres for the export of rice and paddy<sup>210</sup>. Rohanpur was situated thirty miles south of Englishbazar on the Punarbhaba just above its junction with the Mahananda. It was a place of considerable trade in the rice season and large quantities of rice passed through it, from Dinajpur to *diara* tracts. It was well served for communications being a station on the Katihar-Godagari line and a calling station of the Lalgola Steamer Service<sup>211</sup>. Hundreds of carts, loaded with paddy and rice used to come at Rohanpur market from distances of twenty or thirty miles.

The rush was so great that the approaches to the market were often blocked. In addition to the cart traffic, boats laden with paddy came down the Purnabhaha, bringing the produce from the northeastern corner of the district and from parts of Dinajpur district<sup>211</sup>. From the memoirs of Prabhudayal Agarwall and Lalbihari Majumdar it is known that the intermediaries or the middlemen played an important role in the paddy / rice trade at Nababganj, Rohanpur, Old Malda and Aiho. The paddy merchants or the *aratdars* had a control over this trade. Many substantial peasants or *jotedars*, who were also agricultural-creditors, were engaged in this trade and dominated this field too. Even the range of local prices was controlled by them<sup>213</sup>. Though there was a railway station at Rohanpur the bulk of the paddy / rice trade was carried by river. The export of this produce was made partly by steamer and partly by boats to Dacca, Faridpur and to Rajmahal, Purnia and other Bihar districts<sup>214</sup>.

## FAIRS

Apart from the permanent *bazars* and weekly or bi-weekly *hats*, trade was also carried on in the district by means of a number of fairs. The internal trade of the district was carried on by the periodic fairs that were held in different parts of the district. Altogether 125 fairs were held annually in different parts of the district. Most of them were of local origin and usually connected with religious festivals<sup>215</sup>. All of these fairs provided various amusements for the people, with swings, dances, *jatra*, *alkap* and *gambhira*, to add to their commercial importance. Such *melas* provided the show places for the skill and talent of the manufacturers, who spent many months there. Transactions at these *melas* were carried on in various articles like brassware, furniture, toys,

clothes, utensils, spices etc. These *melas* were attended by a large number of people, the big ones being attended by thousands and the small ones by hundreds<sup>216</sup>.

The most important *mela* in the district was the one that was held at Ramkeli near Gour on the occasion of the *Jyaistha Sankranti* to commemorate the visit of Sri Chaitanya in 1509<sup>217</sup>. It lasted for about ten days and was the largest in Bengal. Vaishnavas from all over Bengal assembled at this *mela* and the attendance was between 20,000 and 30,000<sup>218</sup>. Manufactured articles from the neighbouring western districts as well as local manufactures were sold in large quantities. A large number of temporary shops were set up by shopkeepers to sell finished articles like Jangipur blankets from Murshidabad, cooking utensils, furniture and mats and various other things<sup>219</sup>. The business done was calculated at sums amounting to Rs.2,00,000<sup>220</sup>. The next in importance was the annual Urs festival at Pandua, which was held in the month of Rajab on the death anniversary of the Persian saint Jalaluddin Tebrezi. Muslims from various places of the district as also from places in Bihar and U.P. used to attend this *mela*. Several *melas* were also held on the banks of the Ganges and Bhagirathi rivers in connection with bathing ceremonies on certain Hindu festival days. These lasted for a day or two and were well attended. The principal one those held at Sadullapur and Kansat on the bank of the river Bhagirathi and at Mathurapur and Narayanpur on the bank of the Ganges<sup>221</sup>.

#### PATTERN OF TRADE: IMPORTS AND EXPORTS

Hunter in his account mentioned raw silk and cocoons, silk cloths, indigo, brass-metal, rice and other kinds of grain and pulses and fruits, especially

mango as the articles of export from the district<sup>222</sup>. Apart from these articles, later accounts of Lambourn and Carter mentions lac, jute, oilseeds as export-items of the district<sup>223</sup>. The principal imports in the district were cotton cloth and other cotton piece goods, kerosene oil, sugar, salt, metals, timber, spices and various articles of European manufacture<sup>224</sup>.

The chief commodities in export trade of the district were raw silk and silk cloth as well as cotton textile. The silk of Bengal had a flourishing trade both in and outside India. Indeed, "the fame of the silk fabrics of Malda and Murshidabad was not confined to the shops of India, but spread to the countries bordering on the Mediterranean"<sup>225</sup>. The testimony of Hunter to the effect that in 1577, a merchant of Malda, Sheik Bhik by name, sailed for Russia by the Persian Gulf with three ships laden with Maldahi silk cloths, fully substantiate the above view and evidently shows the size of the silk industry then existing in Malda<sup>226</sup>. Sushil Choudhury has consulted the material in both the Dutch and English archives and came to the conclusion that in the 1670s there was a thriving trade carried on by the Asian merchants in silk and textiles from Malda. Quoting a report by Richard Edwards of the English East India Company in 1676, Sushil Choudhury estimates the textile export of Asian merchants from Malda by riverine routes at 1.5 to 2.5 million and that by land at about Rs.0.75 to 1.25 million<sup>227</sup>.

The internal and inter-provincial market in Malda silk grew wider with time on, and on the eve of Plassey, it was most expanded. Malda and Murshidabad then exported large quantities of silk, raw and wrought, to the markets at Beneres, Mirzapur, Nagpur, Agra, Lahore, Multan, Surat, Ahmedabad, Chaul and other places in northern and western India and even to the ports of the Malabar and Coromandel. Raw silk exported to Surat, Ahmedabad and Chaul

was woven into various fabrics suited to the fashion of the inhabitants of the different regions of western and northwestern India<sup>228</sup>.

In the silk market of Malda the English Company had to face stiff competition from its Dutch and French rivals. The prices offered by the Dutch and French traders were often more than that of the English Company. The Company's men then resorted to unfair practices to eliminate the rival mercantile groups from the local market. A complain was lodged by the French from Chandernagore to Lord Cornwallis in 1787 against Mr. Udney, the chief of the English factory in Malda, who allegedly seized from their peons 'twenty one pieces of cloth that they were carrying to the French House of Commerce'. Sarkis Munassakar, an agent of the Armenian merchant in Malda, complained in 1787 to the Board of Trade that Mr. Udney forbade his *dalals* in collecting and purchasing cloths. Mr. Udney stationed his peons at the house of weavers and ordered that company's seal should be affixed on the cloths. In this way, he had collected 52 bales of cloths and 5,200 pieces for his personal trade<sup>229</sup>.

The period 1760 – 1790 witnessed a boom in the silk trade of Bengal as well as of Malda. During these years, the English Company was able by means of Bengal silk to compete with the imports into England from Turkey of raw and manufactured silk<sup>230</sup>. The Commercial Resident of Malda reported 1817 that the silk piece goods of Malda had an unprecedented demand in Europe. He further reported that in Malda the existing factories were enhanced, new filatures were added and a new silk station was established at Sahapur<sup>231</sup>. With the decline of competition from Turkey, that from France and Italy grew and the trade declined. Buchanan Hamilton in 1810 found it greatly depressed<sup>232</sup>. The subsequent course of the trade in the district was almost

complete diversion of the industry into the production of Khamru silk for the Indian market and filature and waste silk for the European market<sup>233</sup>.

In 1810, Buchanan Hamilton estimated the total value of Maldahi cloth exported annually was Rs.2,50,000. However, in the 1870s it had fallen to Rs.6000 only<sup>234</sup>. During this time, however, the manufacture of raw silk or silk trade was in a flourishing condition. The chief silk mart was Amaniganjhat, where buyers came from neighbouring districts of Murshidabad and Rajshahi. The value of transactions in silk in one hat day was estimated at lying between Rs.20,000 and Rs.50,000. The cocoons and the raw silk from the filatures owned by the local residents were chiefly exported to Murshidabad, while the European wound silk went straight to Calcutta on its way to France. The silk cloths found purchasers mostly in Calcutta and Benares<sup>235</sup>. In the 1950s, Malda provided raw silk and cocoons for the silk weavers of Murshidabad, Birbhum and Bankura. Almost the entire quantity of silk cocoons and raw silk produced in the district was exported<sup>236</sup>.

Apart from silk and cotton textiles, extensive trade was carried on in other items as well. Indigo was exported direct to Calcutta even in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>237</sup>. However, when Lambourn was writing the District Gazetteer in 1918, the cultivation of indigo was totally ceased in the district<sup>238</sup>. The trade in brass and bell metal work was mainly centred in Nababganj and Englishbazar. The articles turned out were exported all over the province, large quantities being sold at various annual fairs in the Rajshahi Division<sup>239</sup>.

#### MARKETING MECHANISM AND TRADE IN PADDY / RICE.

The most important centres of commerce for foodstuff as it has already been stated, were Englishbazar, Old Malda, Rohanpur and Nababganj<sup>240</sup>. Rice was

the principal food crop of the people of Malda district. It was also one of the main trading commodities of the district. Paddy / rice were traditionally brought and sold in the village's *hats* and rice markets of the district mentioned above. It was exported to Calcutta and other places from the rice markets of the district<sup>241</sup>.

However, as the rice mills started operation in Calcutta from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the export of Dhenki – husked rice diminished largely and paddy began to move towards metropolitan rice mills from different district markets of Bengal<sup>242</sup>. The main centres of retail trade were the *hats*. The cultivators brought the produce at the nearest village hats where it was sold to village merchants or *paikars*, or *beparis* (primary collectors). The *beparis* acted on their own and sometimes as agents of the *aratdars* (wholesale traders). They brought the commodity to the big trading centres where *aratdars* had their establishments. Sometimes the cultivators brought their crop directly to *aratdars* with a view to getting more prices. In this stage the recognized broker or *dalal* acted as an *aratdar*<sup>243</sup>.

In this market-structure, the common *raiyyats* had little scope to operate in the open market. The middlemen in the existing marketing organization were indispensable to the growers and the wholesale merchants. The cultivators could scarcely bring their small amount of surplus paddy / rice to the distant centres of trade. Consequently, intermediaries like *beparis* and *aratdars* emerged in the paddy / rice trade of the district as well as of Bengal who deprived cultivators of a fair price for their crops.<sup>244</sup>

During our period of study, the trade in rice in Malda was remarkably expanded.<sup>245</sup> Numerous developments were stimulating the internal and

external trade in rice. The increasing size of the population was one. There was a steady influx of the *santal* people from adjacent Rajmahal into Malda after 1880. They were employed by the zamindars of *barind* to clean the *jungle* land made it cultivable. In Malda, the population growth was very rapid after 1901 as illustrated by the following table:

Table 3.3 Variation of population in Malda during 1901 – 1951

Year	Population	Variation	Net variation 1901 - 1951
1901	603,649		----
1911	698,547	+ 94,898	----
1921	686,174	- 12,373	----
1931	720,440	+ 34,266	----
1941	844,315	+123,875	----
1951	937,580	+ 93,265	+ 333,931

Source: A. Mitra ed. census 1951, op.cit., p. A2

A larger grain supply was thus necessary to feed this growing urban and rural population. Before the introduction of railway in the district in 1909, most of the surplus rice, which used to be exported, was moved by boats along the rivers<sup>246</sup>. Concerning the channels along which trade was carried on in the district in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the collector thus remarked:

'The district possesses so great advantages of water communication, that the grain and commercial traffic is carried on entirely by boats'<sup>247</sup>. It was estimated that the surplus *aman* rice that was exported from the district in 1876 was not less than 250,000 *maunds*. Paddy / rice were exported mainly to Bihar, North Western Provinces and to Calcutta<sup>248</sup>. The traffic that passed up and down the Ganges was registered at Sahebganj, and the goods consigned to and from Calcutta were registered at Nadia for the Jalangi route. The Sahebganj register gives the total quantity of rice dispatched up the Ganges from both Malda and Dinajpur as 1,628,794 *maunds* or 59,625 tons in 1872, and as 1,538,898 *maunds* or 56,334 tons in 1873. The detailed return shows that Rohanpur on the Purnabhaha had the most extensive traffic in up country rice of all the Malda towns. In 1873, its export reached 407,489 *maunds* or 14,917 tons. The Calcutta trade of Malda consisted chiefly of the export of rice and the import of salt. In 1873, 53,000 *maunds* or 1,940 tons of rice were registered at Nadia as consigned from Malda to Calcutta, along the Jalangi route<sup>249</sup>.

The introduction and extension of railways in the district after 1909 and the resultant improvement in communication had a big role in the development of the Malda rice trade<sup>250</sup>. However, this situation did not last long. In the middle of 1920s a new development took place that had a direct impact on the Malda rice trade as well as Bengal. Bengal rice began to face increased competition from Burma rice, in both the Bengal market and the Indian market<sup>251</sup>. Bengal rice gradually lost its traditional markets in other parts of India to the rice from Burma, and the important rice-growing countries like Thailand and Indo-china. On the other hand, Burma rice increasingly intruded into the local market<sup>252</sup>. This situation was likely to have a critical influence on the rice trade of Malda

as shown by M. O. Carter in the mid-1930s<sup>253</sup>. The Great Depression of 1930 only aggravated the condition. During this period, the amount of export of paddy / rice from Malda underwent a dramatic decline. The Eastern Bengal Railway and the India General Navigation and Railway Company Limited supplied the following figures of exports of paddy, rice and other principal commodities from Malda:

**Table 3.4 Goods carried by Eastern Bengal Railway, 1930-31**

Goods	Weight (in maunds)
Paddy	19,793
Rice	37,644
Pulse and grain	105,489
Jute	197,694
Oil seeds	36,742
Sugar	3,432
All Goods	499,644

Source: M.O.Carter, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928- 1935, op.cit., p. 18

However, even in 1930-31 the amount of export of rice by river was greater than that of railway. The following table would illustrate this:

Table 3.5 Goods carried by the Indian General Navigation and Railway Company Limited, 1930-31

Goods	Weight (in <i>maunds</i> )
Paddy	2,240
Rice	41,364
Seeds	22,338
Jute	11,790
Mangoes	94
Tobacco	4,885

Source: M.O.Carter, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928- 1935, op.cit., p. 18

This extensive rice trade of Malda suffered a setback in the 1940s. First, the Famine of 1943 dealt a severe blow to the marketing mechanism and trade in rice / paddy. Beside silk, mangoes and paddy / rice, the chief exports from the district were lac, pulses, jute, oilseeds, *gur* or molasses, *san* or hemp, vegetables, wheat and to a small extent, tobacco<sup>254</sup>. Lac used to be exported to Dhulian in the Murshidabad district. *San* or hemp used to be exported to Chittagong and Calcutta. Vegetables were exported to Rajshahi and Murshidabad. Tamarind and tree cotton (*Simul tula*) were exported to Calcutta. Jute, wheat, pulses and oilseeds used to be exported to Rajmahal and Calcutta, some amount of wheat, pulses and oilseeds being also exported to Dhulian<sup>255</sup>.

The exports from the district, Hunter informs, exceeded the imports considerably in value, but instead of a steady accumulation profits used to be remitted away from the district by the traders hailing from Bihar and North-west Provinces<sup>256</sup>. The articles imported, Hunter states, consisted of cotton cloths, jute, coconuts, betel nuts, paper, *ghee*, oil, sal wood, salt, suger, ginger, spices of all kinds and pepper<sup>257</sup>. Apart from these, Lambourn included kerosene oil, metals, corrugated iron in the list of imported articles.<sup>258</sup> M. O. Carter in his Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Malda 1928-35 mentions that the chief imports were salt, cotton clothes and other piecegoods<sup>259</sup>.

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19. Silk reeled according to the European method was known as filature silk, that according to the native method was known as Khamru. The difference were, that in filature silk evenness of size throughout the skein, elasticity of thread, colour and appearance, are looked for, while in khamru reeling so much importance was not attach to these qualities. The result was that from a maund of cocoons which would produce two to three seers of filature silk, nearly half a seer more of khamru could be reeled – see G. E. Lambourn, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Malda, Calcutta, 1918*, p. 67
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33. Made out of untwisted silk threads and used as ordinary *saris* and gown pieces.
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## CHAPTER FOUR

### EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS 1905 – 1953: CASE STUDIES OF THE SANTALS AND THE RAJBANSIS

Caste and caste mobility in Bengal has become a popular subject of research for modern historians and sociologists who study the problem from many angles<sup>1</sup>. Social mobility in various degrees and forms has been present in Bengal's social life since pre-colonial times, as Hitesranjan Sanyal has shown in his book. Indeed, he has argued that the caste system was able to survive for such a long time because of this inner dynamism or ability to accommodate upward social mobility and thereby absorb tensions from below<sup>2</sup>. However, though the avenue for mobility was open, the scope was very limited in pre-colonial times. A process of change is supposed to have set in with the coming of the British. Colonial rule released certain forces, which directly and indirectly widened this scope. The opening of various job opportunities, emergence of a new working culture and urban life, growth of facilities for modern education gave the traditional lower castes new opportunities to be at par with the upper castes<sup>3</sup>. A new impetus was thus provided for mobilization along caste lines in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal as in the rest of India.

In this historical backdrop, the present section is an attempt to present a systematic analytical history of the *santal* social mobility movement and Rajbansi caste movement in the first half of the twentieth century in the district of Malda.

## THE SANTAL SOCIETY

The community life of the *santals* was centered in the village and so was organized as to make common action inevitable in social, economic and religious affairs. The village was known as *santalpara*<sup>4</sup>. The houses were clean and well constructed with solid walls of clay. The social system was under the direction of a village headman, called *manjhis*. His duty was to administer the rights, rules and ceremonies of the *santal* village community. No public sacrifice, no festival, and no ceremony, such as a marriage- in short, nothing of a public character- can be properly done without the participation of *manjhi*<sup>5</sup>. No administrative job has been assigned to the *manjhi* in Barind. Unlike the *manjhis* in the Santal Parganas, he does not collect rents etc., nor does he deal with the civil authorities. In the Barind, the Majistrate of the district does not appoint the *manjhi*. His office was normally hereditary, but if the successor of a *manjhi* incurred the displeasure of his co-villagers, another replaced him. The ordinary duties of the *manjhi* were to control his people and punish by fines or other means for breaches of social customs. When there were disputes between different *santal* villages, their *manjhissat* together as a tribunal<sup>6</sup>.

In his official capacity, a deputy headman called *paranik* or *paramanik* assisted the *manjhi*. He worked as an advisor and as acting headman when the *manjhi* was ill or away. Next in importance was the *jogmanjhi* who may be called a kind of 'Censors of Morals'<sup>7</sup>. The *jogmanjhi* had an assistant called *jog-paramanik* who officiated when he was absent. Another village official was the *gorait* who acted as the *manjhi*'s orderly, called the villagers together at his command, and collected sacrificial fowls for the village sacrifices. Each

village had its own priests called the *naiki* who perform all the sacrifices to the aboriginal deities<sup>8</sup>.

Unlike the Hindu society, the *santals* recognized the necessity of combining the temporal and spiritual leadership in one individual at the apex. At the village, the *manjhi* is the temporal leader. Though he has some religious functions to perform, viz. worship of the *manjhi haram* situated invariably opposite to his house, the religious functions of the community are conducted by the *naike*. In the field of rituals, the *naike* is in no way dependent on the *manjhi*. Thus, it is very clear that the santal community had two strains of leadership<sup>9</sup>. The community gods are placed at the *Jaher than* (place of worship) outside the village boundary and the *naike* and his assistant perform religious rites on behalf of the village community there as well as in the village<sup>10</sup>.

Along with kinship ties, clan organization and the well-knit village system, another factor, which served to cement the solidarity of the tribe, was *raska* or pleasure in *santali*<sup>11</sup>. Their conception of good life was "one with ample scope for and indulgence in pleasure, while maintaining social obligations to separate groups"<sup>12</sup>. The content to pleasure was dancing, singing, eating, festivity, playing etc. It constituted the dominant form of socialization and the chief expression of communal solidarity<sup>13</sup>.

## THE SATYAM SHIBAM MOVEMENT

As has already been stated, *santals* had begun to pour into Malda from the Santal Parganas in about 1871<sup>14</sup>. Consequently, local zamindars employed them for clearing of *jungle* lands of Barind. Stiff red clay of Barind was another consideration, which needed sturdy *santal* peasants for cultivation. They were

settled in Barind at nominal rents and often with occupancy status to extend cultivation<sup>15</sup>. In Barind, the *santals* lived in close proximity with Hindus, retaining the core of their tribal identity against odds.

The caste Hindus, in general, were averting to any kind of social intercourse with the *santals*. The aversion, however, seldom caused overt hostilities between Hindus and *santals*. The Hindus were careful not to antagonize the *santals*, believed to be 'powerful in witchcraft'.<sup>16</sup> A more important reason perhaps was the demonstration of the *santal* skill as waste reclaimers.

The *santals* were obviously keen to adjust themselves to the pattern of settled agricultural life. This changed pattern of life again had generated a stress in the society and a very high form of anxiety had been prevailing among them in view of the perceived threat from the environment. In fact, the alienation of land had been very extensive. In most cases, vast areas of land had been transferred from the *santal* agriculturists to Hindu zamindars, moneylenders and traders. Growing alien domination constituted a decisive influence on *santal* society. The *santal's* perspective, as Tanika Sarkar observes, on the process of alienation and dispossession was ambivalent, made up of more than anger against the non-*santaldiku* who robbed his land. It included a harsh self-contempt for losing out so thoroughly<sup>17</sup>. In the *santal* folklore, the *santals* often associated with small and weak animals. Nevertheless, the weak animals in the end overpower bigger and dangerous beasts through a mix of cunning and tricks<sup>18</sup>. The *dikus*, as folk tale imagined, led foolish *santals* to their ruin with gestures of friendship and offers of drink. The anger against the *diku* merges with anger against the self-destructive gullibility of the *santa* who allowed him to be tricked<sup>19</sup>.

This negative self-image often drove the *adivasis* to seek out the ways of the very *dikus* whom they bitterly blamed for their troubles. The perception that a structural insufficiency making the *adivasis* vulnerable in changing times led them to initiate movements to lift the members up towards the custom of the dominant society by emulating them. Attempts were thus made to revise tribal custom through waves of conversion to Christianity or Hinduism. Out of this train of thought emerged the Safa Hor (pure men) movement in the Santal Parganas under the leadership of Bhagirath Manjhi and Satyam Shibam movement in the Barind region of Malda under the leadership of Jitu and Arjun Santal.

The eventual rise of the Satyam Shibam sect in Barind in Malda may be traced to the Safa Hor movement of Santal Parganas. The Safa Hor movement was launched, largely inducting Hindu ideas of pollution and purifications. In 1871, one Bhagirath Manjhi of Godda Subdivision announced that he would restore the Golden Age to the *santals* if they returned to the worship of one God and cleaned themselves of their sins. It was proclaimed that their present oppression was a divine punishment for abandoning the worship of God and for venerating the spirits<sup>20</sup>. Deliverance could come only through a radical change of heart. It would bring back the Golden Age when the *santals* had been the undisputed masters of their land. Then they had worshiped God alone and no evil spirits<sup>21</sup>. Bhagirath exhorted his fellow tribesmen to abstain from eating pork and fowl's meat and from drinking liquor. The *santal* should also cease to worship Marang Buru (their chief spirit) and venerate only Thakur, the Supreme Deity. He instructed the *santals* to take bath before cooking their food, and not to pollute the Burma rice with meat of fowls and pigs. The new norms of behaviour which Bhagirath sought

to impose on the *santals* certainly reflected Hindu notions of purity and pollution. Bhagirath's teaching, however, had also a political slant. He proclaimed that 'the land belonged by right to the *santal* and that no Government could demand taxes from them'<sup>22</sup>.

Thus the Safa Hor or Kherwar movement initiated by Bhagirath Baba conjured up the Golden Age of the *santal* traditions in the minds of the tribals when they lived in Champa in absolute independence and had no rent or tribute to pay but only to bring a small annual offering to their leaders in virtue of their office. After Bhagirath Baba, the movement was kept alive by several preachers. In 1880 Dubia Gossain, who himself lived like a Hindu *sannyasi*, introduced the worship of the Babaji in the manner of the Hindus.

During the following decades, the Kherwar movement split in three sects – the Safa Hor, Samra and Babajiu. There was however little to differentiate one group from the other. Among these, the more sanskritised group was the Safa Hor. They abandoned practices such as the keeping and eating of fowls and pigs. They used to take a purificatory bath before taking their morning meal and recognized *Mahadeb* or *Shib* as their one God. Because of the Safa Hor movement the santals were generally moving towards Hinduism. The emulation of Hindu socio-religious practices was regarded as a means of improving their socio-economic status. Apart from the Safa Hor movement, various Bhagat movements had sympathetic vibrations among the *santals*. The movements that emerged among the *Oraons*, *Bhils* and several other tribes of Chhotanagpur were highly sanskritised.

Soon reverberations of these movements came to be felt in the distant Malda. The Satyam Shibam Sect was almost a continuation of the Kherwar

movement without a break, with the additional prospect of better placement of the converts in the Hindu caste hierarchy<sup>23</sup>. However, the Satyam Shibam movement in Barind was not just a replication of the Kherwar movement in Santal Parganas. The specificity of its locale, particularly the agrarian economy dominated by the Hindu – Muslim *joteders*, the exploitation and oppression by the village *mahajans* and keen competition from the Muslim *shershabadiya* agriculturists in Barind, had its distinctive imprints on the movement.

The time of origin of the Satyam Shibam Sect among the *santals* of Barind is not a unanimous one. According to J.N.Sengupta, Satyam Shibam sect was founded in 1905<sup>24</sup>, but M.O.Carter mentions the time as 1917<sup>25</sup>. The sect was founded by Kashishwar Chakraborty, a Dinajpur based *swarajist* pleader and very active among the Dinajpur *santals*. He used to visit the adjacent district of Malda with proselytizing aims. Opinions also differ as to his real motive in founding the Satyam Shibam Sect. Official records suggest that the real motive of Kashishwar Chakraborty was financial gain. He used to charge three *rupees* and four *annas* from each *santal* convert<sup>26</sup>. There is no doubt that at a time when the annual rent for one *bigha* of land in Barind was six *annas*, the fees of three *rupees* and four *annas* for conversion was quite some money. Sometime later, however, M.O.Carter stated that the sole motive of Kashishwar Chakraborty 'appears to have been to claim the *santal* for the Hindu community rather on the lines of the Arya Samaj'<sup>27</sup>. Carter wondered why the founder picked up 'Satyam Shibam' as the motto of the sect. 'Satyam Shibam Sundaram' is one used by the Brahmos but it is not clear why it was adopted by the reformer. Left to themselves, the *santals* are naturally very much more truthful than most of their neighbours'<sup>28</sup>.

Whatever might be the motive in founding the Satyam Shibam Sect, it seems that Kashishwar Chakraborty came out of a wider movement around this time, when Hindu ascetics came close to the Congress movement and functioned as preachers, combining Hinduization as well as populism among labourers, peasants, and tribals<sup>29</sup>. From the late 1920s, as Joya Chatterjee has shown, some Hindu leaders began to recognize the need to 'reclaim' the low castes in order to create a unified Hindu political community<sup>30</sup>. Pradip Datta has traced the origin of this type of 'Hindu communal common sense' to U. N. Mukherjee's book 'The Dying Race', published in 1909 which expressed concern for the future of the Hindu race and argued that the *dalit* and *adivasis* were vitally important for physical power of the Hindu community<sup>31</sup>. Stories of the militant tradition of the *santals* date back to the Santal rebellion of 1855. Likewise, in rural Bengal the *lathiyal* retinues of most zamindars came from *dalit* groups like the Bagdis, Namasudras or Patnis. Therefore, for projecting the martial qualities of the Bengali Hindus as a 'race', inclusion and mobilisation of the *dalit* and the *adivasis* had become a political necessity<sup>32</sup>.

A number of Hindu organisations, therefore, embarked upon a project to mobilize such groups. The Hindu Sabha movement underlined solidarity among the different Hindu castes. At its provincial conference in 1924, the Sabha declared that its chief focus would be on the removal of untouchability and the purification (*shuddhi*) of 'polluted' peoples<sup>33</sup>. The Hindu Mission founded by Swami Satyananda started a train of conversions. Later, Hindu Mission and Hindu Sabha worked hand in hand in propagating the Hindu ideals and in arranging the conversion of ethnic groups of people standing in the periphery of the Hindu society. Swami Pranabananda of the Bharat Sebashram Sangha started working among the Namasudras, Paunda-

Kshatriyas and other scheduled caste villagers in Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur, Bakarganj and Nawabganj in Malda<sup>34</sup>. However, the All India Hindu Mahasabha played the most crucial role in this respect. The Mahasabha ever since it started functioning in Bengal in 1923 also targeted the lower caste peasantry for political mobilisation as a part of its campaign for Hindu Sangathan (organisation). Around 1924 it made contact with the Rajbansis of North Bengal, particularly with their charismatic leader Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma. Ultimately, however, this alliance did not bear any fruit<sup>35</sup>. Apart from conversion, branches of Hindu Sabha were set up in the districts with definite programme of propaganda and conversion. There was a branch in Malda also of which Ashutosh Choudhury, one of the richest landlords of Malda, was a patron<sup>36</sup>.

A trend was thus set and Malda *santals* too formed part of this general trend. There began an organized campaign to instill in them a sense of belonging to the Hindu community and to mobilise them in defence of the Hindu religion. Joya Chatterjee, in fact, argues that the Satyam Shibam activities in Malda were clearly part of a 'Sangathan' movement to redefine the Hindu political community<sup>37</sup>. This Hinduisation process started around 1924 and ended in Jitu Santal's attack on the Adina mosque in 1932.

It has already been stated that Kashishwar Chakraborty was a Dinajpur-based pleader maintaining a link with the Swarajist politics. As was common with many Swarajists at that time, Kashishwar Chakraborty had an affinity toward the Hindu association. He had tried to establish contact with the Hindu Sabha sometime later in 1926. On November 26, 1926, Kashishwar wrote a letter to Padamraj Jain, vice-president of the Hindu Sabha and sought his help for setting up a Hindu Sabha at Dinajpur. Whatever may be his politico-religious

affiliations, Kashishwar Chakraborty was instrumental in founding the 'Satyam Shivam Sect' whose object was to bring *santals* into the 'Hindu Community'<sup>38</sup>. With the support of other local Swarajist leaders, he launched a programme to 'reclaim' aboriginals and untouchables into the Hindu fold through ritual purification (Shuddhi) and social reform<sup>39</sup>. By Satyam Shivam, the founder of the Sect wanted to convey to the *santals* that they happened to be an integral part of the Hindu society as Shiva, a non-Aryan deity, was taken in the Aryan Pantheon.

In not only Dinajpur and Malda, Kashishwar Chakraborty used to convert the *santals* in many other parts of India, especially in Assam. With the purpose to unite the *santals* he established " All India Santal Committee." <sup>40</sup> Though he started the process of proselytisation of the *santals* of Malda in 1905, success came only after 1920. One thing was very crucial to his success. Kashishwar Chakraborty used to prescribe medicine to the patients of malaria, influenza etc. in Barind region of Malda that had experienced malaria and influenza repeatedly<sup>41</sup>. Later in 1932 he wrote a book titled " *Satyam Shivam Sundaram Kria Puthi, Bhajan, Bakhera Aar Chhere E'*" in which religious customs were described and the last page generally contained details about how to cure several diseases. He pointed to ham, chicken and intoxicating stuffs as the reason of these diseases and forbade his disciples to domesticate such pets and take them as foods. <sup>42</sup>

Kashishwar made a deep impression on the *santals* and a large number of them embraced Hinduism. They gave up eating pigs, fowls and other food considered obnoxious by the Hindus. It needs to be mentioned here that there was a similarity in observances and tenets between the Sapha Hor of Santal Parganas and the Satyam Shivam of Malda. The followers of the Sapha Hor

also did not take pigs or fowls nor did they drink toddy or pachwai. While the Sapha Hor was santals and half way to Hinduism, the Satyam Shibams were full-fledged Hindus. Both these sects had adopted the principles of pollution and purification of the Hindus.

Kashishwar Chakraborty selected his favourite disciples from every village and conferred him with the title *sardar*. Every *sardar* received the particular cloth, turban and a piece of silver, in which the words “ *Satyam Shibam Sundaram*” were inscribed. Sardars had to look after the practice of social norms and customs of their villages. The title *sardar* was a prestigious one and disciples rendered a habitual obedience to them. At every village there was a “*Kalithan*” where on every Tuesday evening disciples used to pray, worship and sing.<sup>43</sup>

Among the *santal* acolytes of Kashishwar Chakraborty, Jitu and Arjun Santal eventually emerged as the leaders of Hinduisation movement initiated by the Swarajist pleader. Jitu Hembram (popularly called Jitu Santal) was born in 1883 at Khochakandar in Mangalpura *anchal* within Habibpur P.S. His father Biram Hembram and mother Tele Murmu had migrated to Khochakander with the first batch of *santals* from Santal Parganas. Irrepressible in spirit, he was called the Marang Sardar or the Great Chief. Nothing is known about his early boyhood. Nevertheless, he was born amid spreading cultivation, and as he grew up, the simmering discontent among his fellow-tribals could not have escaped him<sup>44</sup>. Arjun was almost inseparable from Jitu.

After his conversion to Hinduism, Jitu, along with Arjun Santal set up a band of *sanyasi dol* with santal sharecroppers of the Habibpur – Bamangola- Gajol range and conducted a Kali Puja, defying police orders, to proclaim his new

Hindu status<sup>45</sup>. Kashishwar Chakraborty was also referred to as '*sanyasi baba*'. Though the word *sanyasi* was freely used, it seems unlikely that either Chakraborty or Jitu's group was actually ascetics<sup>46</sup>.

Throughout Barind, Jitu held many meetings among the tribals and large number of *santals* became Hindus and came within the fold of Satyam Shibam Sect. According to Bangi Hembram, the daughter of Jitu, he had erected a Kali temple beside his house – a thatched hut on high plinth. Every afternoon, many people used to come at his house; gossips and religious songs used to continue for hours<sup>47</sup>. During the evening religious recitals, Jitu used to compose songs and sing them. Bangi remembered one such song<sup>48</sup>:

Nun-ah marang dhartire

Manwa chikata bape bujhau

Dariakhan

Shermapuri neaotapa bachha

Jatidharam

(In such a wide world, O man, why don't you realise that Divine Rule is your religion.)

In fact, what is striking about Satyam Shibam movement is the element of this performance. The hymns that sung by Jitu and Arjun in the form of questions, answers, stories and injunctions were part of the Satyam Shibam mode of performative pedagogy. In his preachings to the *santals*, Jitu urged them to be clean in observances and live like the Hindus. He advised the *santals* not to drink *handia* or *pachwai*, or to keep pets like pigs, hens etc. He assured the *santals* if they lived a clean life like the Hindus, God would shower his

blessings on them. Jitu preached all these tenants through songs composed by himself<sup>49</sup>.

Horjanamdo hindudharam dharma duaor – rebon

Lebet akan,

Jatibon dishaya dharambon dohoya chandoduarrebbon

Sabudena

(We are *santals*, we are Hindus, we shall have to protect our religion. Ram is our lord, bearing him as such, we shall have to wade through the life. We are his subjects.)

It needs to be pointed out here that pigs and fowl were a necessary part of *santal* ritual feasting. Santal harvest festival began with the sacrifice of three hens by priests. Bongas were pleased with these. The *santal* folktales were full with stories of miraculous benefits that accrued from fowl sacrifices<sup>50</sup>. However, Jitu, as Tanika Sarkar has shown, insisted emphatically on the ritual avoidance of pigs and fowl and warned to take stern measures of social boycott and intimidation against those who still practised such ritual<sup>51</sup>. It was believed that the new observances would bring changes in the prevailing situation and usher in a new *Raj* under which the *santal*sharecroppers would attain secure status in society.

Collectively transmitted rumours and prophecies were powerful vehicles of mobilization by Jitu. Rumours are herbingers of charismatic leader as well, and are the first signs of people's acceptance of the leader as such. Around this time, an area of 104 square miles of Habibpur and Bamongola P.S. was

surveyed by the air survey methods. The aeroplane was entirely a new object to the *santals* of Barind. Jitu told his followers that the Garuda, the mighty carrier of Lord Vishnu, had come to visit the area. Miracles are concomitant to charisma<sup>52</sup>. By then Jitu had become a charismatic leader and his followers accepted whatever he said. So the *santals* believed in the miracle of the visit of Lord Vishnu on his divine carrier Garuda<sup>53</sup>. Jitu also claimed miraculous powers to cure fever, sore eyes and other diseases. He again claimed divine authority through a proclaimed association with the Thakur who was said to be communicating with him through letters. Sheets of paper were produced, inscribed on them were the Divine Orders. Jitu promised that *Raj* would return to the *santals*. It is significant that Jitu did not promise to restore Champa, the mythical homeland to the *santals* of Malda. He did promise, however, a new world that required new ritual modalities<sup>54</sup>. Jitu thus combined in himself the roles of a preacher who could reveal the true path, a healer who could cure disease, a prophet who could exercise divine powers and a deliverer who would be the harbinger of a new age.

The Satyam Shibam world-view expressed conflicting impulses. It presented an exhaustive critique of *santal* customs and traditions while drawing upon *santals* symbols and practices in order to define their self-identity. It was true that the Satyam Shibam Sect banned the ceremonial use of pigs and fowl, but in marriage and local customs, this group has nothing to distinguish itself from ordinary *santals*<sup>55</sup>. Under the influence of Jitu, the *santalsanyasi dol* began to worship the Goddess *Kali* in place of *bongas*. Scholars are of the opinion that *Kali* originated as a tribal deity whom brahmanical religion absorbed into its own mythology. Even after the absorption, as Kunal Chakraborty observes, she retained a strong resemblance with the more malevolent *bongas*<sup>56</sup>. Jitu

made no effort to alter the *raska* or pleasure orientation, which was a principal distinction between the *santal* and the Hindu. In fact, the typical attributes of *santal* life were retained: drinking, merry-making, dancing and festivities. Jitu also insisted on the maintenance of typically *santal* weaponry and arts of warfare<sup>57</sup>.

In this Hinduisation movement among the *santals*, the role of Kashishwar Chakraborty has been highlighted by colonial officialdom as well as by the nationalist media. Santals of Malda were seen as reacting to external agency. It cannot, however, be denied that Kashishwar did play a crucial formative role in the initial stages of the movement. He inspired the idea of a *sanyasi dol* and brought Kali worship to Jitu. District officials saw Chakraborty's relationship with Jitu as *guru's* with his disciple. As the district officer of Dinajpur reported in 1928 that the 'Santals are blindly led by the *guru* Babu Kashishwar Chakraborty, pleader'<sup>58</sup>. However, the available evidences suggest that Chakraborty's role in this Hinduisation drive among the *santals* of Barind was much exaggerated. Kashishwar Chakraborty seems to have quickly disappeared from Jitu's life. By 1926, as Tanika Sarkar observes, all connection between Chakraborty and Jitu disappeared and Jitu was laying down his own version of the new religion<sup>59</sup>.

In his own version of Hinduism, Jitu laid much stress on caste stratification that governed local Hindu society. In this respect, also Chakraborty's own message, echoing Arya Samaj lines of a unified, composite Hindu society, had little direct or meaningful bearing on the *dol's* own ideology. Another aspect of the *dol's* ideology was a deep – rooted hatred for the non-Hindu and, in particular, the Muslims. This vision was probably influenced by the Hindu Sabha message.

In final analysis, it may be stated that though the santals belonging to Satyam Shibam Sect embraced Hinduism, yet they did not entirely identified with the Hindus. As Tanika Sarkar points out, 'if a few markers of *santal* existence had been demonstratively abjured, many others remained a vital part of the movement'<sup>60</sup>. They were *santals* of a new kind: Hinduized *santals*, but not Hindus. The Satyam Shibam movement was a striking case of self-reform among *santals*, in interaction with ideas and images from outside, but according to terms decided by the *adivasi* leader. The leader selected some elements from the non-*santal* world to follow and discarded others. At the same time, he alone decided what to follow from the older *santal* life and what not to practice. The Barind region of Malda saw the advent of this charismatic leader in the person of Jitu who founded a religious sect. With the passage of time, this religious movement swivels into a political nature, confronting the British government. However, this is another part of the story, which is discussed in Chapter Seven of the present dissertation.

## THE RAJBANSI SOCIAL MOBILITY MOVEMENT

It needs to be mentioned here that the movement of the Malda Rajbansis aiming to claim for the *kshatriya* status is an extension of the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement, which was then making much headway in the northern part of Bengal. So this attempt by the Malda Rajbansis to achieve higher social status should be understood in relation to the general trend of the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement of northern Bengal.

## THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE RAJBANSIS

The Rajbansis constituted the most predominant section of the local Hindu population in the northern districts of Bengal. Numerically they were the third

largest Hindu caste in Bengal as a whole<sup>61</sup>. The district in which they were mostly to be found were Rangpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Malda, and Darjeeling in North Bengal, Purnia in Bihar and Goalpara in Assam. In Malda, the Rajbansi population was concentrated mainly in Gajol – Habibpur – Bamongola p.s.<sup>62</sup>. They were called *bangals* and the village where they resided was called *bangalpara*. The Malda Rajbansis was predominantly agriculturists<sup>63</sup>.

In respect of socio – cultural practices, the Rajbansis had very little in common with the local upper caste Hindus. This cultural distinction separated the Rajbansi community from the upper caste Hindu society of North Bengal. The Rajbansis occupied a low position in the caste hierarchy of Bengal. They were placed in the caste hierarchy along with the Namasudras, the Pods and other *antyaaja* caste. Hunter noted that in Malda the high caste Hindus treated the Rajbansis contemptuously<sup>64</sup>. Lalbihari Majumdar, a noted local literati, has mentioned in his '*memoir*' that the social status of the Rajbansis was extremely low and high caste Hindus did not take cooked food from their hands<sup>65</sup>. They did not accept invitation of even an affluent Rajbansi on ceremonial occasions<sup>66</sup>. Discrimination against the Rajbansi was rooted even in rural educational institutions. At the time of the Saraswati Puja, there was a custom that the Rajbansi students offered flowers standing outside the temporarily built shrine<sup>67</sup>. They had no right to enter the kitchen in the upper caste households<sup>68</sup>. In other parts of northern Bengal similar forms of discrimination was prevalent. To upper caste Hindus the Rajbansis were backward, uncultured and even *antyaj*<sup>69</sup>. They called the Rajbansis as *bahe*, implying their cultural identity. The word '*bahe*' originated from the word '*babahe*', which was used by the Rajbansis to address a person<sup>70</sup>.

## CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE RAJBANSI IDENTITY

The precise origin, status and folk history of the Rajbansis remain obscure. Existing history is largely based on the accounts left by the colonial administrators and colonial ethnographers. All of them generally arrived at the conclusion that the Rajbansis were a purified group of 'Koch' who had abandoned their aboriginal culture and adopted Hinduism during the reign of the first Koch king Viswa Singha who ruled in the western part of Kamrup by the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century<sup>71</sup>. B. H. Hodgson wrote that after his conversion to Hinduism Viswa Singha named his kingdom Behar and the people who are said to be of the same stock came to be called Rajbansis<sup>72</sup>. W. W. Hunter also opined that the Rajbansis and Paliyas were the offshoots of the Koch tribe. They abandoned the name 'Koch' after they embraced Hinduism and took the name Rajbansi which literally means 'Royal Race'<sup>73</sup>. Herbert Risley, E. A. Gait and Dalton believed that the Rajbansis were of the Dravidian stock with an intermixture of the Mongoloid blood<sup>74</sup>.

Rajbansi intelligentsia, social reformers and caste publicists, however, refuted the view stated above and emphatically denied any affinity between the Rajbansis on the one hand and the Koches, Paliyas and Bodos on the other. In their writings, the Rajbansis were referred to as different from and superior to the Koch. The *Rajbansi Kula Pradip* (1907) by Hara Kishor Adhikari of Goalpara, the *Rajbansi Kshatriya Dipak* (1912) by Maniram Kavyabhushan of Dinajpur and the *Rajbansi Kula Kaumudi* by Jaganmohan Singha Pandit of Rangpur all argued that the Rajbansis were Kshatriyas and were different from the Kochs. Hara Kishor Adhikari argued that the Rajbansis were Hindus before the reign of Viswa Singha and were recognized as Bhanga

Kshatriyas<sup>75</sup>. Upendranath Barman also equated the Rajbansis with Kshatriyas who lived in the land called '*Paundra Desa*', between the river Karatoa and Ganga. He attempted to show that the Rajbansis were claiming the Kshatriya status long before the eighteenth century<sup>76</sup>. This claim to Kshatriya status received a fillip in later years, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century and came to be associated with a social reform movement<sup>77</sup>.

## THE RAJBANSI KSHATRIYA MOVEMENT

The origin of Kshatriya movement, as A. K. Roy has observed, could be located in the hatred and ill-treatment received by the community at the hands of the upper castes of the Hindu society; but the immediate cause of the movement was census of India, 1891<sup>78</sup>. From 1881, census authorities not only listed and described various Hindu castes but also ranked them in a hierarchy based on the ancient *varna-jati* system. People turned to successive census reports for a record of their claim of the desired social status, and the Kshatriya status claimed by the Rajbansis was part of this process.

However, Sibsankar Mukherjee has shown that the Kshatriya caste status was claimed by a section of the Rajbansis well before census operations began. Basing on the account of Francis Buchanan - Hamilton, Mukherjee has shown that the well-to-do Rajbansis of Rangpur and Goalpara districts used to describe themselves as *kshatriyas* giving a historical explanation of this claim<sup>79</sup>. The poorer section of the Rajbansi community, stated Buchanan-Hamilton, remained in the tribal fold, whereas the affluent section elevated themselves socially<sup>80</sup>.

However, the claim of the Rajbansis for Kshatriya caste status began to take the shape of a movement at the time of the census of 1891<sup>81</sup>. This time the official attempt for lumping together the Rajbansis and the Koches as members of the same caste caused resentment among the Rajbansi elites. At this juncture, an organization called the *Rangpur Bratya Kshatriya Jatir Unnati Bidhyani Sabha* was formed under the leadership of Haramohan Roy, a Rajbansi zamindar of Shyampur in Rangpur district. This heralded what can be termed the modern phase of the Kshatriya movement though yet, unlike in the later periods, there was no attempt at a general mobilization of the entire community to press the demands<sup>82</sup>. Under the auspices of this organization a Dharma Sabha was assembled where the local *pandits* present declared that the Koches and Rajbansis were separate group of people, the latter being superior to the former, and that the Rajbansis were *bratya kshatriyas*, i.e., *kshatriyas* who had fallen from the caste for not performing the assigned rituals. Based on this ruling, the District Magistrate of Rangpur issued a circular permitting the Rajbansis to write Bratya Kshatriya in all government documents<sup>83</sup>.

While this development was taking place in Rangpur, the Rajbansis of Malda were no silent spectators. Some rich cultivators and lawyers of the local Rajbansi community began practicing Kshatriya customs and manners by the last decade of the nineteenth century<sup>84</sup>. When the Census Report of 1881 classified Koches, Rajbansis and Paliyas under the head of Koches, Dharani Das, a local Rajbansi lawyer, raised a voice of protest against this designation and claimed that it lacked any foundation whatsoever. He tried to organize the local Rajbansi people but achieved little success. Dharani Das, however, sent an application to the Census Superintendent claiming that the Rajbansis were

in no way similar to that of the Koches in respect of social customs, rituals and food habit<sup>85</sup>. This movement led by Dharani Das, lacking popular support, subsided within a very short time.

The movement gathered momentum again during the census of 1901. In the primary enumeration the Rajbansi Kshatriya were entered as only Rajbansi and this naturally caused resentment among them. In the census report of 1901, the Rajbansi and the Koches were again classified as member of the same caste<sup>86</sup>. In 1910, at the time of the census operations, the Rajbansis once again started their campaign for having themselves enumerated as *kshatriyas*. This time a new genre of Rajbansi leader emerged and they gave the movement a new dimension. They were the product of political, social and economic changes introduced by the colonial government in the nineteenth century. The social origins of this Rajbansi *bhadralok* class lay in the system of land revenue administration and legislation introduced by the colonial government. The need for a new class of people conversant with the rules and regulations regarding property rights, tenures, classification and assessment of land was felt. Rajbansi landholders realized the need for formal education, and those who could afford to do so, sent their children to schools in district and sub divisional towns. The educated Rajbansis were brought up in a social environment dominated by the caste Hindu *bhadralok* and they entered the professions and services whenever opportunity permitted<sup>87</sup>. They could articulate the community's cause before the government since they felt more strongly than their rural counterparts did the odium of caste Hindu society due to their low social origin<sup>88</sup>.

So the ground was prepared for the formation of a modern type of organization for the Rajbansis that would transcend the class and local

boundaries. The man who played the leading role in founding a well-knit organization for the Rajbansis was Panchanan Barma (1865 – 1935), revered by his community as Thakur Panchanan<sup>89</sup>. He was originally an inhabitant of Cooch Behar, obtained his post – graduate, and law degrees from Calcutta University in 1896 and 1898 respectively. He joined the Rangpur Bar in 1901 and spent the rest of his life at Rangpur. He took the initiative in mobilizing Rajbansi Hindus in striving for a proud Kshatriya identity.

The new leaders of the community were not satisfied with petitioning the District Officers for the fulfillment of their demands. The years 1910 to 1921 witnessed a large-scale mobilization of the community in an attempt to prove its *Kshatriya* status<sup>90</sup>. In 1910, the Kshatriya Samiti was formed at Rangpur under the leadership of Panchanan Barma. Its formation, as Swaraj Basu observes, gave a new direction to the Rajbansi caste movement<sup>91</sup>. The immediate objective of the Kshatriya Samiti was to force census authorities to recognize their *kshatriya* caste claim. About four hundred members from Rangpur, Goalpara, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur attended the first conference of the Kshatriya Samiti held at Rangpur in May 1910. Madhusudan Roy, a pleader from Jalpaiguri and Panchanan Barma became the president and the secretary of the Kshatriya Samiti respectively<sup>92</sup>.

The formation of the Kshatriya Samiti gave a new direction to the Rajbansi caste movement. The first meeting of the Samiti clearly spelt out the principles of the movement:

- a) The Koch and the Rajbansi were different *jatis*; and
- b) The Rajbansis should be returned as *kshatriyas*<sup>93</sup>.

During the next few years the Samiti tried to popularize the rituals, customs and manners of upper caste Hindus, beginning with the *shuddhi* (purification) ceremony to uplift them from their *vratya* (fallen) position by donning the sacred thread (*upanayana*). Representatives of the samiti were sent to Nabadwip, Mithila and Benares to get the *upanayanavyavastha* or sanction for donning the sacred thread from celebrated *pandits* who were the ritual guardians of Hindu society. On 27 Magh 1319 B. S. (corresponding to 9 February 1912) the Rajbansis performed the sacred thread wearing ceremony on the bank of the river Karatoa at Debiganj in Jalpaiguri. In this way, the Rajbansis formally celebrated their re-attainment of *kshatriyahood*<sup>84</sup>. The place of investiture was known as *milankshetra*. Within the next couple of years 192 such ceremonies were held at different places and according to one estimate 182, 154 Rajbansis were initiated into *kshatriyahood*<sup>85</sup>. The wearing of the thread now became a rallying point for recruiting a band of local supporters committed to the goal of carrying forward the Kshatriya movement.

#### THE RESPONSE OF THE MALDA RAJBANSIS

While the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement was making headway in the northern part of Bengal, the Malda Rajbansis did not lag behind. They quickly grasped the significance of this movement aiming to achieve a higher position for the Rajbansis in the social hierarchy and responded to it enthusiastically. In fact, two Rajbansi leaders of Malda, Karpur Mandal and Banbihari Mandal of Habibpur, attended the first conference of the Kshatriya Samiti held at Rangpur in May 1910. They were deeply impressed by the speech of Jagatmohan Singha who, quoting sastric authority from his book *Rajbansi Kula Kaumudi*, tried to prove that the Rajbansis were Kshatriyas<sup>96</sup>. Karpur

Mandal felt the necessity of founding a branch of the Kshatriya Samiti in Malda and for this purpose, he met Panchanan Barma. Barma advised Mandal to make necessary groundwork for establishing a branch of the Kshatriya Samiti in Malda<sup>97</sup>.

In 1912, an attempt was made by Karpur Mandal and some of his followers to set up a branch of the Kshatriya Samiti at Gajol-Habibpur-Bamongola belt. Several meetings were organized to mobilize the community for attaining a respectable position in social hierarchy. The ritualistic and cultural message of the Kshatriya movement was circulated among the Rajbansis. In 1913, Karpur Mandal and Banabihari Mandal organized a *milankshetra* at Bamongola and 100 Rajbansis donned sacred threads. However, this feverish activity soon waned. The poorer Rajbansis, mostly sharecroppers and small peasants, could not afford the expenses for the *shuddhi* ceremony needed for donning the sacred thread. Apart from this, a number of Rajbansi *jotedars* and rich peasants of Gajol-Habibpur-Bamongola region did not like the idea of poor Rajbansis donning the sacred thread. This Rajbansi *jotedars* had a remarkable influence on the Rajbansi sharecroppers who did not like to invite the wrath of their *jotedars*. Their resistance against organizing *milankshetra* by the Kshatriya Samiti leaders was primarily responsible for the failure of the early phase of the Kshatriya movement in Malda<sup>98</sup>.

The Kshatriya movement again received an impetus during the visit of Panchanan Barma in Malda in 1923. With the help of Karpur Mandal and some other rich Rajbansi peasants, Panchanan Barma undertook the task of propagating and popularizing the very concept of Kshatriyahood among the Rajbansis living in Gajol, Habibpur, Bamongola and Englishbazar town. In several meetings, Panchanan Barma highlighted the need for social reform.

Among the measures emphasized by him were the wearing of the sacred thread, reduction of the days of mourning on the death of either parent from thirty days to twelve days, which was the mourning period of high caste Hindus, and change of surname from Das to Barman, Singha and Roy. He also emphasized the need of taking up a *gotra* name or clan identity, as was the custom of upper caste Hindus. The Rajbansis initially identified themselves with *kashyapa gotra*. In Bengali, there is a saying '*haraye maraye kashap gotra*'. This caustic remark implies that those who have no other *gotra* identity are included in the *kashyapgotra*. The Rajbansis, later on, took the *gotra* name of their *gurus* or preceptors. Panchanan Barman also asked the Rajbansi *Kshatriyas* to follow the *dashakarma* or 10 sacraments<sup>99</sup>.

The personal appeal of Panchanan Barma thus instrumental in organizing a sizeable section of the local Rajbansi community. Karpur Mandal, Banbihari Mandal, Kamalakanta Sarkar, Sudhicharan Mandal emerged as the most popular leaders of the local Rajbansi community. It was due to their efforts two *milankshetra* were organized, one at Gajol and the other at Bamongola and, according to an estimate, over 1,000 Rajbansi people donned sacred thread<sup>100</sup>. The Kshatriya Samiti of Malda tried to ensure that the Rajbansi Kshatriyas discarded their non-*kshatriya* social customs, manners and habits in favour of those followed by the superior castes. With the passage of time, the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement of Malda began to gather support from the literati of the community. Sudhicharan Roy, a lawyer by profession, hailed the sacred thread ceremony as marking the rebirth of the community<sup>101</sup>.

The Rajbansi Kshatriya movement of North Bengal, as Swaraj Basu observes, was not confined merely to the emulation of upper caste culture or religious behaviour. The secular aspects of community formation were not

neglected either<sup>102</sup>. The leaders attempted to reawaken the *kshatriya* martial spirit. Since the Kshatriyas were regarded as a martial group, in order to develop that spirit among the Rajbansis, the Kshatriya Samiti tried to inspire the youths to join the army<sup>103</sup>. Because of these appeals, a number of Rajbansi youths had joined the army. It was reported that from the three North Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and Dinajpur 400 Rajbansis joined the army, from Dhubri around 800 and from Goalpara 600<sup>104</sup>. Panchanan Barma made an appeal to the Bengal Government to raise a separate regiment for the Rajbansis<sup>105</sup>.

In Malda also, the leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti stressed the need for joining the army by the local Rajbansi youths to show their Kshatriya prowess. A number of physical training centres were opened in Habibpur and Bamongola to popularize the call for joining the army<sup>106</sup>. Just as in the case of the sacred thread ceremony, so in the case of recruitment for the army, tradition was brought into play for the fulfillment of more pragmatic and immediate necessities. The effort was directed at opening up a permanent job opportunity for the community<sup>107</sup>. A Kshatriya regiment, according to one leader, would serve two purposes. It will arouse the Kshatriya prowess, and once the door for the recruitment in the army is open, the problem of livelihood will be solved. Like the Sikhs and the Gurkhas the youth of the community will be recruited in the army easily<sup>108</sup>. Responding to the call as many as 72 youths from Gajole-Habibpur-Bamongola region joined the army<sup>109</sup>.

The Rajbansi social reformers of North Bengal did not limit their movement to mere wearing of sacred thread; they also undertook measures for establishing

primary schools and hostels for students. This had two-fold objectives in view viz.

- (1) It would inspire the Rajbansi students for carrying on studies and
- (2) In the hostels, the Rajbansi students would develop a sense of unity among themselves, which was essential for carrying on future movements<sup>110</sup>.

In fact, the spread of modern education features prominently on the agenda of the Kshatriya movement<sup>111</sup>. The obsessive belief that education was the panacea of all the ills affecting the society was clearly expressed in the speeches of Panchanan Barma : *Many people wrongly believe that if they have enough wealth there is no need to pay any attention to the education of their children. However, it must be kept in mind that education is necessary not only for jobs. Education is necessary for gaining knowledge and fame. Education is the basis of the greatness of a community. That is why I urge you a hundred times, my friends, please educate your children*<sup>112</sup>.

Likewise, the Rajbansi leaders of Malda stressed the need of education for social reform. They undertook several steps to promote education among the members of the community. As Harimohan Sarkar, a Rajbansi teacher of Malda Zilla School and a leader of the Kshatriya Samiti, comments: 'education and employment were essential for the economic development of the community and these were the new sources for higher social status'<sup>113</sup>. The Kshatriya Samiti of Malda collected funds, which was spent in constructing the building of a primary school at Dahil village of Gajol. The Samiti also donated a sum to the A. C. Institution of Malda for the establishment of a student hostel on the condition that some seats would be reserved for the Rajbansi students<sup>114</sup>.

However, this feverish activity soon waned due to several reasons. It was not possible for the poorer Rajbansis, mostly sharecroppers and small peasants to afford the expenses needed for the *shuddhi* ceremony, which was essential for donning sacred thread. Furthermore, as in the case of other Northern Bengal districts, the response of the local upper caste gentry towards the Kshatriya movement of the Malda Rajbansis was in no way favourable. The caste Hindu *jotedars* and *mahajans* did not like the idea of poor Rajbansis donning the sacred thread<sup>115</sup>. Their attitude towards the Kshatriya movement is well demonstrated by the writings of a contemporary literati, Lalbihari Majumdar who remarked, 'the cast Hindus often made ridiculous statements about the movement. The local Brahmins ridiculed the emulative rituals and customs of the Rajbansis. They stated that *suchashastric* practices would condemn their forefather to hell for ever'<sup>116</sup>.

However, the Kshatriya movement in Malda failed to achieve much success due to the opposition from certain section within the community. A number of rich Rajbansi *jotedars* embarked upon a project of opposing the movement from its onset. These *jotedars* were the traditional social leaders in their respective villages. The pretext of their opposition was offered by the over enthusiastic Kshatriya Samiti leaders who tried to enforce strict vigilance over the emulative social and ritual practices of the common Rajbansi people. In fact, the social upliftment movement divided the Rajbansi community into two social exogamous social groups. The first group was those who donned the sacred thread and followed new customs and rituals. The second group was those who did not wear the sacred thread and followed their traditional customs and practices. In addition, there is some evidence to show that in the Rajbansi pockets of Gajol – Habibpur – Bamongola, as elsewhere in other

northern Bengal districts, those who did not adhere fully to the ideals of the Kshatriya Samiti were looked down upon by those who did. Therefore, it is clear that the Kshatriya movement led to a new disunity among the members of the community<sup>117</sup>.

The matter came to a head when some Kshatriya Samiti activists of Bamongola P.S. attempted to forbade interdining or intermarriage among the Rajbansi social subgroups – ‘purified’ and ‘impure’. These attempts by the Kshatriya Samiti leaders to develop caste solidarity invited the wrath of Shymacharan Mondal, a local *jotedar* and man of influence. He made contacts with other big *jotedars* of Bamongola, Gajol and Habibpur and began to oppose the thread wearing ceremonies (*milankshetras*) held in various places in the district. Panchanan Barma and Karpur Mondal were accused of misleading the common folk for their own benefit. Shyamacharan Mondal alleged that the so-called Kshatriya movement was dividing the community in the name of social upliftment. Some other big *jotedars* also expressed doubts about the importance and necessity of Kshatriyaization movement and stated categorically that unity within the community was immediately needed<sup>118</sup>.

Shyamacharan Mondal convened a meeting of the Rajbansis at his village Gupinathpur of Bamongola on 6 May 1925. It was attended by a number of big *jotedars* of Gajol-Habibpur-Bamongola as well as by poor Rajbansi peasants and sharecroppers. Satish Das, a *jotedar* of Gajol, stated that a number of poor Rajbansi peasants of Gajol were forced by the leaders of the Kshatriya Samiti to discard their traditional customs and rituals as well as to wear sacred thread.

This should not be allowed to continue as it is creating polarization within the Rajbansis. Shymacharan Mondal argued that the wearing of the sacred thread, changing of surnames, emulation of upper caste Hindu cultural practices were meaningless for the majority of the Rajbansis. A resolution was unanimously adopted, which stated that the Rajbansis would continue to retain their traditional customs and rituals and would discard the sacred thread if they wore it<sup>119</sup>.

Therefore, it is apparent that the Kshatriya Samiti movement in Malda failed to be very appealing to a major section of the rich and poor Rajbansis alike. Generally speaking, the Kshatriyaization movement in northern Bengal had failed to break out of the close circle of the elites or the better-off section of the community<sup>120</sup>. The movement lacked any well-defined theory or programme. It did not have any programme for the poor peasants and sharecroppers who constituted the bulk of the Rajbansi Hindu peasantry. The programmes of the Kshatriya Samiti offered no solution to mitigate the economic hardship of the poor Rajbansi peasants and sharecroppers who were facing acute financial crisis due to depression and transfer of land. The ritualistic and cultural changes of the Kshatriya Movement had little significance for the poor Rajbansis<sup>121</sup>. While commenting on the rural social scenario of the Barind region of Malda, a contemporary observer noted that “the majority of the people belonging to the Rajbansi community do not wear sacred thread in Gajol, Habibpur and Bamongola p.s.”<sup>122</sup>

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE ZAMINDARS OF MALDA : THEIR ROLE IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE

The Bengal Zamindars have often been portrayed in literature as well as in the texts as tyrants and oppressors. This parasitic class, it is commonly believed, made a fortune by exploiting the cultivating tenants. The Permanent Settlement made them the proprietors of land, a right they never enjoyed before. However, even a casual observer of rural Bengal will easily notice that the landlord-*raiyyat* relationship in the colonial period did not end in mere collection and payment of rent. It actually spread over nearly every sphere of life. The Bengal Zamindars indeed played a significant role in the vast realm of cultural, social and economic life of the province. The landed gentry, although torch-bearers of feudal sentiments and the existing social structure, played a significant role behind the fantastic blossoming up of the Bengali mind in diverse fields like literature, education and social reform that came about in 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries Bengal<sup>1</sup>.

Likewise in Malda a good number of zamindars imbibed paternalistic sentiments and played a vital role in the socio-cultural developments of the district. Sometimes, their motive behind the promotion of art, culture and education was nothing but self-aggrandizement, but inspite of this limitations, the contributions of the zamindar families towards the socio-cultural developments of Malda were formidable.

Among the zamindars of Malda, the Roychadhuris of Chanchal were undoubtedly the most influential. G. E. Lambourn wrote in his Gazetteers, 'Of local residents the Brahmin family of Chanchal, whose ancestors acquired

land in the north of the district, is the most important. The present representative of the family, Raja Sarat Chandra Roy, who received the title of Raja in 1911, resides at Chanchal and is well known for his liberal support of medical and educational institutions for the benefit of his tenantry<sup>2</sup>. The influence of the Raychaudhuris had a very notable bearing in the educational and cultural development of the district.

There are two hypothesis regarding the origin of the Chanchal estate. It is stated that Raja Man Singha, General of Akbar, was impressed by a Brahmin of Jessore when the former was taking rest at Baneres after winning a war. Man Singha donated his landed property at Chanchal and adjacent areas to this Brahmin of Jessore who may be regarded as the founder of the Chanchal Estate<sup>3</sup>. The other hypothesis states that Ramchandra Roy, a Brahmin priest of Kalighat temple, was a relation of the Sabarna Chaudhuris of Calcutta. He later became engaged in the trade of indigo and came to the indigo factory at Harishchandrapur of Malda. This factory was owned by a British who, before his departure to England, assigned the proprietorship of the *kuthi* to Ramchandra. Later Ramchandra sold the *kuthi* and purchased in auction the zamindari of Malatipur which later became known as the Chanchal Raj Estate<sup>4</sup>.

The contributions of the *zamindars* of Chanchal Estate towards the socio-cultural developments of Malda were formidable. Siddeshwari Debi of Chanchal Raj Estate established a well-equipped hospital in 1875 at Chanchal in memory of his late husband Ishwar Chandra. The hospital – Ishwar Chandra Charitable Dispensary – “was one of the best equipped dispensaries of the district. The private dispensaries at Chanchal is in charge of an assistant surgeon, and medical assistance is afforded to outlying parts

of the Raja's estate by itinerant hospital assistants"<sup>5</sup>. There was accommodation for doctor and other staffs within the hospital compound. The operation theatre was well-equipped with modern instruments imported from England. It provided 12 beds for those who were seriously ill<sup>6</sup>. At the time of the abolition of the zamindari system in 1953, the hospital was situated on a land measuring 1 acre. Later Raja Saratchandra opened a number of free dispensaries at Samsi, Gohila, Srishchandrapur and Koklamari. He also donated a large sum of money to Malda District Hospital and Malda T. B. Hospital<sup>7</sup>.

The zamindars of the Chanchal Raj Estate also took keen interest in the spread of education in their zamindari estate as well as in other parts of the district. They established schools, extended patronage for maintaining the Tols, Chatuspathis, sponsored the establishment of colleges, cultural associations, libraries, dramatic club etc. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, William Marshman and Halliday founded a Tole or Chatuspathi at Chanchal<sup>8</sup>. Later Ishwarchandra of Chanchal Raj Estate extended patronage to the Toll and donated rent free land for its maintenance<sup>9</sup>. Hunter mentioned that the *gurus* of this *Tolls* were mostly Brahmins. They were paid a salary of eleven rupees per month<sup>10</sup>. Raja Saratchandra, son of Ishwarchandra, appointed Pandit Bidhusekhar Sastri as the *guru* of this *Toll* who served here for four years. Later he joined the Santiniketan and appointed as Professor of Sanskrit and Pali. After Rabindranath's demise, Bidhusekhar Sastri joined the Calcutta University as Asutosh Professor in the Sanskrit department<sup>11</sup>. In his early career, Pandit Bidhusekhar was patronized by Raja Saratchandra. When Bidhusekhar Sastri joined Santiniketan, Raja Saratchandra, in memory of his son, renamed the *toll* as *Sibpada Chatuspathi*<sup>12</sup>.

At that time there was no high school at Chanchal. Students had to go to Mathurapur B.S.S. High School for study. Raja Saratchandra felt the necessity of establishing a high school at Chanchal. In 1888, the Chanchal Siddheswari Institution was established as a High English School by Raja Saratchandra in memory of his mother, Rani Siddheswari Debi Chaudhurani<sup>13</sup>. The entire capital and recurring costs for the school used to be borne by the Raj estate of Chanchal. The school was recognized by the Calcutta University in the year 1899. It was granted permission to teach science in 1947. It was upgraded into a Higher Secondary School with Humanities, Science and Technical courses from 1959<sup>14</sup>.

Kamakhya Charan Nag, Principal of Daulatpur college, was appointed as the Headmaster of the school by Raja Saratchandra. The Raja turned out to be very sincere and took keen interest in the school's activities. The school became very famous and produced worthy alumni. Among them were Sibram Chakraborty, the famous literateur, and also Charuchandra Bandyopadhyaya, a close associate of Rabindranath Tagore and the famous author of '*Rabi Rashmi*'<sup>15</sup>. He taught at the Calcutta University and edited the famous journal '*Bharati*' as well. Sibram Chakraborty was a relative of Raja Saratchandra. When studying at the Siddheswari Institution, Sibram began to publish a periodical '*Murali*'. He wrote several poems and short stories in this periodical. Later he became involved in the Non-Cooperation Movement and organized a strike at the Siddheswari Institution. His association with Chanchal Raj Estate was reflected in his two novels – '*Chhelebayase*' and '*Zamidarer Rath*'<sup>16</sup>.

Raja Saratchandra also took keen interest in the national education movement started after the Partition of Bengal in 1905. In 1905, the anti-Partition agitation broke out in Bengal. The nationalist minded people took

part in it and boycotted government institutions. A large section of the Bengali student community and educationists became interested to build up a new and parallel system of education under the guidance of the National Council of Education. The spirit of *Swadeshi* education had stirred Raja Saratchandra greatly. He became deeply associated with the national education movement and in 1907 he donated Rs. 3 lakhs to Benoy Kumar Sarkar to establish the National School in Malda and in other parts of Bengal<sup>17</sup>. This instance shows that the nationalist movement in the country had an influence on the Chanchal Zamindars.

Raja Saratchandra's deep sense of nationalism was reflected in other instances as well. On 28 January 1916, Nabinchandra Bose, the Headmaster of Malda Zilla School was stabbed to death by a group of revolutionaries<sup>18</sup>. The revolutionaries thought that Nabibdrachandra Bose had tipped off the police from time to time about the political activities of his students<sup>19</sup>. The police arrested Mahendranath Das of Gajol on the charge of assassination. After a trial of six months Mahendranath was sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to the penal settlement of Andaman. To meet the expenses of trial, Das's family fell in heavy debt. In his *memoirs*, Mahendranath Das stated that the Raja of Chanchal, Saratchandra Roychoudhury sanctioned a loan of Rs. 32,000 to the Das family which remained unpaid for several years<sup>20</sup>. Sibram Chakraborty, the noted author, mentioned in his autobiography that Chittaranjan Das had recognized the financial contribution of the Raja of Chanchal to the Congress fund. Benoy Kumar Sarkar had informed Chittranjan of the Raja's secret help to the revolutionaries<sup>21</sup>.

The Raja of Chanchal was connected with other utilitarian activities both in and outside Malda. He donated Rs. 1 lakh to the Deaf and Dumb School of

Calcutta<sup>22</sup>. He contributed regular monetary assistance to Jadavpur Engineering College<sup>23</sup>. The B. R. Sen Public Library of Malda used to get regular monetary assistance from Raja Saratchandra<sup>24</sup>. The A. C. Institution of Malda also received regular monetary assistance from the Raja. In 1944, Saratchandra donated Rs. 20,000 to the newly established Malda College for the construction of its own building<sup>25</sup>. In 1926, Raja Saratchandra founded Kumar Sibpada Memorial Institute at Chanchal. A stage was built to perform drama and other cultural activities. In 1925, he founded the Chanchal Raj Cooperative Bank to provide relief to the *raiyats* from *mahajani* debt<sup>26</sup>.

The importance of the zamindars in the spread of education and cultural activities in Bengal lies in the fact that they, to a great extent, directed and influenced the forces released by British government in this regard. The Chanchal Zamindars provided a shining example. But there were many other instances. The notables among them were the zamindars of Singhabad, Bulbulchandi estates and the Choudhury estate of Englishbazar.

The original home of the Choudhuries of Malda was a small hamlet in the vicinity of Beneres. The founder of this family came from this original home in the up-country and settled in Tanda, the then capital of Bengal, in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>27</sup>. They became engaged in silk trade and acted as the *Banyan* of the East India Company. They lent money to the Englishbazar firm of the East India Company who granted *hundis* on certain Calcutta firms. This was the climax of their fortune<sup>28</sup>.

The most prominent among the zamindars of the Chaudhuri Estate were Krishnalal Chaudhury, Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Chaudhuri. This Chaudhuri family of Englishbazar contributed towards creating a healthy and

modern cultural atmosphere which, it may not be an exaggeration to say, helped to influence the social milieu of the town of Malda.

Krishnalal Choudhury was the Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality at its inception and the town owes much of its improvement to Krishnalal Choudhuri<sup>29</sup>. He was a member of the Red Cross Committee. Krishnalal was the founder and the President of the Maldaha Association<sup>30</sup>.

Love for education, literature and music was the hallmark of the zamindars of Choudhury Estate of Malda. The fourth session of the North Bengal Literary Conference was held at Malda in 1911<sup>31</sup>. On that occasion, eminent men like Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay and Charuchandra Mitra visited Malda. To make the Conference successful, a Reception Committee, presided over by Krishnalal Choudhury, was formed. He was one of the chief patrons of this Conference<sup>32</sup>. The Conference decided to form a committee which would carry out historical and archaeological researches. The members of this committee were Krishnalal Choudhury, Radhesh Chandra Seth, Abid Ali Khan and Maulavi Abdul Gani<sup>33</sup>. Krishnalal's love for historical researches and literary activities was manifested in other instances as well. In 1907 Rajanikanta Chakraborty, the scholarly Sanskrit teacher of Malda Zilla School wrote the first volume of his famous '*Gourer Itihas*'. The entire expenses for the publication of this celebrated book was borne by Krishnalal Choudhury<sup>34</sup>.

This kind of tradition in the Choudhury family continued in later periods also. Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Choudhury of the Choudhury Estate were associated with different educational institutions and other utilitarian activities. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, diseases like malaria and cholera were very common in Malda<sup>35</sup>. Ashutosh Choudhury and

Jadunandan Choudhury founded the cholera ward in the local charitable dispensary to commemorate the memory of Brindamani, the wife of their grandfather Doman Choudhury<sup>36</sup>. They contributed a substantial sum towards the construction of Akurmani H. E. School hostel. To educate their tenantry, they made substantial contributions to the educational institutions within the estate area. Golapganj M. E. School was named after the name of Ashutosh's father as Harish Chandra Memorial M. E. School<sup>37</sup>.

Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Choudhury played a leading role in the establishment of Malda College in 1944<sup>38</sup>. Prior to 1944, there was no college in Malda. Students of the district had to go either to Rajshahi College or Berhampore K. N. College for higher education. Realising the need for the establishment of a college in Malda, Ashutosh and Jadunandan began to raise funds. They donated Rs. 25,000 for this purpose. Due to their initiative the Malda Mango Improvement Committee donated Rs. 1 *lakh* to the fund of the proposed college<sup>39</sup>. Jyotirmohan Misra, zamindar of Harishchandrapur, also extended his help for the establishment of a college in Malda<sup>40</sup>. It was due to their efforts, Malda college was established in the year 1944. Later in 1949 Ashutosh and Jadunandan donated a land measuring 2 acre for the establishment of new building of the college<sup>41</sup>.

The zamindars of the Chaudhury Estate were also noted for their patronage to classical music. Ashutosh and Jadunandan were fond of Hindusthani songs. Ashutosh himself used to practice the instrument *tabla* and *mridanga*. He was taught by *Ustad* Jogen Ghosh, who at that time was known as '*Adi Talguru of Malda*'. The famous classical singer *Ustad* Mohabeb Ahmed Khan, who belonged to Oudh *gharana* and a relative of Wazid Ali Shah, closely associated himself with the *darbar* of Jadunandan Choudhury<sup>42</sup>. Jadunandan

had learnt dhrupad from him. The practice of inviting and entertaining the reputed singers and arranging *majlish* full of grandeur for musical demonstration gradually became very popular at the time of Jadunandan Choudhury and Ashutosh Choudhury. Among the famous artists who came to Malda to perform their songs on the invitation of the Choudhuris, mention may be made of Kale Khan, Gyanendraprasad Goswami, Chhote Faiaz Khan, Gaharjan etc. Ashutosh and Jadunandan used to arrange these functions in their residence Choudhury Lodge. For this reason the name of Choudhury Lodge became popular as '*Rangmahal*' and the name of the lane standing beside the building became Rangmahal Lane<sup>43</sup>.

Apart from the zamindars of Choudhury family, Bhairabbendra Narayan Roy, the zamindar of Singhabad was also a patron of classical music. He was also fond of poetry and drama. Many classical singers, poets got his patronage. Bhairabendra Narayan himself was a very good *tabla* and *pakwas* player. Bhairabendra Narayan also invited renowned singers of classical music to perform at his residence of Singhabad<sup>44</sup>.

Beside music, the Singhabad Zamindars played a significant role in the promotion of education in the district. Bhairabendra Narayan Roy established a number of primary schools and a charitable dispensary at Singhabad. They donated land and money for the establishment of Tilasan High School<sup>45</sup>. Rajendra Narayan Roy, the Bulbulchandi Zamindar, established two primary schools in his estate. Bulbulchandi High School was established and patronized by the zamindars of this estate. Amarendra Narayan Roy founded Rajendra Narayan Vidya Niketan in memory of his father. Anilbaran Roy established Girija Sundari Vidyamandir in memory of his mother. He also set up a charitable dispensary at Bulbulchandi<sup>46</sup>.

On the whole, the Malda zamindars played a positive role behind the promotion of culture and education in the district during our period of study. There was dichotomy in their efforts but that was natural. It sprang out from Bengal's socio-political reality after 1793. The Malda zamindars indeed contributed towards creating a healthy and modern cultural atmosphere which, it may not be an exaggeration to say, helped to influence the socio-cultural milieu of the Malda district.

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## 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 district<sup>1</sup>. 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 them<sup>2</sup>. The *sannyasis* and *gosains* were the chief merchants of Malda area for the export of silk piece goods to the Western Provinces and Deccan<sup>3</sup>. 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 Asia<sup>4</sup>.

In 1794, the prominent *gosain* merchants of Malda were Mahant Majgir, Gosain Sannalgir, Gosain Dasagir, Gosain Bhairovgiri and Mohant Kesargiri<sup>5</sup>. 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 them<sup>6</sup>. Some of the sannyasis of the Giri sect acquired landed properties in the district of Malda<sup>7</sup>. 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 attack<sup>8</sup>.

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"<sup>9</sup>. 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 contribution<sup>10</sup>.

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* raiders<sup>11</sup>.

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 Malda<sup>12</sup>. 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 rupees<sup>13</sup>. 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"<sup>14</sup>. 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 Malda<sup>15</sup>. 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 civilization<sup>16</sup> 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 Wahabi<sup>17</sup> 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 district<sup>18</sup>. 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 weapons<sup>19</sup>." 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 Government<sup>20</sup>".

In Malda, the chief leader of the Wahabi movement was Rafik Mandal, a poor peasant himself<sup>21</sup>. 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.<sup>22</sup> 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-west<sup>23</sup>. 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 society<sup>24</sup>. 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 Wahabis<sup>25</sup>. 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 Malda<sup>26</sup>. 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 Murshidabad<sup>27</sup>. 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 frontier<sup>28</sup>." There were many sub-collectors in district who collected small sums of money in their villages and send it to Maulvi Amiruddin<sup>29</sup>. The name of such sub-collectors were Sardar Masoom, Enayetullah, Amanat Mondal, Saifulla, and others<sup>29</sup>. In 1869, Maulavi Amiruddin and a number of his followers were arrested and prosecuted on the charge of waging war against the government<sup>30</sup>. Property of Maulavi Amiruddin was confiscated and he was sent to Andaman in exile<sup>31</sup>.

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 *jihadis*<sup>32</sup>. 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 oppression<sup>33</sup>. 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 Murshidabad<sup>34</sup>. 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 1860<sup>35</sup>.

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 Bengal<sup>36</sup>. A few more English schools were established in the district by 1870<sup>37</sup>. 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 colleges<sup>38</sup>.

Thus, a new class of English educated gentry emerged in the socio-political canvas of the district in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 service<sup>39</sup>.

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 continue<sup>40</sup>.

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 Malda<sup>41</sup>. 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 consciousness<sup>42</sup>. 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 funds<sup>43</sup>. 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 etc<sup>44</sup>. 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 cause<sup>45</sup>.

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 attempted<sup>46</sup>. 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 Sandhya<sup>47</sup>. 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 Assam<sup>48</sup>. Radhesh Chandra Seth took a leading role in arranging such meetings in which leaders from various places including Calcutta spoke on nationalistic subjects<sup>49</sup>. 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 Malda<sup>50</sup>. 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 people<sup>51</sup>. 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 movement<sup>52</sup>. 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 observed<sup>53</sup>.

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 it<sup>54</sup>. The Swadeshi activists also resented the elaborate preparations made by the authorities of Malda Zilla School to receive Sir Bamfylde Fuller<sup>55</sup>.

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'<sup>56</sup>. 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 activists<sup>57</sup>. 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 Malda<sup>58</sup>. 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 meetings<sup>59</sup>.

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 service<sup>60</sup>. 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 agitators<sup>61</sup>.

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 divided<sup>62</sup>. 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 staff<sup>63</sup>.

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-presidents<sup>64</sup>. 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 primary<sup>65</sup>. These schools were located at Malda, Kutubpur,

Kaligram, Dharampur, Paranpur, Jadupur and Malatipur<sup>66</sup>. In order to spread mass education, the Malda Jatiya Shiksha Samiti had established night schools at Kutubpur, Kaligram and Dharampur<sup>67</sup>. The Samiti also endeavoured to spread female education. Girls' schools were opened at Kaligram and Dharampur<sup>68</sup>.

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 geography<sup>69</sup>. 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 books<sup>70</sup>. Prominent scholars like Radhakumud Mukherjee, Radhakamal Mukherjee, Bidhusekhar Shastri, Kumudnath Lahiri were invited to deliver lectures and to encourage higher research in Bengali<sup>71</sup>. 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 SahityaParishad<sup>72</sup>.

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 workshop<sup>73</sup>. 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 technology<sup>74</sup>.

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 efforts<sup>75</sup>. 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 Malda<sup>76</sup>. 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 places<sup>77</sup>. 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 movement<sup>78</sup>. 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 Malda<sup>79</sup>.

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 society<sup>80</sup>. 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 years<sup>81</sup>. 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 School<sup>82</sup>. At Giridi, Krishnajiban came into connection with Barindra Kumar Ghosh and decided to join the Maniktala Secret Society<sup>83</sup>. 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 educated<sup>84</sup>. During the preparatory period of the Maniktala Society, its members were concerned chiefly with the collection of men, arms and money<sup>85</sup>. 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'<sup>86</sup>. In

the Alipur Bomb Case Krishnajiban was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for one year<sup>87</sup>.

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* campaign<sup>88</sup>. 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'<sup>89</sup>. 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 death<sup>90</sup>. The revolutionaries suspected that Nabinchandra Bose had been supplying information to the police about the political activities of his students<sup>91</sup>. 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 Malda<sup>92</sup>. 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 imprisonment<sup>93</sup>.

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 participants<sup>94</sup>.

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 Bengal<sup>95</sup>. In the same year Banerwar Das, a young and energetic nationalist leader in Malda, had left for the USA to receive higher education<sup>96</sup>. In 1914, Benoy Kumar Sarkar himself had left for the USA and thus was created a void, which could never be filled<sup>97</sup>.

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 1921-22<sup>98</sup>. 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*<sup>99</sup>. 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*<sup>100</sup>. 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.<sup>101</sup> The meeting was presided over by Maulavi Shah Mohammad Choudhury, a zamindar. The other speakers were Maulavi Mohammad Laljan Motwalli and Maulavi Mohammad Ismail.<sup>102</sup>

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 Englishbazar<sup>103</sup>.

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 Movement<sup>104</sup>. 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 strike<sup>105</sup>. The student of the A.C. Institution of Englishbazar also participated in the movement. They organized strikes when the district leaders were arrested<sup>106</sup>. 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 Institution<sup>107</sup>.

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 regeneration<sup>108</sup>. 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 importance<sup>109</sup>. An official report stated that several zamindars of Malda provided financial assistance for establishing these schools as well as for organizing anti- British campaign<sup>110</sup>.

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 practice<sup>111</sup>. 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 success<sup>112</sup>.

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

etc<sup>113</sup>. 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 police<sup>114</sup>.

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 tax<sup>115</sup>. 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 Rangpur<sup>116</sup>.

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 hike<sup>117</sup>. Instances of *chowkidars* being socially boycotted for refusing to resign their posts were reported from the district<sup>118</sup>.

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*<sup>119</sup>. 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*<sup>120</sup>. 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 made<sup>121</sup>.

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 1932<sup>122</sup>.

#### 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 incident<sup>123</sup>. 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 entry<sup>124</sup>. 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 well<sup>125</sup>. 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 terms<sup>126</sup>. 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 strike<sup>127</sup>. 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 Lytton<sup>128</sup>.

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 badly<sup>129</sup>. 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 offenders<sup>130</sup>. 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 discontent<sup>131</sup>.

However, the situation did not improve much. The Swarajists led by Kashishwar Chakraborty of Dinajpur took the opportunity and began to organize the *santal* sharecroppers<sup>132</sup>. 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 Association<sup>133</sup>. 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*<sup>134</sup>. 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 zamindar<sup>135</sup>.

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 Calcutta<sup>136</sup>. 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*<sup>137</sup>.

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 India<sup>138</sup>.

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 success<sup>139</sup>. 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 well<sup>140</sup>. 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 textiles<sup>141</sup>.

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 martyr<sup>142</sup>. 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 country<sup>143</sup>. 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 disobedience<sup>144</sup>.

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 manner<sup>145</sup>. 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 1929<sup>146</sup>. 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 seats<sup>147</sup>.

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 people<sup>148</sup>.

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 examination<sup>149</sup>.

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 Raj<sup>150</sup>. 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 effect<sup>151</sup>. 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 resigned<sup>152</sup>.

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 atrocities<sup>153</sup>. The police arrested two Congress leaders Ramesh Chandra Bagchi and Ramesh Chandra Ghosh on 11 July 1930<sup>154</sup>. 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 offered<sup>155</sup>. Salt was however sold in various areas of Malda and the people purchased it from the *satyagrahis* with great

enthusiasm<sup>156</sup>. 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' publicly<sup>157</sup>. 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 arrest<sup>158</sup>.

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 Tilak<sup>159</sup>.

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 movement<sup>160</sup>.

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 Barind<sup>161</sup>. 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 evidence<sup>162</sup>. 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 made<sup>163</sup>.

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 orders<sup>164</sup>. 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 Gandhi<sup>165</sup>. By defying the orders of the district administration, the Congress volunteers observed the Independence Day and hoisted the National Flag on 26 January 1932<sup>166</sup>.

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 jail<sup>167</sup>. 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 leaflets<sup>168</sup>. On 15 May, the police raided many houses in Malda in search of prohibited books and leaflets<sup>169</sup>. 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 programmes<sup>170</sup>.

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 peasants<sup>171</sup>. 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 zamindars<sup>172</sup>. 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'<sup>173</sup>. In *Gandhibaba*, Jitu saw a saviour of the poor people

against the oppression of the *zamindar-mahajan*<sup>174</sup>. In *Gandhiraj*, as envisioned by Jitu, 'there would be no more zamindars or zamindar's rent...zamindars will be driven away'<sup>175</sup>. 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 Group<sup>176</sup>. 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 others<sup>177</sup>. 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 Singhabad<sup>178</sup>.

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 Bose<sup>179</sup>. 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 CPI<sup>180</sup>.

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"<sup>181</sup>.

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 Movement<sup>182</sup>. 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 aggressor<sup>183</sup>. 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 Congress<sup>184</sup>. 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 committee<sup>185</sup>. 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 it<sup>186</sup>.

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 products<sup>187</sup>. 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 Roy<sup>188</sup>. 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 Gajol<sup>189</sup>.

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 movement<sup>190</sup>. 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’<sup>191</sup>. 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 compound<sup>192</sup>.

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 Stations<sup>193</sup>. On 2 September 1942, the records of Harishchandrapur Debt Settlement Board was burnt down. An excise shop at Kachala was set on fire<sup>194</sup>. On September 4, Subodh Misra was arrested but a mob forced the police to set him free<sup>195</sup>. The mob showed its jubilation by destroying all the telegraphic arrangements at Harishchandrapur uprooting a mile of telegraph posts<sup>196</sup>. When the SDO arrived in the evening of 6 September, he noticed mounting tension in the locality<sup>197</sup>. Subodh Misra was eventually arrested and sentenced to 6 years of rigorous imprisonment<sup>198</sup>.

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 village<sup>199</sup>. 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 Brahmachari<sup>200</sup>. 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 campaign<sup>201</sup>.

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 leaders<sup>202</sup>.

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,<sup>203</sup> the Congress largely failed in popularizing the 'do or die' call among the Muslims<sup>204</sup>.

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 nationalism<sup>205</sup>. 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"<sup>206</sup>.

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118. *Maldaha Samachar*, 10 June 1922
119. GB, Home Poll. File No. 18 / 1922, *District Magistrate, Malda to the Chief Secretary*, Govt. of Bengal, 11 April, 1922, WBSA
120. *Ibid.*
121. *Ibid.*
122. For a discussion on the revolt of Jitu Santal in 1932, see *Chapter Seven* of the present dissertation
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125. *Gourddot*, 2 October 1925
126. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 26 November 1924
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133. *Maldaha Samachar*, 27 March 1924
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136. *Maldaha Samachar*, 7 August, 1927
137. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmriti*, op.cit., *Gourdoot*, 22 April 1953
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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### POPULAR PROTEST MOVEMENTS AND TRIBAL RESISTANCE

#### INTRODUCTION :

One of the very recent trends of the Indian historiography is that a number of historians have concentrated on writing the 'history from below' i.e. the history of the toiling people of our country, through the ages. The ruling elite, not only of our country, but throughout the world, denied the past activities of the common people and discarded them from the arena of history, with a view to impose state's systems of control over the past. Hence, an attempt to write people's history has emerged as an effective answer to the traditional approach of writing elite history. In this context, we would discuss some popular protest movements and tribal resistance that emerged from the local conditions.

#### THE REVOLT OF JITU SANTAL IN 1932

The *barind* sub-region of Malda is relatively high agricultural land of red clay soil of the old alluvium. It is a least fertile land<sup>1</sup>. The name 'barind' is derived from the word 'Barendra'. During the Mughal rule, the region was thickly populated<sup>2</sup>. It lay within a day's journey of the capitals of Gour and Pandua. After the transfer of the capital to Murshidabad and the decay of Gour, the *barind* gradually became depopulated and over grown with *jungle*<sup>3</sup>. By the time of the revenue survey, a large part of the region was covered with forest and *jungle*<sup>4</sup>. The task of reclaiming the *jungle* land of *barind* was left for the *santals*, who began to migrate into the district from Rajmahal mainly after the 'hoof' of 1855.

The census of 1931 mentions that almost the entire *santal* population concentrated in the *thanas* of Bamongola, Gajol, Habibpur, Old Malda, Gomastapur, Nachol and Nababganj. It gives the number of *santal* population as 72,145<sup>5</sup>. In *barind* area agricultural labour was much in demand. Covered with thick brushwood and formed of stiff red clay and consequently non-responsive to the easy cultivation of cereals, the *barind* area required

strenuous efforts for cultivation which the local labours, decimated and devitalized by malaria, was scarcely capable of. The *santals* made of stouter stuff and stronger sinews, could, however, easily break the *barind* soil and make it respond to cultivation. Consequently, local zamindars employed them for clearing of *jungle* lands in *barind* and making it cultivable<sup>6</sup>.

The zamindars and their agents in the *barind* entered into a keen competition to entice the migrant *santals* to their lands for greater productivity and rent. The package offered to *santals* was land on extremely low rent, common rights of hunting, fishing, and so on<sup>7</sup>. A gradually flourishing *santal* colony thus grew up in the *barind* in east Malda. Santal colonization and the spread of rice cultivation in this region proved an extremely successful enterprise<sup>8</sup>.

As the *barind* area began to be transformed into a developed agricultural zone, the zamindars of *barind* began to enhance the rent and curb the rights so far enjoyed by the *santals* from 1910 onwards. The new development caused a deep resentment among the *santals*<sup>9</sup>. Cases were commonly found, M. O. Carter mentions, in which the lands cultivated by the *adhiars* were previously their occupancy holdings but had been sold up in rent or mortgage sales<sup>10</sup>. In a few cases it was found that *adhiars* had been cultivating the same land for several generations<sup>11</sup>. A comparative table on the incidence of rent differentially paid by the occupancy Raiyats and under-Raiyats at *barind* in 1930 highlights the plights of the *santals* who were the main under-tenant group in that region :

Table 7.1 Average rate of rents of Raiyats and under-Raiyats

Thanas	Occupancy Raiyats			Under-Raiyats		
	Rupees	Anna	Paisa	Rupees	Anna	Paisa
Habjbpur	1	15	3	3	10	6
Old Malda	1	12	7	5	6	7
Gajol	1	8	5	4	15	0
Bamongola	2	1	6	5	1	9

Source : Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks, Malda, Ed. A Mitra, New Delhi, 1954, pp. 1 xix

In addition, they were oppressively loaded with a plethora of cesses and *abwabs*. The total amount realized as *abwabs* was not less than the actual land revenue of *barind*<sup>12</sup>. The greater part of the *abwabs* went to the *gomastas*, but in some cases the landlords also took their share. These impositions varied in both size and character from estate to estate<sup>13</sup>. The *Gourdoot* gives an elaborate list of *abwabs* which the *barind* zamindars imposed on the *santal* under-tenants<sup>14</sup>.

a) Tahuri :

Payable to the *naib* or *gomastas*. It amounts to not less than two *annas* in the rupee.

b) Peadagan :

Payable to the *naib's* underlings. It amounted to one *anna* in the rupee.

c) Haldari :

The Choudhury Estate of Englishbazar used to collect a tax in Gajol P.S. on each plough.

d) Puja Kharach :

Most of the estates levied a special tax on various ceremonies in the zamindar's house.

- e) For a rent receipt :One *anna*.
- f) Some estates levied a tax when marriage ceremonies took place in a tenant's house. The rate was Rs. 5 for a son and Rs. 2-8 for a daughter.
- g) Some estates made special levies for the purchase of a motor car, an elephant or a gun.
- h) The tenants had to pay *anajrana* to meet the zamindars.

These *abwabs* varied from estate to estate. The Census Report of 1951 gives the following picture of estate-wise variation of *abwabs* in the *barind*<sup>15</sup>.

Table 7.2 Estate-wise variation of *abwabs* in the *barind*

Thanas	Estates	Abwabs
Habibpur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Porsha Shaha</li> <li>ii) Harihar Satiar</li> <li>iii) Bulbuli-Singhabad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) 8 <i>anna</i> in the rupee</li> <li>ii) 12 <i>anna</i> in the rupee</li> <li>iii) On the average of 4 <i>anna</i> in the rupee. The tenant had to pay between Rs. 1 and Rs.2 to see the zamindar.</li> </ul>
Gazol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Jadu Nandan Choudhury</li> <li>ii) Girija Kanta Das</li> <li>iii) The Sannyals</li> </ul>	The average <i>abwabs</i> is over 4 <i>anna</i> in the rupee. Tahsildars were either not paid or were paid a nominal amount, made the rest out of tenants.
Old Malda	Girija Kanta Das and	J. N. Choudhury levied a tax on

	others	each plough. The <i>abwabs</i> varied from 4 to 8 <i>anna</i> per rupee. Fees for the Tahsildars and peons, the cost of establishment, the cost of rent receipts and subscription to various festivities were realized. On the average a tenant paid as <i>abwabs</i> not less than one-third of the legal rent.
Gomastapur	Taherpur Estate, Brajendra Moitra, Begum Saheba of Rohanpur	The general rate of <i>abwab</i> varied from 2 to 8 <i>anna</i> per rupee. The <i>abwab</i> in Begum Saheba Estate was 3 to 9 <i>anna</i> which was fairly moderate in the <i>barind</i> .
Source : Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks, Malda, Ed. A. Mitra, New Delhi, 1954, p. lxxiii		

After 1910, the Gourdoot informed, the *barind* zamindars persistently attempted to enhance rents, which became a constant source of friction between the zamindars and *santal* agriculturists<sup>16</sup>. The friction took an alarming proportion as early as 1910 when the zamindar of Bulbulchandi tried to enhance the rent. The *santal* tenants rose in protest. The gravity of the situation compelled Mr. Vas, then the District Magistrate, to interfere and the rent was fixed as six *annas* per bigha. As the administrative machinery now occasionally came forward to safeguard the interests of the *santal* sharecroppers, the zamindars became apprehensive and they tried to use the loopholes of the prevalent legal devices to deprive them of their holdings. In doing so they were assisted by the *mahajans* and pleaders. Thus, *zamindars, mahajans* and pleaders - all were combined in the common object of exploiting the *santals*<sup>17</sup>.

The Gourdoot mentioned certain coercive methods by which the *zamindars* and the *mahajans* used to evict the *santals* from their land<sup>18</sup>. If the *santal*

tenants refused to pay the recently enhanced rents, the unpaid enhancement was recorded as 'arrears' in the estate accounts for many years. The zamindars charged compound interest on it. Consequently it was found that a tenant with an annual rental of Rs. 4/- or Rs. 5/- had been shown in the estate accounts as being in arrears amounting to even Rs. 1500/- to Rs. 2000/-. The poor *santal* tenant expressed his inability to pay the sum, yielding to eventual loss of his land. The editor informed that once he went to Habibpur with Mr. Peddie, then the District Magistrate and Mr. Peddie showed him some hundred papers which bore evidence of such unjust and corrupt methods<sup>19</sup>.

The *santals* lost their lands to the *mahajans* not only in consequence of their debt to them. They were dispossessed of their land also by means of deliberate fraud committed on them, which was possible because of their complete ignorance of the laws relating to occupancy rights. A '*khos kobala*', for instance, means a sale deed but a '*khot kobala*' is a form of mortgage. In Malda, cases occurred where the word '*khos*' was substituted for the word '*kho*' in the mortgage deed of a *santal* by the *mahajans* in collaboration with the court pleader, with the result that the transaction amounted to an outright sale<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, on many occasions the zamindars forced the *santal* tenants to hand-over their rent receipts and it was deliberately destroyed.

Another method was to use the civil court, and by suppressing its processes to get an *ex parte* decree. As a result, many *santal* tenants had lost their occupancy rights. One case came to notice of government officials in which a *santal* actually lost his holding because he borrowed some salt from his *mahajan*<sup>21</sup>. The Gourdoot mentioned some instances where a *santal* tenant borrowed some ten or twelve rupees from the *mahajan* for which he was ultimately evicted from his land<sup>22</sup>. We have figures for the years 1928 - 33 obtained from the civil court which show the number of cases heard *ex parte*, and the percentage of such cases to the total number of cases. The figures were as follows<sup>23</sup>.

Table 7.3 Number of cases heard *ex-parte*

1.	Rent Suits : a) Cases heard <i>ex parte</i> – 881 b) Percentage – 88%
2.	Mortgage Suits : a) Cases heard <i>ex parte</i> – 172 b) Percentage – 82%
Source : Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks, Malda, Ed. A. Mitra, New Delhi, 1954, p. lxxiii	

From a statistics given in the Malda Census of 1951 it is known that in such a way some 25,000 acres of land held by the *santal* tenants in *barind* had been expropriated by the *mahajans - dalals - zamindars*<sup>24</sup>.

Table 7.4 Survey of Expropriated Area from Aborigines

Thanas	Area expropriated in sq. miles	Area in sq. miles	Estimated area expropriated from aborigines
Bamongala	69.32	1.46	1.10
Habibpur	156.73	9.00	6.75
Gajol	196.84	6.36	4.77
Malda	87.15	8.10	6.08
Gomastapur	122.64	20.34	10.17
Nachol	109.70	10.53	5.27
Nababganj	55.90	9.00	4.50

Total :	798.28	64.77	38.64
Source : Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbook, Malda, Ed. A. Mitra, New Delhi, 1954, p. lxxiv			

The above figures represent the transfer of lands from all categories of cultivating tenants and not only *santals*, but there is little doubt that the major portion had been expropriated from *santals*. According to the Malda Census Handbook of 1951, not less than three quarters of the area in the first four *thanas*, and half of the area in the remaining three *thanas* formerly belonged to *santals*. That means that in about 25,000 acres of land the *santals* had lost their occupancy rights, and probably in the majority of cases became *adhiars* without any rights<sup>25</sup>.

The defects in the tenancy legislation and its execution were obviously a vital factor for such a situation. Chapter VII(A) of the Bengal Tenancy Act (1885) was extended to the *santals* of Malda in 1923, and to the *oraons* there in 1927. Under its provision no tribal can transfer land by sale or mortgage without the permission of District Magistrate in writing. Unfortunately, this provision was nullified in practice because the District Magistrate was not given any statutory power to compel the moneylender to accept his terms to which he arrived at after calculating how much land should be sold or what should be the terms of the mortgage and what the amount owing to the moneylender was. It appears that law was meant to be preserved in the stature and not to be put into practice or enforced. In fact the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885 failed so far as the *santal* peasants of Malda are concerned in the determination of a fair rent protection against eviction and prevention of alienation of land to non-agriculturists, the cherished objective of the said legislation<sup>26</sup>.

Loss of lands meant to them loss of identity. The question of land had not only economic and political implications but had a spiritual value too. W.H.Archer has rightly pointed out, "A *santal's* land not only provides economic security, but is powerful link with his ancestors; and this applies to newly entered areas

no less than the old, for he will not take possession till the sprits approve. The land is part of his spiritual as well as economic heritage”.

It was against this background of injustice, exploitation and malpractices the movement of Jitu Santal broke out. Our principal sources for information in this respect are archival records and the unpublished ‘*memoir*’ of Lalbihari Majumdar, the editor of Gourdoot, a local newspaper. The ‘*memoir*’ of the editor serialized in Gourdoot contains a vivid description of this movement of Jitu Santal against zamindars and its patron, the British Raj<sup>27</sup>. The editor informed that he had personal linkage with Jitu who often used to meet him whenever he came to the town<sup>28</sup>. Jitu developed a personal liking for him, as the editor thought, he published a newspaper and was well aware of the contemporary political situation. Moreover, Jitu probably believed that the editor knew much about ‘*Gandhibaba*’ whom Jitu saw as the savior of the poor people against the oppression of the zamindars<sup>29</sup>.

Jitu’s movement was, Tanika Sarkar observes, rooted in a rich tradition of tribal struggle in Malda<sup>30</sup>. The early form of *santal* resistance was migration, which amounted to a kind of passive resistance. From 1901 onwards a large number of *santals* began to leave Malda for Dinajpur, Rajshahi and even the Nepalterais<sup>31</sup>. Active struggle between the *santals* and their landlords began about 1910. In this year the zamindars of Tauzis 586 and 587 in Habibpurthana tried to enforce an enhancement of rent<sup>32</sup>. The *santals* raised the voice of protest against it. At first they adopted peaceful means for a solution. They made a representation to the Governor, alleging oppression and unfair exactions by the *gomastas* and the *peadas* (guard). Mr. Vas, then the District Magistrate, was appointed as arbitrator, and was accepted by both parties to the dispute<sup>33</sup>. Because of Mr. Vas’s settlement, the lands were measured and rent was settled at six *annas per bigha*. A provision was also made for the payment of arrear rent. This settlement was accepted by the *santals* and since then all attempts to make further enhancements were resisted. M.O.Carter cited a case where a *santal*’s holding was sold for the non-payment of rent, which had been increased without his knowledge. When

the purchaser came to take possession, the *santal* defended his right and killed him with an arrow. The *santal* was sentenced to seven years' rigorous imprisonment<sup>34</sup>.

So at the time of commencement of settlement operations, there was much tension in the relation between landlords and *santals* in *barind*. It was in this backdrop of oppression, exploitation and injustice, Jitu Santal of Kochakandar village of Habibpur began to unite the *santals* of *barind* for a widespread movement. In the late 1920s Jitu came under the influence of a Swarajist pleader from Dinajpur named Kashishwar Chakraborty. His aim was to bring the *santals* within the Hindu fold. Jitu Santal became his disciple and organized a *Sannyasi Dol*. They came to be known as the Satyam Sibam Sundaram Sect<sup>35</sup>. The devotees gave up eating pigs, fowls and other 'forbidden' food<sup>36</sup>. By 1926 Jitu had become the leader of a widespread movement in converting the *santals* into Hindus. At one time the editor of Gourdoot noticed a '*Kali than*' (place of worship of Goddess Kali) at Jitu's residence. According to the editor, it was an important source of Jitu's income<sup>37</sup>. Jitu declared that the *santals* would have to acknowledge him as their sovereign authority and accept his justice<sup>38</sup>. In 1926, the '*Sanyasi Dol*' under Jitu's leadership defied police order to perform a *Kali puja* to assert its new Hindu status<sup>39</sup>.

Jitu told his followers that the English and the Mussalmans would go and Shikarpur will be rescued for the Sannyasis. 'The zamindars will be driven away. There will be no more zamindars'<sup>40</sup>. 'All the land will be ours' was a slogan repeated again and again<sup>41</sup>. In September 1928 the *santal* sharecroppers under the leadership of Jitu looted the '*bhadoi*' (autumn) crop from the lands that had recently been taken away from them in *barind* region. Several other incidents of paddy looting took place. The District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police rushed to the spot with armed police. After several clashes Jitu together with sixty of his followers were arrested<sup>42</sup>.

After his release, Jitu began to call himself *Senapati Gandhi*<sup>43</sup>. At that time the Civil Disobedience Movement under Gandhiji's leadership began. The *santal* sharecroppers of *barind* did not precisely know who Gandhi was or what were his ideas and principles. They only know that a man named Gandhi was carrying on a struggle against the enemy of the common people - the British. To the *santals* of *barind* the name of Gandhi was symbol of struggle and a source of inspiration<sup>44</sup>.

The *santals* of *barind* constructed the image of Gandhi from rumours and disjointed bits of news. It is to be noted here that the non-tribal political forces in Malda were represented by *Swarajists* and *Hindu Sabha* activists<sup>45</sup>. But interestingly Jitu himself accepted Gandhiji as an overarching authority<sup>46</sup>. It may be that Jitu in this respect was influenced by the *santals* of *Balurghat* subdivision in the neighbouring district of Dinajpur. They were far better integrated with the Congress movement<sup>47</sup>.

So Jitu himself appropriated Gandhi's image and use his symbols. He gave *darshan* to his disciples, sitting at the *charkha*<sup>48</sup>. '*Desh*' or homeland and '*Gandhiraj*' were themes that occurred again and again in Jitu's preaching : '*The English Raj has gone*'; *Gandhiraj*, our *desh* is coming'<sup>49</sup>. In fact, Jitu had his own vision of *Gandhiraj*. In his *Gandhiraj*, 'there will be no more *zamindars* and *mahajans*. There will be no more *zaminder's* rent ..... *zamindars* will be driven away ..... our *Raj*, our *desh* is coming. There will be no more *zamindars* and no more rent'<sup>50</sup>. The *santals* of *barind* believed that they were following their leader into a new utopian world of '*Gandhiraj*'. In fact, the *santal* sharecroppers of *barind* interpreted Gandhi in their own ways, drawing meanings from their own lived experiences and made him a symbol of power for the powerless<sup>51</sup>. Thus the *Gandhiraj*, conceptualized by Jitu, promised to deliver the *santal* masses of *barind* from exploitation, oppression and miseries<sup>52</sup>.

In June 1931 rumours circulated all over *barind* that *Gandhibaba* spoke for the stoppage of payment of rent to the *zamindars*. Instead he asked the *santal* tenants to pay Jitu one *kula* (about five seers) of paddy. As a result, the payment of rents to the *zamindars* of *barind* had been totally stopped. Other communities such as *Koch*, *Rajbansis* had also stopped the payment of rents being apprehensive of the trouble from the part of the *santals*<sup>53</sup>. From the local newspaper source, one interesting anecdote of Jitu's struggle comes to our knowledge. As and when an aeroplane crossed over the sky of *barind* region, Jitu told his followers that the British power had staged a retreat and all the aeroplanes belonged to *Gandhibaba*<sup>54</sup>.

In fact, rumours about the collapse of the government had become a dominant theme in Jitu's mass mobilization drive: 'the English *Raj* will not remain, the *desh* will come'; 'The English *Raj* has gone'; 'The English and the Mussalmans would all be driven out'; 'Our *Raj*, Our *desh* is coming'; and so on<sup>55</sup>. Jitu also had envisaged an alternative structure of authority: 'Do not go to the government with your complaints. You must pay me Rs. 3. I shall be the judge and arbitrator in all disputes'<sup>56</sup>. Jitu challenged the legitimacy of the prevailing legal system by branding it as '*be-aini*' (illegal)<sup>57</sup>. Those who were not ready to accept his '*bichar*' were threatened to be excommunicated<sup>58</sup>.

The situation was thus explosive and it needs but a spark to kindle a conflagration. This was supplied by the Muslim zamindar of Kotwali. In October 1932 the zamindar of Kotwali demanded two-thirds of the crops from the *santals*<sup>59</sup>. At Jitu's instruction the *santals* refused to obey. Jitu spelt out: '*Gandhibaba* asked the *santals* not to pay rent to the zamindars. All the lands now belong to *santals*'. A clash between the zamindar's *paiks* and the *santals* took place at Habibpur on 25 October 1932. The police rushed to the spot and controlled the situation. The *santals* found that the government was on the side of the zamindar. The anti-zamindar agitation now turned into an anti-colonial struggle<sup>60</sup>.

In December 1932, a large number of *santals* marched to Pandua<sup>61</sup> and occupied the ruins of the Adina<sup>62</sup> mosque. Jitu declared that the Adina

mosque was in reality the temple of Adinath or Siva which was later transformed into *masjid* by the Muslims<sup>63</sup>. Jitu stated that they would perform a *puja* (Worship) of the GoddessKali within the mosque. At the same time Jitu, who now called himself 'Senapati Gandhi', declared the end of the British Raj and proclaimed his own government : 'The English has gone. Our Raj, Our Desh is established. We have our own Government. 'Lara' (fight) has begun to drive English and Muslims out of *barind*<sup>64</sup>.

The *santals* now resorted to violence. Houses of *zamindars* and *mahajans* were attacked. Police outpost was attacked at Habibpur. From Habibpur the outbreak spread in other areas of *barind* region like fire<sup>65</sup>. The long oppressed *santals* of *barind* at last found in it a chance of getting free from the zamindars and moneylenders and establishing themselves as a free people. A magical vision of the breakdown of English power was projected by Jitu : 'Our bows and arrows will carry three *kos* and the guns of the English will not fire'<sup>66</sup>.

The district administration sent a large group of armed police force to Pandua to put down the revolt of *santals* of *barind*. The then District Magistrate ordered the *santals* to leave the Adina mosque, but they refused to obey. A pitched battle followed between Jitu's men and armed police force who opened fire after the *santals* refused to come out. Six *santals*, including Jitu himself, were shot dead, while a police was killed by a poisoned arrow and some others were wounded<sup>67</sup>. The police entered the mosque and arrested the *santal* rebels. In this task the police were assisted by some *zamindars* and *mahajans* of Malda. The prominent among them was Abul Hayat Khan Choudhury, the zamindar of Kotwali<sup>68</sup>. The revolt of Jitu which aimed to establish a Santal Desh came to an end.

It has been attempted to represent the revolt of Jitu essentially a communal violence. The communal preaching of Jitu and his 'Sannyasi Doi' were highlighted. It has been stated that in 1926 when Jitu gave the call of 'lara' at 'Pandua Gar', his chief targets were the local Muslims. The occupation of Adina mosque in 1932 was projected as only an attempt to transform the mosque into a temple<sup>69</sup>. The local Hindu Mahasabha also propagated the

incident in a communal tone. The Mahasabha stated that the occupation of the Adina mosque angered the Muslims and the authority opened fire on the *santals* at the instigation of the Muslims<sup>70</sup>. The colonial officials were prone to characterize Jitu's movement from two angles : i) that it had a strong communal tone and ii) that it was externally manipulated. The district officer of Dinajpur reported : 'Trouble may be caused by the *santals* who are blindly led by the *guru*, Babu Kashishwar Chakraborty, pleader'<sup>71</sup>.

However, the facts given in local sources differ substantially from such type of hypothesis. There is no evidence to suggest that the Muslim people in general nourished any type of apathy towards the *santals*. It was true that the *santals* adopted Hindu religious beliefs and practices. They gave up the use of pigs and foul<sup>72</sup>. In doing so they attempted to raise themselves to the status of intermediate '*Jal chal*' castes. But this dominant Hindu attitudes does not indicate a simple model of communalism. Tanika Sarkar has observed that even when Hindu religion and caste structure were accepted by the *santals* under Jitu, there was, on another plane, a notion of continuous struggle where Hindu overlords and local oppressors were implicitly pitted against *santal* peasants<sup>73</sup>.

In this context, Tanika Sarkar has examined Jitu's concept of *Desh* or *raj*. Jitu propagated that between the community leader (Jitu himself) and the ordinary *santal* all intermediate layers of authority erected by the colonial government would disappear<sup>74</sup>. 'There will be no more *hakim* or *thana* or *zilla*. They are abolished ..... There would be no more *zamindars* - *hakim* - *thana* or police ..... There will be no more *zamindars* or *zamindars*' rent ..... *zamindars* will be driven away ..... our *Raj*, our *desh* is coming. There will be no more *zamindars* and no more rent'<sup>75</sup>. It is thus evident that the revolt of Jitu was not against any specific community. All sources of oppression - *zamindar*, *hakim*, *thana*, *police*- are lumped together. The revolt of Jitu was, in fact, against an entire system of oppression.

If Jitu nurtured hostility against the Muslims, he also had deep contempt for lower castes and untouchables : 'If you (*santal*) don't come to our side, you

shall be outcaste and will be associated with Mussalmans and *domes* and *chamars*<sup>76</sup>. This attitude had nothing to do with the Hindu Sabha message of an unified Hindu community that swept over Malda at this time<sup>77</sup>. Moreover, Jitu's Hinduization drive and his worship of the Mother Goddess Kali did not find favour with the urban and rural Hindu *bhadralok* community. They criticized as well as actively opposed the revolt of Jitu. When a condolence meeting in memory of the police official killed at the hands of the *santal* rebels was held at Englishbazar, a large number of local Hindu populace joined the meeting and vehemently condemned the movement of Jitu<sup>78</sup>. Ashutosh Choudhury, a rich zamindar and prominent Hindu Sabha leader, actively assisted the police in suppressing Jitu's revolt for which he was congratulated by the government<sup>79</sup>.

Jitu's movement, though had some religious overtone, was not simply communalist. The movement did not set the *santal* sharecroppers against their Muslim counterpart in *barind* in open conflict. It also did not divert the *santals* from economic issues to a false solidarity with their communal friends but class enemies. To the *santals*, the Adina mosque was the symbol of authority of the Muslim zamindar of Kotwali who was one of their oppressors. It is therefore highly probable that the grudge of recalcitrant *santals* revealed itself in the occupation of the Adina mosque. In doing so, they wanted to challenge the authority of that particular zamindar<sup>80</sup>. So the decision to occupy and convert the Adina mosque was largely rooted in the problems and agrarian relations of the region itself.

To sum up, Jitu's uprising falls within the general category of peasant uprisings. We have shown that the element of religion, though used sometimes as ideology or an ingredient of organization build-up, was never a determining force in the revolt. The general history of peasant uprisings is full of such religious overcoatings, but the contents become clear when the revolts climb down to the realm of actual life and hostile class forces face each other. Then the veil of religion disappears and zamindars like Ashu Choudhury and Abul Hayat Khan, a Hindu and a Muslim landlord, became united with the force of the government against a Jitu, a Hindu but a peasant.

## THE SANTALS AFTER 1932 : DARAIL BEEL AND CHOROL BEEL INCIDENTS

The revolt of Jitu Santal in the *barind* region of Malda failed to attain its objective. But for the first time, it drew the attention of the British authority to the untold sufferings of the *santals*. Shortly after the revolt, the District Magistrate proposed to government that a Special Officer should be appointed for the *barind* to enquire into the grievances of the *santals* and redress them as far as possible<sup>81</sup>. Sir P.C.Mitter, then the Revenue Minister, called for a report from the Settlement Department on the actual state of affairs in *barind*. On the basis of this report a Special Officer for *barind* was appointed in June 1933<sup>82</sup>. But this step did not usher any real reform. The zamindari oppression continued unabated. An enquiry in 1945-46 established that the *santals* in the Habibpur-Bamongola-Gajol complex of villages were remained sharecroppers with average holdings well below the size of an economic holding, and that even in the best of times their livelihood rose barely above the minimum subsistence level<sup>83</sup>.

So the conditions were ripe for further tenant unrest. In April 1938 violent clashes between the police and a tribal mob took place at Darail *beel*<sup>84</sup>. It was a large natural lake within the jurisdiction of Habibpur P.S. The zamindar of Singhabad owned the *beel* which was known for the great quantity of fish it yielded every year. A large number of *santals* lived in the villages in the vicinity of Darail *beel*. On 6 April 1938 the santal tenants gathered around the *beel* to catch fish. The Gourdoot informed that this type of fish-looting was customary in the *santal* tradition<sup>85</sup>. They called it *bahich* and it usually took place after the Fagua<sup>86</sup>. The *santals* considered it their birth-right. Mr. Vas, then the Divisional Commissioner, ordered in the 1920s that the *santals* could observe this traditional custom at each pond for one day at *barind* region. Since then the *santals* had been observing this custom without any resistance from the zamindars<sup>87</sup>.

The zamindar of Singhabad sought the assistance of the police to prevent the *santals* from catching fish in Darail *beel*. A police force rushed to the spot and

asked the *santals* not to catch fish in the *beel*. But the *santals* refused to obey. The officer-in-charge of the Habibpur P.S. fired a shot. The crowd became violent and attacked the police force and the Peadas of the lessee of the *beel*. A Peada was injured and later succumbed to death. Many polices were injured<sup>88</sup>. As the news of violence reached Englishbazar, the headquarters of the district, a large police force led by the Superintendent of Police rushed to the spot. The adjacent tribal villages were searched. The police arrested some leaders of the *santals*. A criminal case was filed against them. In his verdict, the assistant session judge of Malda sentenced four *santals* to rigorous imprisonment of two years each<sup>89</sup>.

Another conflict between the *santal* agriculturists and the local zamindars led to police firing on the unarmed *santals* at Chorol *beel* (pond) in April, 1947. It is interesting to note that all the standard literature on the Tebhaga Movement are prone to discuss this incident in connection with the Tebhaga Movement which broke out in 1946 in several districts of Bengal including Malda<sup>90</sup>. Our study however has shown that the Chorol *beel* incident had no relation with the Tebhaga episode. It was mainly a fight to assert customary rights of the *santal* community which the local zamindar tried to subvert.

From contemporary local newspaper source we come to know that while a large group of *santals* numbering six to seven hundreds were engaged in fishing with the help of Polo or Tapa (Pail-shaped wicker-basket for catching fish) at Chorol *beel* in the zamindari of Bulbulchandi, the police at the order of the Barind Officer<sup>91</sup> opened fire on them. It put, according to official estimate, four *santals* to death<sup>92</sup>. But the newspaper was unwilling to accept the official declaration of death-toll. The editor believed that the actual number of casualties was greater than the official estimate. The editor informed that he visited the place of event in person, made a thorough enquiry, interviewed the injured *santals* and some local people. On the circumstantial evidence he came to the conclusion that the official estimate of casualties was a deliberate lie<sup>93</sup>.

In support of his view the editor of *Gourdoot* furnished the following reasons<sup>94</sup>

:

- a) the police officials admitted that they fired thirty rounds of bullets. So it was unbelievable that only four *santals* were killed and a handful injured in view of the fact that the *santals* were unarmed and they gathered thickly at the pond. It left little chance for the police to be misaimed;
- b) The police showed no intention to disperse the crowd by firing in air. They began shooting without any provocation from the *santals*;
- c) The police had no intention either to hurt the *santals* by shooting at the lower part of body. The fact that two *santals* were found dead with bullet injury on their forehead confirmed this view;
- d) Immediately after the Adina incident of 1932 (revolt of Jitu Santal) then the District Magistrate issued a statement on the event. But in the case of *Chorol beel* the district administration failed to issue any statement within two weeks after the incident took place. The newspaper considered this silence deliberate. It reported that the silence of the administration aroused suspicion in a section of local people<sup>95</sup>.

The newspaper reported that the local Communist Party, the District Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha unanimously condemned this brutal act on the part of the police in unequivocal terms<sup>96</sup>. The communists organized a procession in protest against police-firing on the unarmed *santals*. They demanded punishment of the police officials who were responsible for such brutality<sup>97</sup>. The leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha stated that this unfortunate incident could easily be avoided. They asked the administration to state clearly the situation in which the police were compelled to open fire<sup>98</sup>. The newspaper (*Gourdoot*) reported that conceding to public pressure the district administration had to issue a statement after a long spell of silence<sup>99</sup>.

The *santals* were, according to this statement, repeatedly warned by the *naib* of the Bulbulchandi Estate to stop fishing at the pond. While the armed *santals* paid no attention to his warning, he informed the police. A group of police and the Barind Officer rushed to the spot and ordered the *santals* to leave the place. But the *santal* mob refused to obey and a group armed with bows, arrows and spears attacked the police. Finding no other alternative the police had to fire in self-defense<sup>100</sup>.

But all the political parties, according to the newspaper report, expressed doubt regarding the authenticity of the official statement<sup>101</sup>. The local congress sent an enquiry team led by Ramhari Roy, M.L.A. to the spot. After a thorough investigation the enquiry team issued a statement to the press. The enquiry team was, the statement ran, in a position to say that the number of dead persons were fifteen to twenty. The police firing injured about forty to fifty people also. The mob consisted of *santals*, few Rajbansis and very few Muslims. The enquiry team stated that the police opened fire upon a peaceful gathering who were neither riotous nor they were armed with bows and arrows as alleged by the administration. Neither the mob threatened the police party with any attack. At the end of the statement the enquiry team vehemently criticized the role of the Barind Officer<sup>102</sup>.

The local Communists accused that the Barind Officer acted in collaboration with the zamindar and demanded his immediate resignation<sup>103</sup>. This demand was echoed by the newspaper also<sup>104</sup>. This brutal act on the part of the administration greatly stirred the mind of the local populace. This is evident from the reports of the local newspaper. The Gourdoot, for instance, had raised some questions<sup>105</sup>:

- a) What was the nature of bullet injury, specially where it struck the body?
- b) How and where the *santals* concealed their weapons while catching fish?

- c) Did the *santals* escape after collecting their weapons or abandon those when firing began?
- d) How many weapons were seized by the police from the spot?
- e) During the Adina incident of 1932 many prominent personalities were employed by the administration to persuade Jitu to surrender. Did the administration adopt such type of persuasion before taking the ultimate path of firing in the case of Chorol *beel*?

The local intelligentsia was of the opinion that this brutal act of the police, aided by the local zamindar, was not an isolated event. They wanted to relate it to the deep-rooted agrarian problem of the *barind* region. In the editorial of Gourdoot it was stated that the incident of Chorol *beel* took place as the culmination of a long-standing conflict between the *santal* agriculturists and the local zamindars<sup>106</sup>. As was discussed in connection with the discussion of Jitu's revolt that the principal causes of ill-feeling that existed between the landlords and the *santal* tenants of *barind* were the exaction of various *abwabs*, the illegal enhancement of rent, non-grantal of rent-receipts, the levy of interest at high rates and the rapacity and oppression of landlords' agents, *gomastas* and *peadas*.

This strained relation was particularly noticeable in the Bulbulchandi Estate. According to the District Census Report of 1951, the Bulbulchandi Estate was perhaps the most remarkable example of mismanagement in the district<sup>107</sup>. If the tenants refused to pay the enhanced rents claimed by the zamindar of Bulbulchandi, the unpaid enhancement had been entered as arrears in the estate accounts for many years and interest had been charged on it. Consequently it was not uncommon to find a *santal* tenant with an annual rental of Rs. 5/- had been shown in the estate accounts as being in arrears to the tune of Rs. 2000/<sup>108</sup>. The Bulbulchandi Estate also followed another malpractice, namely the deliberate destruction of rent receipts<sup>109</sup>.

These malpractices produced a bitter relation between the landlord and *santal* tenants in the zamindari of Bulbulchandi<sup>110</sup>. After the appointment in 1932 of a Special Officer at *barind* to look after the interests of the *santals*, it was hoped that this oppression would at least be reduced, if not ended<sup>111</sup>. But this hope of the *santal* tenants to get justice was dashed to the ground. It was seen that this Special Officer often cooperated with the zamindars<sup>112</sup>.

In December 1946 i.e., just before the incident of Chorol *beel* the zamindar of Bulbulchandi once again made an attempt to increase rents<sup>113</sup>. The *santal* sharecroppers protested vigorously and decided not to pay the enhanced rent. They also made an appeal to the Barind Officer to look into the matter. Several clashes took place and the zamindar's *gomastasand peadas* were assaulted on a few occasions<sup>114</sup>. The situation became tense and the zamindar of Bulbulchandi resolved to take revenge. The result was the incident of Chorol *beel* in 1947 where the zamindar with the help of the police gunned down some *santal* tenants on a trivial pretext<sup>115</sup>.

The occurrence of Chorol *beel* is a rare incident in the panorama of general agrarian protests in Bengal. It shows how a ritualistic cause of tribal society could ignite a general discontent simmering within the framework of zamindar-peasant relations where rack-renting was the rule of the day. It also shows the complex relationship between different peasant groups, the tribal and the non tribal and how they were cemented when the onslaughts came. The incident of Chorol *beel* and its dating thus misguided some scholars who described a tribal community's bid to retain its customary right against the subversive attempt of the zamindar as a peasant struggle within the blazing trail of the Tebhaga Movement.

## THE STRIKE OF THE MALOS

One of the most interesting information collected from the Gourdoot is perhaps the strike by the *malos* (fishermen) in protest against the fixation of prices of fishes by the district administration. In the context of the history from

below<sup>116</sup>, this protest movement by the poor *malos* of Malda deserves attention and requires further serious research. The gravity and magnitude of the movement is revealed by the fact that the newspaper covered the news of this protest movement in four issues - 24 May 1945, 7 June 1945, 8 July 1945 and 6 September 1945.

The Gourdoot reported that the District Magistrate had fixed the prices of various kinds of fishes in the area under the Englishbazar Municipality<sup>117</sup>. The District Magistrate Mr. Barnwell further declared that this had been made according to the Safety of India Act. The District Magistrate warned the *malos* that in case of violation of the Act, strong punitive measures would be taken<sup>118</sup>. This step was editorially supported in the Gourdoot. The editorial also proposed that the fixation of rates be implemented in the entire district. At the same time some problems of the *malos* were pointed out - (1) rapid increase in auction value of ponds; (2) non-availability of fishes owing to drought; (3) enormous price-hike of essential commodities<sup>119</sup>.

Anyway, we come to know from the subsequent issues that some serious problems arose as a result of fixation of prices of fishes, such as -

- a) The act was practically rendered void by the *malos*.
- b) The prices of fishes went on increasing.
- c) The *malos* were defying the law openly. They were selling fishes at a high price at their house and they were going outside the municipality area to sell fish at high prices.
- d) As a result the influx of fishes at the *hats* and *bazaars* of municipality which was under the direct jurisdiction of the Act, was almost stopped<sup>120</sup>.

To solve this problem the district administration had declared that thenceforth the act would come in force in the entire district<sup>121</sup>. The administration had taken stern attitude and about 15 *malos* were arrested for violating the act. In

the protest against this governmental action the *malos* called for a strike and the selling of fishes was stopped in the whole district<sup>122</sup>. The editorial of Gourdoot informed that the ordinary buyers were happy with the action taken by the district administration. They praised the administration for punishing the obstinate *malos*<sup>123</sup>.

The editor recapitulated that about 25 years back i.e. in 1920 a similar situation arose<sup>124</sup>. At that time a section of the congress workers led by one Ramlal Kabiraj called a meeting of the *malos* and ordinary buyers and fixed the price of different kind of fishes. The *malos* opposed this step in unison and a difference of opinion cropped up in the congress rank. Eventually C.R.Das, the state congress leader, had to be informed about this problem. He immediately expressed his concern and came at Malda only a few days after. He called for a meeting and in front of him the two sections of the congress who were for and against the fixation of prices of fishes began to make quarrel<sup>125</sup>. C.R.Das, after considering the opinion of the both sections, declared that the fixation of prices of fishes should not continue. In support of his view he cited several reasons<sup>126</sup>:

- i) Uncertainty of catching fish. Though a *malo* caught three *maund* today, he might not be able to catch half *maund* tomorrow;
- ii) Flexibility of demands. In marriage and other such occasions the demand usually went high. But at times the *malos* could not get buyers even at a low price.

The editor of Gourdoot was of the opinion that the problems of the *malos* cited by C.R.Das about 25 years back still continued. Moreover some other problems were added to worsen the condition of the *malos*, such as<sup>127</sup>:

- a) The price of fishing boat was rocketed up after the War. Some three or four years ago it cost Rs. 30 - 32/- only. Its price now (i.e. 1945) stood at Rs. 100 - 125/-.
- b) The price of fishing net increased by four times.

- c) The auction value of ponds increased rapidly. The pond which some ten years ago was sold at Rs. 2,000/-, in 1945 its price now rocketed to Rs. 10,000 - 15,000/-

The editor stated that all these are the economic impact of the Second World War. So he requested the government to consider the present condition of the *malos* before fixing the rates arbitrarily<sup>128</sup>.

So we notice an interesting change of the stand in this issue. While in the issue of 24 May 1945 the editor enthusiastically supported the move of the local administration, now in September 1945 he came out in open support of the *malos*. We don't come to know why the newspaper changed its stand so quickly. We don't get any hint in the editorial either. Anyway, the newspaper opined that in case of fixation of rates, the interest of the poor *malos* should be duly protected<sup>129</sup>. The subsequent issues of the *Gourdoot* informed that the strike had been continuing. But rather surprisingly the successive issues did not contain any further information about the protest movement of the *malos*. It may be assumed that for being vocal in support of the *malos* the newspaper was warned by the authorities and it was refrained from containing any further news and taking up the cause of the *malos*.

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30. Tanika Sarkar, *Jitu Santal's Movement*, *op. cit.*, P. 147
31. M.O.Carter, *Final Report*, *op. cit.*, P. 37
32. *Ibid.*, P. 82
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, P. 84
35. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, 27 August 1949

36. M.O.Carter, Final Report, *op. cit.*, P. 40
37. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, op.cit.*, 27 August 1949
38. *Ibid.*
39. Government of West Bengal, Poll. Conf. F.N. 622(1-2) / 1926, enclosure I, Report of Malda SP, 26 December 1926
40. GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629(1-3) / 1926
41. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, op.cit.*, 10 September 1949
42. Tanika Sarkar, Jitu Santal's Movement, *op. cit.*, P. 14
43. Prabal Roy, Maldar Santal Gana-asantosh (in Bengali), Joar, 1 March 1991; Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, op.cit.*, 10 September 1949; A. B. Chaudhuri, State Formation Among Tribals : A Quest for Santal Identity, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993, P. 126
44. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, op.cit.*, 10 September 1949
45. Sibendu Sekhar Roy, *Swadhinata Sangrame Maldaha, in Swadhinata Sangrame Maldaher Abodan*, ed. Radhagobinda Ghosh, Swadhinata Sangrame Maldaha Grantha Prakashan Samiti, Malda, Baisakh 1398, P. 10
46. *Maldaha Samachar*, 7 October, 1933; A.B. Chaudhuri, State Formation Among Tribals, *op. cit.*, P. 124
47. J.C.Sengupta, West Bengal District Gazetteers : Malda, Calcutta, 1969, P. 22; Sudhir Kumar Chakrabarty, Maldaher Swadhinata Sangram Smarene, Udayan, March 1975, P. 28
48. The Statesman, 16 December 1932
49. GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629(1-3) / 1932

50. Testimonies in GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629(213) / 1926 and GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 622(1-2) / 1926
51. For Similar instances, see Shahid Amin, *Gandhi as Mahatma : Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921 - 22*, in *Subaltern Studies : Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Vol III, ed. R. Guha, OUP, Delhi,
52. A. B. Chaudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals*, *op. cit.*, P. 128;
53. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, 10 September 1949
54. *Ibid.*
55. GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629(1-3) / 1926
56. *Ibid.*
57. Sudhir Kumar Chakrabarty, *Maldaher Swadhinata Sangram O Sangrami*, in *Swadhinata Sangrame Maldaher Abodan*, ed. Radhagobinda Ghosh, *op.cit.* p. 44
58. J.C. Sengupta, *West Bengal District Gazetteers : Malda*, *op. cit.*, P. 29
59. A. Mitra ed., *Malda : Census 1951*, *op. cit.*, P. lxxiv; Maldaher Santal, Diptimoy Sarkar, in *Madhuparni, Maldaha Zilla Sankhya*, Gopal Laha, ed. Balurghat, 1985, P. 149
60. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, 10 September 1949; , Narendra Nath Chakrabarty, *op. cit.*, P. 28
61. Pandua is situated at a distance of 17km. from Englishbazar on the road to Balurghat. It was for sometime the capital city of Bengal during the reign of Muslim Sultans. It was also known as Firuzabad at that time : see J.C. Sengupta ed., *Malda District Gazetteer,op., cit.*, P. 261
62. This celebrated mosque was built by Sultan Sikandar Shah between 1364 and 1374 AD : see *Ibid.*

63. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, 10 September 1949
64. *ibid*; Prabal Ray, *Maldaher Santal Gana - asantosh*, *op. cit.*, P. 10
65. A.B. Chaudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals*, *op. cit.*, P. 153;  
Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op. cit.*, 7 October 1949
66. GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629(1-3) / 1932
67. *The Statesman*, 16 December 1932
68. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, 10 September 1949
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*
71. J.C. Sengupta, *West Bangal District Gazetteers : Malda*, *op.cit.*, P. 24
72. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, issues of August - September 1949
73. Tanika Sarkar, *Jitu Santal's Movement*, *op. cit.*, PP. 158-159
74. *Ibid.*, P. 158
75. GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 629(1-3) / 1926 and GOB, Poll. Conf. F.N. 622(1-2) / 1926 cited in Tanika Sarkar, *op. cit.*, P. 158
76. *Ibid.*
77. Based on interview with Sibendu Sekhar Roy, then the Secretary of district branch of the Hindu Mahasabha, 10 October 1993
78. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, 7 October 1949
79. *Ibid.*, interview with Manik Jha and Sibendu Sekhar Roy
80. For a discussion of such complex phenomenon of peasant mentality see Gyanendra Pandey, *Rallying Round the Cow : Sectarian Strife in*

the Bhojpur Region, C. 1888-1917, in R. Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies*, vol. II, OUP, 1983

81. M.O. Carter, *Final Report, op.cit.*, P. 82
82. *Ibid.*, P. 85
83. K.P.Chattopadhyay, *Report on Santals in Northern and Western Bengal, 1945-46*, Calcutta, 1947, p.p. 6-8
84. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti, op.cit.*, 13 August 1949; M. S. Bhattacharya, *Studies in Micro history : Political Movement in Some Parts of India and Bangladesh, 1857 - 1947*, Indian Institute of Oriental Studies and Research, Kolkata, 2007, p. 85
85. *The Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947
86. One of the most important Santal festivities is Fagua. The Fagua is counterpart of the Doljatra festival. On the appointed day the villagers go to the place of worship and offer sacrifices. On the way back to the village they sprinkle each other with water, but it is considered highly objectionable to use colored water : see A. Mitra ed. *Malda : Census 1951,op. cit.*, P xxii
87. *The Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947
88. Case No. G 238 of 1938. Emperor Vs. Mangla Santal and others, file A 246, Malda District Records.
89. *Ibid.*
90. See Md. Abdullah Rasul, *Krishak Sabhar Itihas*, Nabajatak Prakashan, Calcutta, 1980; Siddhartha Guha Roy, *Malda*, Calcutta, Subarnarekha, 1991; Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal, 1946-47*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi, 1972; Suprakash Roy, *Bharater Krishak Bidroha O Ganatantrik Sangram*, vol. II, Calcutta 1969 91.

91. The Special Officer appointed after the revolt of Jitu Santal to enquire into the grievances of the santals was called the 'Barind Officer' by local people : see *Gourdoot*; 1 May 1947
92. *Gourdoot*, 17 April, 1947
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Ibid.*
95. *Ibid.*
96. *Ibid.*
97. The *Gourdoot*, 24 April 1947; Narendra Nath Chakrabarty, *Swadhinata Sangrame Maldaher Bhumika*, *op. cit.*, P. 7
98. *The Gourdoot*, 17 April 1947; Sibendu Sekhar Roy, *Swadhinata Sangrame Maldaha*, *op. cit.*, P. 9
99. *The Gourdoot*, 24 April 1947
100. *Ibid.*
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947
103. Narendra Nath Chakrabarty, *Swadhinata Sangrame Maldaher Bhumika*, *op. cit.*, P. 11
104. *The Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947
105. *Ibid.*
106. *Ibid.*
107. *The Gourdoot*, 15 May 1947
108. M.O.Carter, *Final Report*, *op. cit.*, P. 81

109. *Ibid.*
110. *The Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947
111. *Ibid.*
112. Based on interview with Manik Jha, then the secretary of the District Communist Party, 10 February, 1992
113. *The Gourdoot*, 1 May 1947
114. *Ibid.*
115. *Ibid.*
116. For a concept of 'history from below' see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *History From Below*, in *Social Scientist*, April 1983, pp. 3-20.
117. *The Gourdoot*, 24 May 1945.
118. *Ibid.*
119. *The Gourdoot*, 8 July 1945
120. *The Gourdoot*, 6 September 1945
121. *Maldaha Samachar*, 8 October 1945
122. *Maldaha Samachar*, 17 October 1945
123. *The Gourdoot*, 6 September 1945
124. *Ibid.*
125. *Ibid.*
126. *Ibid.*
127. *Ibid.*
128. *Ibid.*



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE COMMUNALIST DIVIDE AND ROAD TO PARTITION 1944 – 1947

Communalism is an ideology, and like all ideologies, it is rooted in a social milieu. It cannot be separated from the politics of the time, nor can it be distanced from the material foundations of society. The most significant development that decisively shaped Bengal politics in the decades before the 1947 partition was undoubtedly the emergence of Muslims as a distinct socio-cultural group, and their importance in the political arena with the introduction of the 1932 Communal Award. However, Muslim separatism in Bengal was not merely political opportunism reinforced by rhetoric. It had to build on a real, original Muslim identity, a sense that all Muslims were in a sense a similar and, in those senses, different from all Hindus, that Muslims formed a distinct set among Bengalis<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, in order to understand the increasing communal conflict in Malda in the decade before 1947, we must look at the process of identity formation among the Malda Muslims reinforced during the nineteenth century. It would provide significant clues to grasp the processes that led to communalist division and finally to partition.

The 1872 census of Bengal – the first ever to be taken in the area – revealed that Bengal proper, hitherto considered principally the domain of the Hindus, was inhabited by an unexpectedly large number of Muslims<sup>2</sup>. In the case of Malda, it was found that nearly half, or 48 percent, of the total population were Muslims. Hunter also noted that in Malda the Hindu and Muslim population were evenly balanced<sup>3</sup>. However, the 1941 census clearly showed that Malda became a Muslim majority district:

Table 8.1 Percentage of Muslim and non-Muslims in the district of Rajshahi Division according to the census of India 1941.

District	Percentage of Muslim	Percentage of non-Muslims
Rajshahi (15,71,750)	74.6	25.4
Malda (12,32,618)	56.7	43.3
Dinajpur (19,26,833)	50.2	49.8
Jalpaiguri (10,89,513)	23.8	76.2
Darjeeling (3,76,369)	2.5	97.5
Rangpur (28,77,847)	73.4	26.6
Bogura (12,60,563)	83.9	16.1
Pabna (17,05,072)	77.1	22.9

Source : Census of India, vol. IV, Bengal (Tables), pp. 2-3, 37-40.

Note: Figures in parenthesis show the total population in the districts.

As a community, the Muslims in Malda were overwhelmingly rural in character and they contributed only a fraction of the urban population<sup>4</sup>. They belonged predominantly to the cultivating classes. The Census Commissioner wrote in 1881: '..... The vast numbers of Mohammedan agriculturists in the Rajshahi Division tilling the soil as their ancestors did before them'<sup>5</sup>. Owing to the fertility of the soil, the Muslims who generally predominated in the riverside lands and *chars* in the district were not driven to the necessity of seeking occupation elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. In Malda, there was also a sizeable number of Muslims who claimed foreign ancestry or *ashraf* status<sup>7</sup>. The *Siyar-ul-Mutakherin*, a contemporary account by Mir Ghulam Hussain-Khan, referring to the Maratha invasions of Bengal, remarked that there was a general

exodus of the Musalman nobility and gentry from the western side, which was immune from Maratha raids<sup>8</sup>. Khondker Fuzli Rubbee suggested that the districts of Malda, Murshidabad, Burdwan, Hooghly, Rajshahi and Bogra, which had the largest concentration of *aima* (lit. subsistence or maintenance; rent-free land granted by a Muslim ruler) had the biggest proportion of immigrant families<sup>9</sup>. Writing in 1871 Professor Blochmann of the Calcutta Madrassah expressed almost the same opinion and spoke of the numerous *ashraf* families, recipients of *madad-i-mash* tenures, who were concentrated in these districts<sup>10</sup>.

Rafiuddin Ahmed has shown that the emergence of a new sense of identity among the Bengal Muslims may be traced back to a series of religious reform movements. The prominent among these were the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya (erroneously called Indian Wahabism) and the Faraizi<sup>11</sup>. The case of Malda was important in this respect because the district was one of the important centers of the Tariqah movement<sup>12</sup>. The efforts of Maulana Inayet Ali, the well-known Patna Caliph, were largely responsible for the great enthusiasm created in Malda, Murshidabad and adjacent areas<sup>13</sup>. Writing in 1876 Hunter noted that 'a great majority of them (Muslims) belong to the Faraizi and Wahabi sects'<sup>14</sup>. This reformist group maintained that Islam in Bengal needed a through cleansing. The Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya sect, in order to restore Islam to its purity, sought to denude it of all Hindu influences. In Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, the Tariqah movement drew its support principally from the poorer sections of the community. Small cultivators, landless labourers, weavers and a few *mullahs* filed the ranks of its fighters in the frontier war<sup>15</sup>. The movement was not merely an agency for religious reform; the poorer sections of the Muslim society found their voice in politics through them. The growth of a community consciousness among the non-elite Muslim population in Malda was the inevitable result of the Tariqah movement.

The Wahabi State Trials (1864-70) in the Malda Court created a sensation among the urban educated Muslim community. Most of them were professional people, government officials and landholders. They did not support the religious fanaticism of the Wahabis. Nevertheless, they did agree

on one point: the present condition of the Muslims should be improved<sup>16</sup>. They also felt the need to safeguard the interests of the Muslim educated classes through representation of their demands to the government. It was due to their efforts the *Maldah Mohammedans Association* was established in Englishbazar in 1890. Its object was to improve the social, political and educational condition of the Muslim community of the district<sup>17</sup>. The President and Secretary of the Association were Maulavi Muhammad Ismail Choudhury and Khan Sahib Abdul Aziz Khan respectively. Both of them were pleader and residents of Englishbazar. The membership of this Association was open to all educated Muslims and its official business was transacted by an elected committee of 30 members, mostly resident of Englishbazar. In the year 1890, total number of its member was 130<sup>18</sup>.

In the late nineteenth century, a debate cropped up among the Bengal Muslims regarding the use of *Mussalmani Bangla*, a curious hybrid that made indiscriminate use of Arabic, Persian and Urdu words<sup>19</sup>. Akram Khan, a noted Muslim literati, opined that the present form of Bengali was not equipped to accommodate the Arabic and Persian words. Nawab Ali Chaudhury founded a society in 1899, called the *Bangiya Sahitya Visayak Musalman Sabha*, aiming to reform the language<sup>20</sup>. This initiative, taken by a section of the Muslim literati, had its reflection in Malda also. In a pamphlet issued by the Maldah Mohammedans Association in 1906 it was pointed out that Bengali could only be accepted as the language of the Bengali Muslims if thoroughly Islamized. It argued that the introduction of Islami Bangla would enable Muslims to learn their mother tongue, which was still believed to be Urdu. Further, it was thought that this would inter alia arrest the rapid 'de-nationalization' of the Bengali Muslims, which, in its view, was quickly setting in because of their learning *Bengali*<sup>21</sup>.

The Maldah Mohammedans Association's suggestions, in fact, reflected a desperate quest for an uncompromising Islamic identity free of all idolatrous accretions. By insisting on the inclusion of Arabic and Persian words in Bengali, the Muslim intellectuals were clearly in favour of a language that was not only different but also de-linked from the Hindu intellectual roots<sup>22</sup>.

It is to be noted here that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the relations between the two principal communities of the district, Hindus and Muslims, had been far from unfriendly, particularly in the rural areas. Participation in one another's ceremonials and festivals had become a regular feature in the lives of the Hindu and Muslims of Malda. Amusements like *gambhira* and *alkap* were enjoyed by Hindus and Muslims alike. Two of the prominent composer of *gambhira* songs, in which Hindu deity Shiva was worshipped, were Sk. Suleman and Md. Safi<sup>23</sup>. However, with an intensification of orthodoxy at the turn of the century, Muslims in Malda became less accommodating in spirit. The presence and activities of itinerant *mulla*hs – rural priests – became increasingly observable. They began to exercise increasing influence over the illiterate Muslim rural masses. They played an important role in bridging the gap between the town based educated Muslims and the rural Muslim masses<sup>24</sup>. Under their influence, a vast number of Muslim peasants were first communalized. Later they were politicized.

The percentage of Muslim participants in the Swadeshi and anti-partition agitation in Malda was quite negligible. In 1909, a Muslim religious – cum – social association *Anjuman-i-Islamia* was established in Malda at the behest of Maulavi Abdul Aziz Khan. A pleader by profession, he was the Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality during the years 1900 – 1912. The other prominent leaders of the *Anjuman* were Maulavi Kader Box and Muhammad Laljan<sup>25</sup>. A large number of Muslims became involved in the Non-cooperation – Khilafat Movement of 1921 – 22. A District Khilafat Committee was formed with Md. Jiauddin, a pleader and later became Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality, as a leading figure of the said committee<sup>26</sup>.

However, after the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922, communal politics raised its ugly head in Bengal, which had its reverberations in Malda also. On 27 October 1925, a meeting was organized by the Muslims of Araidanga and Chandipur villages in Ratua p.s., at the house of a dismissed Sub-Inspector of police named Mubarak Ali Khan of Araidanga. As per the decision of the meeting an association styled '*Malda Moslem Yubak Sangha*' was formed. Munshi Yakub Ali, a teacher of Araidanga High English

School was the president of the association. Kazi Reasat Hossain and Mubarak Ali Khan were made the vice-presidents. Ahmed Ali Khan of Araidanga became its secretary. The *Moslem Yubak Sangha* declared that its aims were to raise social, political and economic status of the Muslims of the district, but the available evidences suggest that its tone was openly communal<sup>27</sup>.

## CRYSTALLIZATION OF HINDU AND MUSLIM COMMUNAL BLOCKS

The period between 1932 and 1947 sharply shows the mutation in the formation of Hindus and Muslims as communities opposed to each other in the political arena. What was distinctive about this period was the growth of the communities as political units in a permanent adversarial relationship. This was further consolidated following the introduction of the communal electorate in the 1937 provincial elections<sup>28</sup>. The process culminated in the construction of a Muslim bloc and consequently the 'othering' of the Hindus. Muslims gradually emerged as key players in 'high politics' and demands were placed for reservations of seats for the community in educational institutions and government employment. The consolidation of Muslim communal forces was matched, if not surpassed, by the rising tide of Hindu communalism. The rise and consolidation of Hindu blocks in Bengal drew largely upon 'communal common sense of dying Hindu'<sup>29</sup>. The Hindu demographic strength was certain to decline, as the argument runs, in view of the proliferation of Muslims due to reasons connected with their social system. The fear of being outnumbered by Muslims appeared to be an effective instrument for those engaged in the mobilization for an exclusive Hindu constituency<sup>30</sup>. In this way, what occurred in the late 1930s in Bengal was, to borrow a term from Ellul, a '*psychological crystallization*' of communal identity among Hindus and Muslims<sup>31</sup>.

It needs to be mentioned here that the relationship between the two major communities in Malda was at least, until the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, free from any tension and conflict. However, in the thirties, signs of tension were clearly discernible in the local scenario. From the late 1920s, some Hindu leaders began to recognize the need to 'reclaim' the low

castes in order to create a unified Hindu political community. The Hindu Sabha movement, which grew out of a perceived need to counteract Christian and Muslim proselytisation, underlined solidarity among the different Hindu castes. A branch of the Hindu Sabha was set up in Malda in 1929 with definite programme of propaganda and conversion<sup>32</sup>. Gosain Rudrananda Giri was the President of the Malda Hindu Sabha and Ashutosh Choudhury, one of the richest landlords of Malda, was its Secretary. The Malda Hindu Sabha was dominated by landlords, merchants and lawyers. The organization aimed at promoting the 'interests of the Hindus of Malda in all respects'. A government report stated that the Malda Hindu Sabha exercised some influence over the local Hindus and held many periodical meetings<sup>33</sup>. In March 1928, Ashutosh Choudhury wrote a letter to Padamraj Jain, Secretary of the Hindu Sabha, regarding delegates to be sent to its Mymensing conference. Six delegates were sent from Malda and they were Ashutosh Choudhury, Madan Mohan Satiar (merchant), Narayan Chandra Saha (merchant), Krishna Gopal Sen Kabiraj, Kailash Nath Roy and Bholanath Choudhury<sup>34</sup>. In 1928, the Maithil Brahmins of Araidanga, Shobhanagar, Dharampur and Nagharia founded another 'Hindu' association. The name of the association was '*All India Maithil Youngman Society, Malda*'. The society celebrated its first anniversary on 10 November 1929 at Araidanga. Pandit Khealiram Jha, vice-president of Mathura - Agra Maithil Mahasammilan, presided over the anniversary functions. About four hundred delegates attended the conference, of which forty came from other districts and provinces<sup>35</sup>. Pramatha Nath Misra, a local pleader was the president of the Reception Committee. Atul Chandra Kumar of Araidanga and Bhupendranath Jha of Nagharia also took a leading role in organizing the conference. The aim of the society was to 'safeguard the interest of the rights and the legitimate interests and privileges of the Hindus and to promote solidarity amongst all sections of the Hindu community'<sup>36</sup>.

The All Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference was held in Malda on 17 and 18 September 1932. The conference was presided over by Ramananda Chatterjee, editor of the *Modern Review*. More than a thousand delegates attended the conference<sup>37</sup>. A number of women and representatives from the depressed classes and *santals* were also included among the delegates.

Jyotirmohan Misra, a local zamindar was the chairperson of the Reception Committee. The committee included Panchanan Majumdar, Asutosh Choudhury, Gosain Rudrananda Giri, Kaliprasanna Saha, Iswarlal Ghosh, Bijoy Niyogi, Probodh Kumar Ray, Sasibhusan Kumar, Narayan Das Behani and others<sup>38</sup>. A volunteer organization was also formed for the conference. Rakhal Chandra Roy was the GOC of the organization. Satyendra Prasanna Sarkar, Nandalal Choudhury and Nikunjabehari Gupta were his lieutenants under whose command the volunteers drilled and paraded<sup>39</sup>. Prof. Benoy Sarkar, Sarala Devi Choudhurani and Padamraj Jain were among the dignitaries who were present in the conference. A resolution was passed requesting Swami Satyananda, Haridas Majumdar and Jogeswar Mandal to attend the conference convened by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and to strive in collaboration with Dr. Moonje for settlement of the problem concerning the depressed classes on the lines adopted at the conference as far as practicable<sup>40</sup>. The conference gave a call for rejuvenation of the Bengali Hindus as a community.

From the mid-thirties onwards, as Joya Chatterjee has shown, Bengal witnessed a flurry of caste consolidation programmes, initiated chiefly under Hindu Sabha and Mahasabha auspices. These programmes were, in fact, part of a broader campaign to create a united and self-conscious Hindu political community in Bengal<sup>41</sup>. The Hindu Mission since the 1930s had been displaying an awareness that in order to thwart what it conceived to be the Muslim threat it was essential to mobilize the lower caste segments of the Bengali Hindu population<sup>42</sup>. Around 1938 the Mission was actively working for the uplift of the poor Namasudras in Nababganj of Malda<sup>43</sup>. Early in 1939, a communal tension cropped up in the Namasudra pocket of Nababganj. An excitement broke out over the passing of a Saraswati Puja procession with music by the local Namasudra in front of a mosque at Nababganj<sup>44</sup>. During this time, the Maldaha Hindu Sabha picked up issues like assault on Hindu women and defilement of Hindu temples by Muslims in the district and agitated for sometime<sup>45</sup>. A meeting of the *santals* was convened at Dharampur on 10 April 1933, in which Swami Premananda, a member of Maldaha Hindu Mission, explained to them the principles of the Hindu faith<sup>46</sup>.

The communal politics in Malda took a new turn with the establishment of branches of the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha. In fact, there did not actually exist a formal provincial unit of the Muslim League in Bengal before 1936. There were two major provincial Muslim Parties: the Krishak Praja Party of Fazlul Huq and the United Muslim Party led by Nazimuddin, Nawab Habibullah and others. The chief organizer of the Krishak Praja Party in Malda was Idris Ahmed of Nababganj<sup>47</sup>. Idris Ahmed, a graduate of Rajshahi College, founded the noted Dadanchak High Madrassa in 1920 and was primarily an educationist. Later in 1935, he joined the Krishak Praja Party and elected vice-president of its Malda unit. In 1937 provincial election, Idris Ahmed contested from Malda South Rural (Muha) Constituency and won by a sizeable margin<sup>48</sup>. With the cooperation of A. K. Fazlul Huq, Premier of Bengal, Idris Ahmed set up a college at Dadanchak of Nababganj. In the arena of Muslim politics in Malda Idris Ahmed was no doubt, an influential person<sup>49</sup>. Idris Ahmed was secular in outlook. He did not support the communal politics of the Muslim League even in 1946. In 1939 in his speech in Bengal Legislative Assembly, he argued that 'when we speak about nationalism we often mix it with Hinduism but I think that the Muslims have every right to be a nationalist while maintaining their Muslim identity at the same time'<sup>50</sup>.

It was in such a context that moves were made to set up a district unit of the Muslim League. In October 1937, an All Bengal Muslim Conference organized by the Muslim League was held in Berhampore, Murshidabad. The conference was presided over by Jinnah himself. Following that conference, the League and its MLAs took initiative in setting up branches of the League at district and Thana levels<sup>51</sup>. It was as part of these developments that in February 1938, the district unit of the Muslim League was set up in Malda and Zahur Ahmed Chaudhury, a pleader of Malda Bar and councilor of Englishbazar Municipality was elected its president<sup>52</sup>. During the years 1938 – 1947, Zahur Ahmed Chaudhury was the unchallenged leader of the Muslim League in Malda. Amongst the other Muslim League leaders of Malda, names of Illias Ahmed, Md. Ziauddin, Md. Laljan, Mujibar Rahaman, Mobarak Ali

Chaudhury, Raisuddin Ahmed, and Hamiduddin Ahmed are worth mentioned<sup>53</sup>.

The following table shows how the Muslim League enhanced its strength in the various districts of North Bengal.

Table 8.2 Year wise membership of the Muslim League in North Bengal.

District	Year 1939	Year 1940	Year 1941	S.P.'s comment
Malda	-----	29,000	43,000	Number given by the president of the League
Rajshahi	3,079	4,908	5,681	League's propaganda during census of 1941
Jalpaiguri	6,000	7,000	8,000	League's propaganda during census of 1941
Pabna	12,783	13,904	14,572	Number given by the president of the League
Dinajpur	1,382	5,087	6,186	Propaganda by League
Rangpur	4,879	7,649	10,701	Propaganda by League

Source : I. B. report on Muslim League Membership, Government of Bengal, File No. 147 - 38 (A), Part I

In such a situation, the caste consolidation programme of the district unit of the Hindu Mahasabha created tension between the two communities. In 1939, a campaign was organized by the local Hindu Mahasabha leaders to mobilize the *santals* in defense of Hindu religion. In fact, as we have discussed, the district of Malda was particularly well known for such mobilization of the tribals from the days of Jitu Santal<sup>54</sup>. Ever since then, whenever the local Hindu Mahasabha leaders wanted to put on a display of Hindu power, they brought

to Malda town a large number of *santals*, fed them generously and tried to excite in them a communal passion. In 1941, Zahur Ahmed Choudhury, President of the local Muslim League, complained to the District Magistrate of Malda that the *Janmastami* procession in 1940, organized by the local Hindu Mahasabha was crowded with *santals* armed with bows, arrows and *tangis*. They shouted anti-Muslim slogan. This intensified communal tension in the district. Zahur Ahmed Choudhury further alleged that following a Hindu Mahasabha mass meeting in May 1940, the local *santals* overtly began to show their anti-Muslim sentiments; they gave up working in the houses of Muslims and stopped harvesting their paddy<sup>55</sup>.

In Malda, several big zamindars took up the cause of the Hindu Mahasabha, repudiating their traditional ties with the Bengal Congress. Jyotirmohan Misra, the zamindar of Harishchandrapur, acted as host to a Mahasabha Conference in his zamindari. Ashutosh Choudhury, one of the big zamindars of Malda, was himself the secretary of the local Hindu Mahasabha. According to an official report, a Mahasabha meeting was held on 7 May 1939 at the house of Babu Bhairabendra Narayan Roy, the zamindar of Singhabad<sup>56</sup>. There are indeed some points in Joya Chatterjee's argument that '*mufassil* zamindar, who had been key supporters of the Congress during the Assembly elections, had changed track and welcome the new Hindu Party which promised to defend their landed interests in a more determined fashion than the Bose Congress'<sup>57</sup>. Official report mentions another mass meeting organized by the local Mahasabha at Gajol hat on 29 December 1940. A large number of armed *santals* assembled to listen to the Hindu leaders. 'Hindustan is the name of this country', one leader proclaimed, 'and the Hindus alone have right to inhabit it. Only if the Muslims do agree to live here as ordinary tenants, there can no objections. Those who are born in India and follow one of the religions of Indian origin are all Hindu'. As the *santals* were Hindus, they should take the responsibility of defending the honour of the Hindu community, their womenfolk and their temples<sup>58</sup>. In this way, the local Mahasabha leaders followed the strategy of using the armed *santals* for the defense of Hinduism.

That the Hindu communalism was gaining ground in Malda in late 1930s is clear. However, the Muslim League activists were not sitting on the fence. The strength of the Muslim communalists was not negligible in Malda and often they rose to the occasion and gave provocation to intensify communalism to serve their vested interest. Sometimes in 1941, a clash occurred at Shibganj between the Hindus and the Muslims in connection with the immersion procession of the Hindus and the matter was seriously complicated as it took a communal turn<sup>59</sup>. However, that was not the only occasion. In spite of special precautions trouble over Moharrum procession occurred at Nababganj in 1942. According to the government report, 'the most serious incident was at Nababganj in Malda district, where some of the processionists *looted* or damaged some Hindu shops. A number police were injured and the Sub-Deputy Magistrate in charge was compelled to order firing, as a result three Muslims were injured'<sup>60</sup>. In 1941, another communal tension was aggravated centering round the slaughter of cow during the 'Bakar Id' festival at Singhabad. It was alleged that Bhairabendra Narayan Roy, the local zamindar and leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, imposed restrictions on cow slaughtering. The Muslims became furious and *looted* some shops owned by the Hindus at Singhabad hat. However, Bhairabendra Narayan Roy refuted all the charges against him and alleged that the whole incident was the conspiracy of some Muslim League activists to defame him<sup>61</sup>.

Thus, in the 1940s Hindu-Muslim political and communal rivalry became acute in Malda. The Muslim League was slowly emerging as the mouthpiece of Muslim separatism. The gradual development of communal feelings, mutual misunderstanding and suspicion took Congress and Muslim League in Malda poles apart. Communalism started to raise its ugly head in rural Malda and political parties began to pander to this dangerous trend. The competition for government jobs, desire for economic superiority and for political power became the most important factors of this communal rivalry. The changing composition of local bodies – Union, Local and District Boards and Municipalities – reflected a significant shift in the balance of power between Hindus and Muslims<sup>62</sup>. When groups that had previously been entrenched in power lost their control over these bodies, they were deeply resentful and it

was usually the Hindu *bhadralok* who lost. The result, all too often, was communal conflict<sup>63</sup>. The District Board election in 1941 in Malda was marred by fisticuffs when a group alleging 'communal bias' on the part of the presiding officer 'broke up the recording of votes by violence at the polling centre'<sup>64</sup>.

Control over school and college committees was another issue, which fuelled communal tension. Thus, we observe that in 1944, over the issue of the establishment of the Malda College, a difference of opinion among the Hindus and Muslims came on the surface. From a contemporary local newspaper source, we come to know that the initiative in the establishment of a college was taken by Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Choudhury, the two prominent leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha. Zahur Ahmed Choudhury, President of the local Muslim League, gave a generous donation for this purpose. In return, he demanded reservation of seats for the local Muslim students. However, Ashutosh Choudhury categorically opposed his demand<sup>65</sup>. A meeting had to be convened to wipe out such dissension over the college issue. At this meeting Jiauddin Ahmed, the Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality, made an appeal to the both communities to look at the college affair with secular outlook. He stated that though the Hindus donated Rs. 33,000 and the Muslims only Rs. 10,000, students of both communities would get equal scope of education in the proposed college. In such a situation, Jiauddin Ahmed stated, if the Hindus retained a slight majority in the college committee, the local Muslims ought not to express resentment<sup>66</sup>. It needs to be mentioned that Jiauddin Ahmed was an influential leader of the Muslim League. For his statement on the college issue, Jiauddin was bitterly criticized by his League compatriots<sup>67</sup>.

Mutual suspicion and distrust was thus looming large in the horizon. In such an atmosphere, a riot between the *santals* and the Muslims took place at Bamongola in November 1944. The issue was the immersion of the Goddess Kali. The men who were taking their daily *namaj* at the local *masjid* asked the *santal* procession not to beat drums. However, the *santals* did not listen to and finally a riot broke out. It resulted in the killing of two people, one of them

was a *santal* and the other was a Muslim. The police rushed to the spot and arrested some twenty persons<sup>68</sup>. The local Hindu Mahasabha, as the report states, tried to politicize this event. The Muslim League came forward to support the role of the Muslims. A communal tension was thus cropped up in the district<sup>69</sup>.

A few months later in April 1945, trouble broke out again between these two communities in the Barind areas over the alleged abduction of a *santal* girl by a Muslim man. Several houses were burnt down and one person was killed, and the incident had serious repercussions on the relations between the two communities in Malda. Although the situation was soon brought under control, the tensions continued for some time. There was a strong probability that the Hindu Mahasabha was actively involved here, as two months later in a Legislative Assembly by-election in Malda, they were assiduously trying to put forward a *santal* candidate, who, however, declined to stand<sup>70</sup>.

The failure of the Malda Congress to sustain its organizational hold in the district was due to a variety of reasons, including internal squabbles<sup>71</sup>. It paved the path for the steady growth of the Mahasabha and the Muslim League who, in fact, became the true representatives of their respective communities as the partition of Bengal drew close. In February 1946, at the prize distribution ceremony of the B. R. Sen Public Library and Museum in Malda, disturbance started over trivial matters. The proceedings of the ceremony commenced with the singing of the nationalist song *Bande Mataram*. Some Muslim gentlemen attending the meeting objected to the song. Throwing of brickbats and a pandemonium followed. Soon after the sub-divisional officer arrived with a contingent of armed force. The police escorted women attending the ceremony to their homes. Some people were injured. The situation was, however, brought under control. The district administration passed an order under section 144 of the CRPC banning all processions, public meetings and assembly of five or more persons<sup>72</sup>.

In their analysis of pre-partition violence in Bengal, Suranjan Das and Patricia Gossman consider the historical trajectory, which culminated in the creation of political blocks of Hindus and Muslims on the eve of partition. Das traces the

changes in the nature of riots in Bengal between 1905 and 1947 from being relatively spontaneous and manifestations of class differences to being planned, organized and attaining an overtly communal tone. In his assessment of communal violence, he outlines the conjunction of elite and popular communalism, which he argues ultimately manifested itself through the Calcutta riots of 1946<sup>73</sup>. Patricia Gossman examines the means by which violence became ritualized and was constitutive of the process of identity formation in Bengal during the same period. She argues that in addition to colonial authorities, Hindu and Muslim political leaders were instrumental in articulating the narratives of communal violence by constructing 'facts' out of every incident. Such representations through numerous repetitions helped to freeze popular perceptions of identity<sup>74</sup>.

#### DEMANDS FOR PARTITION: TO DIVIDE OR NOT TO DIVIDE

The announcement of the Cabinet Mission Plan in March 1946 decisively indicated British plans for transferring power to Indians. Although the Cabinet Mission was projected within political circles as the last ditch effort to avoid partition and Pakistan, its failure to reach any consensus between the Congress and the League representatives assured the possibility of Pakistan. Congress leaders in Bengal began to think seriously about partitioning the province to assure their continued political prominence within free India. The 1946 Calcutta riots sealed their decision in favour of partition<sup>75</sup>.

By late 1946, many Bengalis, both Hindu and Muslims, were convinced that Pakistan whatever its constitutional structure and spatial coordinates was inevitable. However, what needs to be emphasized is the ideological confusion that accompanied such a conviction. For some sections of urbanized Bengali Hindus, Pakistan had come to mean a permanent loss of political sovereignty and their subjection to 'Muslim tyranny'<sup>76</sup>. For most, 'Pakistan' continued remain fuzzy, an idea which made no distinctive efforts to move away from its initial conceptualization of a nation based on a religious majority<sup>77</sup>.

The establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha sponsored Partition League in December 1946 signalled the emergence of an organized movement among Bengali Hindus that demanded a 'separate homeland for the Hindus'. Between February 20 and June 20, 1947, a mere four months from the announcement of the British decision to leave India to the Bengal Assembly's vote for partitioning the province and the western half joining the Indian Union, the partition discourse reached a fevered pick. As the Hindu Mahasabha deployed their cadres, the Bengal Congress also jumped onto the bandwagon for partition, albeit for different reasons. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar argued that 'the Hindus have been forced into this position by extreme circumstances' whose roots lay in the 'communal administration' of the Bengal Muslim League<sup>78</sup>. Kiran Sankar Roy also ultimately argued in terms of the political necessity for partition to ensure the survival of the Indian state.

Between February and June 1947, representations from political units such as the Municipal and Union Boards, civil group like District Bar Associations and Zamindar Associations, and local clubs flooded the offices of the Hindu Mahasabha and the AICC voicing their demands for partition<sup>79</sup>. A front-page cartoon in the Hindustan Standard depicted the *viceroi* being overwhelmed by nearly 10,000 telegrams demanding the partition of Bengal<sup>80</sup>. Most of these petitions asked for the formation of a separate province of West Bengal that would remain within the Indian Union.<sup>81</sup>

The demand for partitioning the province spread to the districts and *mufassil* towns as well. The influential section of the Hindu community in Malda insisted upon uniting the district with West Bengal. The annual conference of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangha (RSS) was held in Malda in April 1947. Sibendu Sekhar Roy, then the Secretary of the local Hindu Mahasabha addressed the meeting of the volunteers. He supported the proposed partition of Bengal and demanded the inclusion of Malda into 'Hindu India'<sup>82</sup>. He criticized Gandhiji as the latter persistently opposed the partition of India. Roy remarked that in view of blood bath owing to recurring Muslim violence in different parts of the country, the partition of India would be the only answer. He made a scathing criticism against the Congress leaders and alleged that

they had been persistently appeasing the minority community. According to Roy, due to this shortsighted policy of the congress leaders, the existence of the Hindus would be at stake<sup>83</sup>. Roy further stated, if the non-Hindu people like to live in Hindu India, they must follow the Hindu culture. They must stay in India in subordination to the Hindu nation<sup>84</sup>.

In May 1947, the Congress and Mahasabha jointly convened a mammoth public meeting in Calcutta to press for partition, which was presided over by the historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar<sup>85</sup>. This pattern of cooperation between the executives of the two parties at the provincial level was replicated in the *mufassils*. In Malda, a meeting of the Hindus of the district represented by all political parties was held on 18 May 1947 at Town Hall. Its purpose was to demand for the inclusion of Malda in *Hindu Bengal*<sup>86</sup>. The meeting was presided over by Charu Chandra Sanyal M. L. C. Many noted personalities of local politics, such as Nikunja Behari Gupta (secretary, Malda District Congress Committee), Ramhari Roy (Congress nominated M L A), Ashutosh Choudhury (local zamindar and leader of the Hindu Mahasabha) and Sibendu Sekhar Roy (Secretary, Malda Hindu Mahasabha) were present at the meeting. At the end of the meeting, a resolution was adopted which stated that :

- a) Bengal should be divided in two parts – Hindu Bengal and Muslim Bengal.
- b) The districts of Malda, Dinajpur and Rajshahi up to the river Atrai should be included in Hindu Bengal in order to unite the Hindu – dominated districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of North Bengal with the Presidency and Burdwan Divisions.
- c) To equalize the distribution of population in each part of Bengal (i.e., Hindu Bengal and Muslim Bengal), Gopalganj of Faridpur district and some parts of Madaripur should be united with Jessore and Khulna of the Presidency Division.
- d) It was hoped that the Muslim population in Hindu Bengal would get fair treatment and the authorities would guarantee their security.

e) The Hindu Bengal would remain as a province of Independent India.

Lalbihari Majumdar, the editor of a contemporary local newspaper as well as a leader of the Malda Congress, stated in his column that he was stringently opposed to the idea of both divided India and divided Bengal. However, if the partition of India became inevitable he would have no other option but to support the proposed partition of Bengal. At the same time, the editor admitted that the possibility of saving Bengal from partition became remote, because majority of Hindus supported partition<sup>88</sup>.

Joya chatterjee rightly observes that the *bhadralok* were the backbone of this movement for partition of Bengal. In 1947, *bhadralok* Bengalis, once the pioneers of nationalism, used every available stratagem and device to demand that their province be divided<sup>89</sup>. The Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha were by no means the only forums through which they expressed their demand for a separate Hindu Province. In those districts where Hindu were in a minority and Muslims dominated the local bodies, professional associations controlled by *bhadralok* Hindus were pressed into service. The Malda Bar Association thus held a special meeting on 30 April 1947 and adopted a unanimous resolution in support of the partition proposal. They wanted the Hindu majority province of West Bengal to include the district of Malda<sup>90</sup>.

To counter the mobilization drive of the Hindus of Malda for partition, the local Muslim league organized itself to press for inclusion of the district in the proposed Pakistan. Although Malda was Muslim majority district, Hindus were demographically preponderant in urban areas. The League High Command received memoranda from Malda urging the League leaders to bring the district within Pakistan. However, the campaign in Malda gradually fizzled out, presumably because of Suhrawardy's assurance of its inclusion in Pakistan due to a clear Muslim majority there<sup>91</sup>.

Even at this late date, dissenters remained against the idea of any division of the province. One group led by Sarat Bose and Abul Hashim promoted the idea of a United Bengal, which would not be constitutionally part of India and

Pakistan but have an independent identity<sup>92</sup>. In a letter to Sardar Patel, Sarat Bose specified that 'it is not a fact that Bengali Hindus unanimously demand partition. As far as East Bengal is concerned, there is not the slightest doubt that the majority of Hindus were opposed to partition ... the demand for partition is more or less confined to the middle classes... Future generations will, I am afraid, condemn us for conceding the division of India and supporting the partition of Bengal and Punjab'<sup>93</sup>. This plan did not find much support within the political ranks of the Bengal Congress or the Muslim League. Leonard Gordon tended to study the United Bengal Plan as a realistic alternative to partition, but to Joya Chatterjee, it was never more than a 'pipe dream'<sup>94</sup>. The Bengali public already inundated by Mahasabha propaganda was wary of the possibilities that Bengal as an independent entity might in the future join Pakistan.

The United Bengal Scheme failed to attract any real support from the Hindus of *mufassil* Bengal. The views of Lalbihari Majumdar, a noted literati of Malda, perhaps reflected their attitude towards the scheme. 'The proposal is absurd. In such climate of distrust and large-scale communal violence, the partition of Bengal would be the only practical solution'<sup>95</sup>. Majumdar wholeheartedly supported the statement of Surendra Mohan Ghosh, the President of the BPCC, that an undivided Bengal in a divided India was an impossibility<sup>96</sup>. The local Hindu Mahasabha made a scathing criticism against the United Bengal Scheme and alleged that Bengal Hindus had suffered terribly under the League ministry because of communal misrule and maladministration<sup>97</sup>.

With the announcement of the Partition Plan on 3 June 1947, the saga of a United Bengal ended. The Bengal Legislative Assembly discussed the 3 June Plan in its session on 20 June 1947. At the joint session, 90 voted to join the existing constituent assembly (i.e., stay with India), while 126 voted to join the new constituent assembly (i.e., join Pakistan). In the meeting of members from Hindu majority districts, delegates voted for partition 58 to 21. In a separate meeting, those from the Muslim majority districts supported the sovereign Bengal proposal, by 106 votes to 34, that the districts in which the

Muslims were demographically preponderant should join the proposed Pakistan Constituent Assembly<sup>98</sup>.

After the vote, the overarching issue was to ensure that one's own locality continued to remain within one's perceived nation and one continued to be an Indian or a Pakistani. Bengalis now wrote letters and passed resolutions providing rationales for the inclusion of a particular locality within India or Pakistan. The reasons mainly focused on economic, religious and cultural issues. For instance, *Minar* – a weekly newspaper that represented the voice of the Malda Muslims, stated that for a long time the Hindus and Muslims had been residing in Malda with harmony and friendship. The district of Malda had been comparatively free from any sort of communal violence, which badly affected the other parts of India and Bengal<sup>99</sup>. At the time of communal holocaust of 1946, the peace – loving people of Malda came in open arms to maintain communal amity and peace. The editor of *Minar* believed that this communal harmony would not be disturbed with or without its inclusion in India. He appealed to the authorities not to divide the district at the time of partition. He argued that the division of Malda would be harmful for two reasons. In the first place, if divided Malda as a full-fledged district may not exist at all. Secondly, the partition of this unique citadel of Hindu-Muslim cultural conjugation would be condemned by future generations<sup>100</sup>.

The Hindu literati of Malda echoed the voice of the *Minar* and agreed that the district should not be divided. At the same time, they found it reasonable and justified to include undivided Malda in the proposed Hindu Bengal. On behalf of them, the editor of *Gourdoot*, a leading local newspaper, presented certain logic<sup>101</sup>:

In the first place, the district of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri would certainly be included in Hindu Bengal. So if the district of Malda was not included in Hindu Bengal, the contact of those two districts with the other parts of Hindu Bengal would be disturbed.

Secondly, the impending partition was not a partition of a district or a province, but a partition of a country. Therefore, each party would be eager to get natural boundary.

Thirdly, the districts of Malda and Dinajpur were called the *Granary of North Bengal*. These two districts were the most significant supply zones of rice to other parts of North Bengal. Hence, the separation of Malda and Dinajpur from North Bengal would render the people of this region dependent on other regions for food-grains<sup>102</sup>.

Once the Indian political parties accepted the decision to partition, the next step was the constitution of a Boundary Commission to draw up the 'real' border. The impossible task of determining a border to accommodate religious demography was delegated to Cyril Radcliffe, a British Civil Servant with little knowledge of Indian subcontinent, who chaired the five member Boundary Commission. The members of the Commission were all judges. The Bengal Boundary Commission thus consisted of well-known judges, B. K. Mukherjee, C. C. Biswas, Abu Saleh Muhammed and S. A. Rahaman<sup>103</sup>. Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tai Young Tan examine the varied issues that confronted the Commission and reveal how it was hampered by unclear and contradictory terms of reference<sup>104</sup>. The conflicting claims of the leading political parties and a restricted schedule of six weeks made their task more difficult.

The terms of reference for the Bengal Boundary Commission were simple enough: 'to demarcate the boundaries on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims and in doing so take into account also other factors'<sup>105</sup>. Further, where a clear contiguous majority or minority became difficult to establish, the 'other factors' would assume primacy. What comprised the 'other factors' remained undefined, giving Radcliffe room for maneuver<sup>106</sup>.

However, in the days before Partition, contingency and confusion were the two catchwords defining the lives of people of Malda. They had little knowledge of how Mountbatten's plan or the Radcliffe Award would change their destinies. The case of Malda, in fact, posed a problem before the

Boundary Commission. In Malda, out of fifteen police stations, nine had a Muslim preponderance over non-Muslims. The problem was that if these nine police stations would finally be handed over to Pakistan, the communication channels between southern Bengal and northern part of Bengal would be disturbed. Therefore, nobody knew for sure whether the district would finally be assigned to India or Pakistan. This reminds us the characters in Bhisham Sahni's story 'We Have Arrived in Amritsar' who did not know whether Lahore or Gurdaspur would be in India or Pakistan<sup>107</sup>.

Two contemporary newspapers of Malda, *Gourdoot* and *Maldaha Samachar*, portrayed the picture of the district on the eve of transfer of power and consequent partition of the country. It highlighted the anxiety and uncertainty of the people looming large over the future of Malda and at the same time expressed concern over the mounting communal tension in the district. It was reported that in the last week of July 1947 a large procession was organized by the local Muslim League. The leaders of the local Muslim League – Jahur Ahmed Choudhury, Tahur Ahmed Choudhury, Arif Sattar Hazi, Ansar Choudhury, Sabir Jaan were all present in the procession. It demanded the union of Malda with Pakistan. The procession raised the slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad'<sup>108</sup>. The local Hindu Mahasabha sharply reacted. The Mahasabha organized a rally of some thousand people at Englishbazar demanding the inclusion of Malda in Hindu Bengal<sup>109</sup>. Naturally, communal tension was increasing. At Kaliachak, two sporadic incidents of looting and arsoning occurred. A clash between two communities broke out at Ratua after a procession raised the slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad'. Though no casualty was reported, the tension reached its apogee<sup>110</sup>.

At Englishbazar, a rumor ran on 29 July 1947, that the district administration had confirmed the union of Malda with Pakistan<sup>111</sup>. A sense of uncertainty and confusion confronted the Hindus. However, both the local Congress and Hindu Mahasabha dismissed this news as baseless. Some people, according to newspaper report, belonging to the minority community had been preventing members of their community from purchasing the essential commodities from shops owned by the Hindus<sup>112</sup>. A bomb explosion near the

local cinema house injured some people, which created panic in the region. All these incidents made the situation tense and the streets of the town wore a deserted look in the evening<sup>113</sup>. It was reported that a section of the people of Englishbazar had thought of leaving the town apprehending an orgy of violence on August 15. The editor of Gourdoot noticed a huge gathering everyday at the local bank for withdrawing their deposit in face of prevailing uncertainty. The newly formed peace committee strained every nerve to maintain peace in the town. It appealed to the people that any rumour regarding communal tension should go unheeded<sup>114</sup>.

This confusion and uncertainty continued until the announcement of the Radcliffe Award on 17 August 1947, two days after the declaration of Independence. Although the Award was ready by 12 August, Mountbatten, fearing civil strife, had arranged for its publication only after the British had relinquished constitutional control over India. The confusion that engulfed the people of Dinajpur and Malda on the eve of partition is aptly portrayed in Satinath Bhaduri's short story 'Gananayak' or 'The Champion of the People'<sup>115</sup>. Situated in a small village on the border between Purnia and Dinajpur, the villagers in the story did not know whether they were part of India or Pakistan. The narrative began with Munimji, the local black marketer announcing that Dinajpur and Malda already become part of Pakistan. The information spread like wildfire, and people gathered in the market to collect as much rice as possible to survive at this hour of crisis. When Pora Gossain, the leader and priest of the *rajbansis*, heard that the village of Titlia would be awarded to Hindustan, he was elated. Achchimaddi, a Muslim resident of Mirpur, was also happy to hear that his village would be awarded to Pakistan. Shortly after Munimji's declaration, the villagers, who had hitherto maintained peaceful co-existence, put up the Congress and League flags in Titlia and Mirpur respectively. Hindu refugees from Mirpur left their home and set up camp on the other side. However, when the Boundary Award was finally published, the residents of Titlia found that their area had been awarded to Pakistan. For Pora Gossain, being a part of Pakistan means that 'I am going to be buried when I die. They won't even let me go to the temple'. Similarly for Achchimaddi, Indian citizenship means, 'We will be forced to pray facing east,

and they won't let us kill chicken'. For both characters, the main concern was culture and their spatial identification of the imagined nations of India and Pakistan. The story ends with Munimji making the maximum financial gain from the confusion<sup>116</sup>.

In fact, people in Malda interpreted Mountbatten's 3 June Plan in different ways. Although leading newspapers carried the details of the provisional plan to partition, the public had little understanding of how it would translate into reality. The Award was to follow the principle of contiguous majority areas but it was not the only consideration for the division. The public was unaware of the specifics of these other considerations until after the Award was announced. In Malda, for three days, between 12 and 15 August 1947, nobody knew for sure whether the district would finally be assigned to India or Pakistan<sup>117</sup>. The Pakistani flag, as the District Magistrate reminisced, 'fluttered over the collectorate until 14 August'<sup>118</sup>. The local Muslim League, under the leadership of Akbar Ali Munshi, had hoisted the Pakistani flag on the roof of Malda Zilla School<sup>119</sup>. At Araidanga, Atul Chandra Kumar, a prominent leader of the Congress, was 'requested' by the local Muslim leaders, to hoist the Pakistani flag<sup>120</sup>. At Kaliachak, and Sujapur, several processions were organized by the local Muslim League to celebrate the inclusion of Malda within Pakistan<sup>121</sup>. However, when the Radcliffe Award was published on 17 August 1947, it was seen that among the fifteen police stations of Malda district, Shibganj, Bholahat, Nachol, Gomastapur and Nababganj were included into Pakistan and remaining ten police stations came to India. Accordingly, the administration of Malda was handed over to a District Magistrate of West Bengal<sup>122</sup>.

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30. Bidyut Chakraborty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, *op. cit.*, p. 11
31. J. Ellul (trans. K. Kellen and J. Lerner), *Propaganda; The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, New York, 1969, p. 162. Ellul shows that under the influence of propaganda, certain latent drives that are vague, unclear and often without any particular objectives become powerful, direct and precise
32. *Progs. Of Govt. of Bengal, political Dept. (Political Branch) File No. 8A 0 17, Progs. B 452 – 53, December 1929*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Maldaha Samachar*, 7 August 1928
35. *List of Associations Registered by Government Corrected up to 1 April 1945, GB, Home Department, B. G. Press, Alipore, 1946, p. 96*
36. *Maldaha Samachar*, 20 December 1929
37. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 September 1932
38. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 May 1932
39. *Bangabani*, 7 September 1932
40. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 September 1932

41. Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided : Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932 – 47*, Cambridge University Press, 1995 (first Indian edition), p. 196
42. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of the Caste in Bengal 1937 – 47, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 1994; 31; 349, p. 377, downloaded on 25 May 2008
43. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 April 1938; *Hindustan Standard*, 21 June 1938
44. Report of the Commissioner, Rajshahi Division, Local Officers Fortnightly Confidential Reports for the first fortnight in February 1939, *GOB, Home Conf. Poll. Branch, File No. 11/39, WBSA*
45. *Bangabani*, 10 July & 19 July 1933
46. *Bangabani*, 24 April 1933
47. Humaria Momen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal : A Study of Krishak Praja Party and the Elections of 1937*, Pakistan Dacca, 1972, p. 15
48. *Ibid.*, p. 25
49. S. M. Abdul Latif, *Barendra Anchaler Katipay Rajnaitik O Samajik Baktitya*, Rajshahi Association, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 2006, p. 56
50. *Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Assembly 1939*, vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 102 – 103
51. Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937 – 47*, Inpex India, New Delhi, 1976, p. 123
52. *Maldaha Samachar*, 16 August 1940; Lalbihari Majumdar, *Maldaha Abalambane Jibansmriti*, *Gourdoot*, 17 April 1952.53
53. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmriti*, *Ibid.*; Ashok Mitra, *The New India 1948 – 1956 : Memoirs of an Indian Civil Servant*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1991, p. 11

54. *Ibid.*, see chapter Four
55. From Z. A. Choudhury to District Magistrate, Malda, 18 January 1941, *GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 81/41, WBSA*
56. *GB SB 'PH' Series*, File No. 501/39
57. Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*, *op. cit.*, p. 137
58. *GB, Home (Political) Confidential File No. 81/41, WBSA*
59. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmriti*, *op. cit.*, 9 December 1952
60. A Brief Summary of Political Events in Bengal during the year 1942, *Home (political) Department, GB, File No. 17/142, WBSA*
61. Report by the District Magistrate of Malda, Local Officers Fortnightly Confidential Reports for the first fortnight in March 1941, *GB Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41*
62. For percentage of Muslim members in Union, Local and District Boards in Malda, see *Appendix*
63. Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*, *op. cit.*, p. 209
64. Report of the Commissioner, Rajshahi division, Local Officers Fortnightly Confidential Reports for the first fortnight in November 1941, *GB Home (Political) Confidential File No. 13/41, W B S A*
65. *Gourdoot*, 13 April 1944
66. *Gourdoot*, 27 April 1944
67. *Maldaha Samachar*, 6 May 1944
68. *Gourdoot*, 18 November 1944
69. *Ibid.*

70. Report of the Commissioner, Rajshahi Division, Local Officers Fortnightly Confidential Reports for the second fortnight in June 1945, *GB Home (Political) Confidential File No. 37/45, W B S A*
71. For a discussion on factionalism in the Malda Congress, see chapter six of this dissertation
72. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 February 1945
73. Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905 – 1947*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991
74. Patricia Gossman, *Riots and Victims of Violence and the Construction of Communal Identity Among Bengali Muslims 1905 – 1947*, Boulder, Colorado : Westview Press, 1999 p. 104
75. Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, *op. cit.*, p. 207
76. Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*, *op. cit.*, p. 232
77. Partha Chatterjee has pointed out that Muslim Politics in Bengal throughout the 1930s and 1940s was singularly non-hegemonic in relation to the Hindu majority in Bengal. This was due to the continuation of League politics in Bengal as politics of the minority even while they were a majority within the province. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Second Partition in Bengal*, in R. Samaddar ed., *Reflections on Partition in the East*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1997
78. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, Partition Demand not outcome of Cabinet Mission Plan, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 15 March 1947
79. *File G – 54 / 1947, Part – I, AICC Papers, NMML, New Delhi*
80. *Hindustan Standard*, 17 May 1947. See Appendix of this dissertation
81. Joya Chatterjee has conclusively argued that the movement for partition was well orchestrated. Similarly, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has shown that there was also some amount of organization and plans to

mobilize among the Schedule Castes of Bengal. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India : The Namasudras of Bengal 1872 – 1947*, Richmond, Surry : Curzon Press, 1997

82. *Gourdoot*, 24 April 1947
83. *Ibid.*
84. This statement of Sibendu Sekhar Roy corresponds the view of M. S. Golwalkar, the Chief of the R.S.S. See M.S. Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur, 1947 (second ed.)
85. *File No. CL – 14 © / 1946, AICC papers, NMML*, New Delhi, cited in Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*, op. cit., p. 250
86. *Maldaha Samachar*, 15 June 1947
87. *Gourdoot*, 7 June 1947
88. *Gourdoot*, 21 June 1947
89. Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*, op. cit., p. 253
90. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 May 1947; Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmriti*, *Gourdoot*, 16 July 1952
91. *The Star of India*, 22 June 1947, cited in Bidyut Chakraborty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, op. cit., p. 111
92. For a detailed account of the United Bengal plan, See Bidyut Chakraborty, *The 1947 United Bengal Movement : A Thesis Without Synthesis*, *The Indian Economic and social History Review*, XXX, No. 4, October 1993
93. Letter dated 27 May 1947, in Durga Das ed. *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945 – 50*, vol. IV, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1972, pp. 45-46

94. Leonard A. Gordon, *Divided Bengal : Problems of Nationalism and Identity in the 1947 Partition*, in Mushirul Hasan ed. *India's Partition : Process, Strategy and Mobilization*, OUP, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 311-15; Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*, *op. cit.*, p. 260
95. *Gourdoot*, 29 May 1947
96. *Ibid.*
97. *Maldaha Samachar*, 27 May 1947
98. *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 21 June 1947; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 and 22 June 1947
99. *Minar*, 1 July 1947
100. *Ibid.*
101. *Gourdoot*, 10 July 1947
102. *Ibid.*
103. The Punjab Commission Consisted of Justice Din Mohammad, Muhammad Munir, Mehar Chand Mahajan and Teja Sing. Radcliffe was the Chairman for both the Boundary Commissions. See *After Partitions*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Delhi, Govt. of India, 1948, pp. 22-23
104. Taj Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Making of South Asian Borders, in The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 78-100
105. N. Mansergh, *The Transfer of Power 1942 – 47*, vol. XII, London : Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1977, Appendix 1, p. 488
106. Pro-British writers argue that the Partition Council deliberately desisted from attempting to define specific considerations since there were too many issues to deliberate upon and they had little time. See Anthony

Read and David Fisher, *The Proudest Day : India's Long Road to Independence*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1998, p. 483

107. Bhisham Sahni, *We have Arrived in Amritsar* (English trans.), reproduced in Mushirul Hasan ed. *India Partitioned : The Other Face of Freedom*, vol. 1, Roli Books, New Delhi, 1995
108. *Gourdoot*, 24 July 1947
109. *Ibid.*
110. *Maldaha Samachar*, 30 July 1947
111. *Gourdoot*, 31 July 1947
112. *Ibid.*
113. *Maldaha Samachar*, 30 July 1947
114. *Gourdoot*, 31 July 1947
115. Satinath Bhaduri, Gananayak (The Champion of the People), in Manabendra Bandyopadhyay ed. *Bhed-Bhibed*, pp. 108-125. Reproduced and Translated in Alok Bhalla ed. *Stories about the Partition of India*, vol. I, Harper Collins, New Delhi, 1999
116. *Ibid.*
117. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 August 1947
118. Asok Mitra, *The New India 1948 – 55 : Memoirs of an Indian Civil Servant*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1991, p. 2
119. Interview with Manik Jha, founder – member of the local Communist Party, on 11 July 2001
120. Interview with Sibendu Sekhar Roy, then the secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha, on 16 August 1997
121. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 19 August 1947

122. Asok Mitra, *The New India*, op. cit., p. 3

## CHAPTER NINE

### REFUGEE PROBLEM , 1947-1953 : SOME ISSUES

The history of Malda after independence and partition can hardly be understood without taking into account the massive influx of refugees from East Pakistan. The inflow had a profound effect on the political, economic and social life of the district.

#### THE INFLUX OF REFUGEES: A BACKGROUND STUDY

The partition of Bengal not only killed thousands of people, but also uprooted and displaced millions from their traditional homeland, their *Desh*<sup>1</sup>. Large number of people, either being directly victimized, or due to fear of violence, left their homes, hoping that they would find peace and security on the other side of the border.

In the case of Punjab, exchange of population was more or less settled once and for all. However, for Bengal, the influx continued in different forms for many years after partition. It has correctly been indicated that, while "the partition of Punjab was a one-time event with mayhem and forced migration restricted primarily to three years (1947-50), the partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuing process"<sup>2</sup>.

In spite of the fact that the independence of India and Pakistan, accompanied by a large - scale population movement, was an important historical event, the number of refugee studies for the subcontinent is limited to a handful<sup>3</sup>. It seems to be true that refugee issues have not attracted much scholarly attention in comparison with partition itself. In particular, Bengal has been given relatively little scholarly attention<sup>4</sup>.

In this historical backdrop, our study proposes to understand the experience and identity of refugees from East Pakistan who settled in a border district namely Malda, on the northern part of West Bengal. By tracing the process of movement and settlement of partition refugees in Malda, we will attempt to illustrate how such factors as policy and measures taken by the

Government, the geographical condition of migration, the choice by refugees, and caste affiliation interrelated with each other, and had a combined effect on the identity of refugees. Another concern of our study is that it will focus on the relation between refugees and hosts and more particularly, the attitude of different political parties of the host region towards the refugees.

In the next section, we will look at the chronological process of refugee influx from East Pakistan and review the policies and measures taken by district administration.

## 9.1 REFUGEE INFLUX INTO MALDA AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

9.1. As table 9.1 shows, the uprooted and displaced people came phase by phase from East Pakistan to Malda.

Table 9.1 : The year-wise influx of refugees into Malda, 1946-1951

Year of arrival in Malda	No. of displaced people		Total
	Males	Females	
1946	105	86	191
1947	2,307	1,978	4,285
1948	2,536	2,685	5,221
1949	3,233	3,041	6,274
1950	22,243	20,992	43,235
1951	494	498	992
Total	30,218	29,280	60,198

Source : Asok Mitra. Ed. *Census of 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks : Malda*, New Delhi, 1954, pp. 72-79.

The first batch of refugees arrived in Malda after the anti-Hindu riots in Noakhali and Tippera in 1946, a year before the actual partition. The shelter-seekers continued to trickle in until the end of 1949<sup>5</sup>. Those, who came during this phase, mostly belonged to the upper and upper middle strata like the landowning, merchant and professional classes. Up to 1949, about 15,971 people came to settle in Malda<sup>6</sup>. The reason for their exodus was not so much large-scale violence but petty extortions, threats and, above all, economic boycotts of Hindu traders and professionals<sup>7</sup>. The first arrival of refugees posed no great problem to the district administration. It was not necessary for the district administration to establish refugee camps<sup>8</sup>. Most of the refugees at this stage were well to do. A small section of these people was able to sell their property in East Pakistan or arrange property exchange with Muslim property owners who were leaving Malda. The educated segment either found jobs or could restart their medical or legal practice again. Government servants posted in East Pakistan accepted the Indian 'option'. A number of refugees brought some money and started business with the help of their relatives in Malda<sup>9</sup>.

However, the picture changed from December 1949 and the influx of refugees in Malda reached its peak in 1950. Anti-Hindu riots in Khulna, Rajshahi, Faridpur and Barisal compelled a large number of people to cross the border. As table 9.1 shows from December 1949 to December 1950, more than forty nine thousand people arrived in Malda<sup>10</sup>. The Nehru - Liakat pact<sup>11</sup> (April 1950) failed to provide the way for the return of the refugees to their homeland. The refugees who came to Malda from 1950 onwards were mainly displaced peasants and agricultural labourers. This time those who crossed the border were very poor and possessed very little except their labour powers. Most of them belonged to the so-called lower-castes, like Namasudra, Sadgop and Malos<sup>12</sup>.

The experience of the refugees of 1950's was considerably different. They did not have access to the social networks of the *bhadralok* who preceded them<sup>13</sup>. For the lower caste and class refugees, there were very few jobs to compete for. They were largely unable to acquire on their own initiative land

on which to rehabilitate themselves. It was this section of refugees who went through the real pain, trauma and agony of the partition<sup>14</sup>.

As the Table 9.2 shows, the bulk of the refugees in Malda mainly came from the adjacent Rajshahi district of East Pakistan. A sizeable number also came from Faridpur, Pabna, Dinajpur and Bakharganj:

Table 9.2 : Place of origin of the refugees

Sl. No.	District of origin in East Pakistan	No. of persons
1.	Rajshahi	42,532
2.	Kusthia	36
3.	Jessore	322
4.	Khulna	802
5.	Dinajpur	2,609
6.	Rangpur	430
7.	Bogura	580
8.	Pabna	3,056
9.	Dacca	1,344
10.	Mymensingh	864
11.	Faridpur	4,309
12.	Bakharganj	2,343
13.	Tipperah	310
14.	Nokhali	301
15.	Chittagang	167

16.	Sylhet	21
17.	Others	179
<p>Source : Asok Mitra. Ed. Census of 1951, <i>West Bengal District Handbooks : Malda</i>, New Delhi, 1954, pp. 72-79.</p>		

#### RESETTLEMENT OF THE EAST PAKISTAN REFUGEES IN MALDA :

In the initial stage, the most difficult problem faced by the district administration was the scarcity of land in Malda able to be utilized for the rehabilitation of refugees<sup>15</sup>. The number of evacuees to East Pakistan was less, and more importantly, evacuee properties were not available in Malda because the Muslims who left for East Pakistan were relatively poor and did not possess substantial land holdings<sup>16</sup>. As has already been stated, the coming of the first batch of refugees prior to 1950 posed no serious problem to the district administration, as they were few in number. The district administration did not find it necessary to set up any refugee camp. Moreover, there was no clear thinking at the Government level, as to whether the refugees needed relief, which was a temporary affair, or rehabilitation, which was long-term. It was hoped that the refugees would eventually return to East Pakistan and that short-term measures would be enough to cope with the situation<sup>17</sup>.

However, by the end of 1950, when the influx of refugees into Malda reached its peak, the district administration was forced to augment relief and rehabilitation efforts. The administrative efforts may be discussed at two levels: urban and rural.

#### RELIEF AND REHABILITATION IN URBAN AREAS:

A large number of refugees coming mainly from adjacent Rajshahi district of East Pakistan started to settle in the municipal area of Englishbazar. The Commissioners of the Municipality mentioned scarcity of water, electricity, proper drainage system and crisis in other municipal facilities due to the influx of refugees repeatedly<sup>18</sup>. Due to the continuing influx of the displaced

persons from East Pakistan, the population of Englishbazar was rocketed up. As Table 9.3 shows, the population of Englishbazar town was nearly doubled during the years 1941 - 1961.

Table 9.3 Growth of population in Englishbazar Town, 1941-1961

Census year	Male	Female	Total Population
1941	12,816	10,518	23,334
1951	16,348	14,315	30,663
1961	24,496	21,494	45,900

Source : J. C. Sengupta, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Malda, 1969, P. 23

In 1951 the Municipality leased out land on cheap rate to the refugees coming from East Pakistan at Mokdumpur<sup>19</sup>. The refugees began to settle in the peripheral areas of the town like Sadarghat, Fulbari, Banshbari, Singatala, Pirojpur, Ramakrishna Pally and Haidarpur<sup>20</sup>. It was a time of troubles for Englishbazar town. The town was groaning under the load of refugees<sup>21</sup>. Scarcity of vacant land was visible in the centre of the town, which was thought to be detrimental to environment and public health<sup>22</sup>. The number of hawkers in the town was increased to a considerable extent due to the pressure of distressed people and lack of alternative employment<sup>23</sup>.

In urban Malda, many refugee families settled on their own. They were given various types of rehabilitation assistance, which included house-building loans, trade loans or professional loans. Government sponsored colonies were also established. There were three such colonies with 600 families<sup>24</sup>. Up to September 1953, about 200 families were given trade and business loans<sup>25</sup>.

Steps were also taken for education of refugee children. It was decided that every refugee school-going child should receive free primary schooling and the more deserving among them should get free secondary education<sup>26</sup>. The

state Government also sanctioned the opening of a new secondary school (Umesh Chandra Bastuhara Vidyalaya) and the expansion of some existing schools to take in some refugee students. Promising refugee student were granted stipends for prosecuting higher education<sup>27</sup>. Malda College, was established in 1944, received grants from the Government for its infrastructural expansion to accommodate refugee students<sup>28</sup>.

#### RELIEF AND REHABILITATION IN RURAL AREAS:

In rural areas of Malda the refugees settled mainly at Gour, Kendua, Baldiaghat, Aiho, Rishipur, Bulbulchandi, Rampara and Mobarakpur<sup>29</sup>. At Gour the refugee populace concentrated in three camps set up by the district administration:

- a) At the northwest of Bardwari where refugees from Kansat and Sibganj of Rajshahi district settled themselves up<sup>30</sup>;
- b) The refugees belonging to Namasudra caste from Pabna and Faridpur concentrated in the camp on the East of Burdwari<sup>31</sup>;
- c) At the camp located on the South bank of Choto Sagardighi resided the refugees belonging to upper caste<sup>32</sup>.

The Malos coming from Pabna were helped to build up their settlement at Bulbulchandi. These Malos from Pabna were very efficient in fishing. Owing to them, a local newspaper informs, the price level of fishes was coming down at Bulbulchandi<sup>33</sup>. At Baldiaghat the refugees were predominantly Namasudra in caste. They were excellent cultivators and fishermen<sup>34</sup>. They were some 15-29 thousands in numbers and came from Faridpur. They were given land, cash money and agricultural equipment by the district administration. At Aiho, Rampara, Rishipur, Kendua and Mobarakpur numerous refugees were settled<sup>35</sup>.

The editor of a local newspaper, Gourdoot, visited most of the refugee settlements in person<sup>36</sup>. He made a report on the state of the refugees, their problems and Governmental and Non-Governmental steps to assist them.

The Government officials came forward to assist the refugees in establishing their settlements. They had been doing their best, the Gourdoot reports, to lessen the sufferings of the refugees. At Gour the Government granted them land and cash money and helped them to build up their cottages. At Baldiaghat, the refugees were given land, cash money and agricultural equipments. Moreover, the district administration granted about 250 boats to the refugees for which the Government had to incur an expenditure of Rs. 1500/-<sup>37</sup>. The editor of Gourdoot felt that a school should be established at Baldiaghat for the continuation of education of the refugee children. At Rishipur a market place and a free M.E. school were established. The administration set up a Rishipur an agricultural office from which seeds, paddy and agricultural equipments were allotted to the refugees. The Gourdoot informed that the Government had spent some three lakhs of rupees for the rehabilitation of the refugees up to July, 1950<sup>38</sup>.

#### LIFE IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS

After briefly considering the efforts of the district administration for relief and rehabilitation, let us now turn our attention to life of the displaced people in some of the camps that were set up in Malda to provide shelter to the incoming displaced persons. As the cross-border influx continued interminably in the 1950's, the helpless, uprooted people reached reception and interception centers at the Englishbazar town. From there, they were subsequently sent to the transit camps. The relief and transit camps were set up in different parts of Malda district to provide immediate help to the displaced people<sup>39</sup>.

The sufferings of the refugees at several refugee camps in Malda came rather prominently in the realm of discourses of the editor of a contemporary local newspaper, the Gourdoot. The memoirs of Lalbihari Majumdar<sup>40</sup>, Bhaktibushan Roy<sup>41</sup> and Sibendu Sekhar Roy<sup>42</sup>. The first problem which confronted the refugees was the insufficiency of medical facilities. A very small number of doctors and paucity of medicines added to their misery. As a result various diseases, namely fever, dencery, small pox etc. became almost epidemic in every relief camps<sup>43</sup>. The dencery was mostly caused by

putrid 'atta' (ground wheat) doled out to them and contaminated drinking water of the tube-wells<sup>44</sup>. While narrating his experience in a refugee camp at Aiho, Balaram Das (76) said, "The refugees definitely got shelter far way from their home and communal hatred, but scarcity of water, lack of proper health care, irregular supply of ration (dry doles) made their lives unbearable" <sup>45</sup>. Prafulla K. Chakraborty, a major chronicler of the partition refugees of East Bengal, has narrated the same story at Dhubulia as well as at Cooper's and Kasipur camps, "Camp life soon made the displaced people forget that they were once human beings. Scarcity of water, woeful shortages of sanitary arrangements, inadequate supply of rations called dry doles, which were often putrid, very little milk for children, and complete absence of privacy made life insupportable for the inmates who were usually accustomed to subsist on very little. The Government gave them shelter and straightway threw them back to a Hobbesian State of nature. Life became 'nasty, brutish and short', and almost promiscuous" <sup>46</sup>.

Along with the setting up of refugee camps, the important task of the district administration was the development of refugee colonies. Like other refugee inhabitant areas of West Bengal, there were three categories of colonies - 1) urban and rural; 2) squatters' colonies; and 3) private colonies<sup>47</sup>.

The government colony was the outcome only a small proportion of refugee families. Table 9.4 shows that the majority of refugees in Malda as well as in entire North Bengal lived in settlements that were not developed and maintained by the government.

Table 9.4. : Refuges in North Bengal in and outside government camps and colonies.

Districts	No. of government colonies	Population in government colonies	Refugees outside camps and colonies	Total refugee population
Malda	12	12,339	69,004	72,924

West dinajpur	11	3,865	1,58,095	1,62,949
Jalpaiguri	9	7,850	1,42,306	1,50,156
Dajjeeling	2	3,375	26,668	30,043
Cooch Behar	12	6,550	2,22,118	2,27,827

Source : *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal (Statement issued by the Government of West Bengal on 15 December 1958)*, cited in P. Chaudhuri, *Refugees in West Bengal : A Study of the Growth and Distribution of Refugee Settlements within the CMD*; Occasional Paper No. 55, Centre for Studies in Social Science, Calcutta, 1983.

Most of the refugee colonies in Malda lacked the basic civic amenities. These colonies provided for the settlers little more than makeshift shelters. They lacked good approach roads and pathways for feeder roads, sanitary latrines, pipe-water supply and electricity. The government colonies were actual and potential slums<sup>48</sup>.

It has been pointed out earlier that a small segment of refugees took shelter in government camps and colonies. The great majority of refugees who settled in West Bengal between 1947 and 1955 thus did so largely or solely through their own efforts<sup>49</sup>. At first, many refugees stayed with relatives or friends or took shelter in camps. But these devices were temporary<sup>50</sup>. Refugee families had to find a place to stay more permanently which would give them some dignity and privacy and was close enough to a town or a city where they could find some work. Such space was in short supply.

It was this combination of pressures which encouraged many refugees simply to grab any free land they could find and to squat upon it<sup>51</sup>. Against this backdrop, the squatters' colonies, an important part of the life and landscape of West Bengal, mushroomed. In some cases, where the land was acquired through legal means and procedures, the government termed the areas of refugee settlement as 'Private Colonies'. But, in other cases,

apparently vacant land, owned by the government or by big landowners, was acquired through forcible occupation. This process of 'collective takeover' was known as *Jabar dakhla*<sup>52</sup>. Most of these squatters' colonies were established in Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly districts. These were inhabited mainly by middle-class and working class refugees from East Pakistan<sup>53</sup>. The refugees built up their own shelters in these areas virtually without any government aid. In order to link the habitation with livelihood, the colonies were set up near the towns or industrial areas.

But, the squatters' colonies were not limited to the cities and suburbs. In rural areas, the refugee peasant took over the uncultivated waste land. Such land was seized not only for habitation but also for cultivation. This type of agricultural colonies was established in Bankura, Birbhum, Midnapore, Burdwan, Nadia, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas, West Dinajpur, Malda, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts<sup>54</sup>. It has been argued that, these '*jabar dakhla*' colonies were classic examples of the organized resettlement of the East Pakistani refugees against the rehabilitation policies of the congress government<sup>55</sup>.

The following is the list of thirty eight squatters' colonies set up in Malda in the post 1950 period<sup>56</sup>.

List of the post-1950 displaced persons' squatters' colonies in Malda.

1. Mangalbari Colony.
2. Khaihata Colony
3. Gandhi Colony
4. Charlakshmipur Colony
5. Khanpur Colony
6. Bagalbagi Colony (Ranir Garh)
7. Bilbari-Nazir Khani Colony
8. Buraburitala Krishnapally Colony
9. Paschim Sarbamangala Palli Colony
10. Uttar Mahimnagar and Kanchan Nagar Colony

- |  |                                 |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 11. Adina Colony                                     | 12. Gobindapur Colony           |
| 13. Duba Khoksan Colony                              | 14. Kadubari Colony             |
| 15. Chandrail Colony                                 | 16. Bolbari Colony              |
| 17. Ghasani Bag Colony                               | 18. Kutubsahar - Golghar Colony |
| 19. Kutubsahar Colony                                | 20. Dalla Colony                |
| 21. Parbatidanga Colony                              | 22. Agra Colony                 |
| 23. Telnai Colony                                    | 24. Nandagar and Poali Colony   |
| 25. Harishchandrapur and Aragachi Colony             |                                 |
| 26. Dharanda and Jugi-Pathar Colony                  |                                 |
| 27. Pathar Sasuli Colony                             | 28. Kuchiamore Colony           |
| 29. Kendua Colony                                    | 30. Bakshinagar Colony          |
| 31. Chhaitangachi Madhyam Kendua (Diary Farm) Colony |                                 |
| 32. Bulbulchandi Rice Mill (Kendua) Colony           |                                 |
| 33. Jaydebpur Colony                                 | 34. Digalbari Colony            |
| 35. Barwadanga Colony                                | 36. Bhangatola Colony           |
| 37. Fuldanga Colony                                  |                                 |
| 38. Chhaitangachi Madhyam Kendua Colony              |                                 |

Living conditions in these fast-growing and densely inhabited settlements were primitive. Since they had grown in an entirely unplanned way, illegally and without license from the government, most did not have even the most basic amenities: drains, electricity or running water<sup>57</sup>. Kshitimohan Roy<sup>58</sup>, a resident of Dalla Colony, who came from Pabna of East Pakistan, said: "The area was full of snakes. There were least possible public amenities. We had to carry drinking water on our own as there were initially no tube-wells in the

area. We were quite well-off there in our *desh*, and here we had to start our lives again like beggars living in a *basti* (slum) - like area”<sup>59</sup>.

## THE ATTITUDE OF LOCAL POPULACE TOWARDS THE REFUGEES

Everywhere in West Bengal the attitude of the local populace towards the refugees were not favorable. As one bitter account by an author (whose family was displaced) puts it : ‘The refugees were regarded as intruders. Their East Bengal patois, their fights and quarrels for scarce drinking water and their begrimed bodies excited the derisive scorn of the smart West Bengal people. These loathsome creatures hardly looked like humans. Indeed they were no more than swarm of locusts eating away the already scarce foodstuff in West Bengal’<sup>59</sup>. News was published in the West Bengal Press which ascribed the scarcity of foodstuff to the presence of these unwanted mouths<sup>60</sup>.

It was against such a sentiment that Sir Jadunath Sarkar, in his Presidential address at a conference of East Bengal refugees at the University Institute Hall, uttered his memorable warning : ‘I warn West Bengal - do not spurn away such a rich racial element when seeking shelter at your doors. They alone can make you great if you utilize these human materials. Let our independent province of West Bengal engraft this rich racial birch upon its old decaying trunk and rise to a new era of prosperity and power’<sup>61</sup>.

In the case of Malda, the reaction was one of apathy, if not of disdain. We get a clear picture of the attitude of the local populace towards the refugees from the memoirs of Lalbihari Majumdar, local literati as well as the editor of a contemporary local newspaper, namely the Gourdoot. The Gourdoot informed that at few localities, particularly at Bubbulchandi the attitude of local populace towards the refugees was rather hostile. They regarded the refugees to be intruders to their native land. They held the refugees responsible for their sufferings<sup>62</sup>.

The refugees, on the other hand being uprooted from their native land in East Pakistan, were very keen to settle at a new place. As a result a tension cropped up between the natives and the newcomers<sup>63</sup>. This attitude of the

natives was criticized by the editor of *Gourdoot*. He appealed to local residents to be sensible and generous to the problems faced by the displaced persons. The editor asked the local population to keep in mind the fact that these refugees had their own land and home a few days back. But they were used as pawns on the chess-board of political leaders and were thrown to an uncertain future<sup>64</sup>.

The editor reminded the natives that thousands of men had left this district for Pakistan. Most of them were agriculturists. So a new problem came on the surface – the shortage of agricultural people in the entire district. As a result there arose a possibility of large-scale transformation of arable land into waste land. In the opinion of the editor, the newcomers might be utilized to fill up this vacuum. By rehabilitating them in different places from where large-scale migration took place and by giving them abandoned land to cultivate, the editor thought, this new problem could be solved<sup>65</sup>.

#### THE ATTITUDE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES TOWARDS THE REFUGEES

Partition transformed Bengal's political landscape. Having lost two-thirds of its territory to Pakistan, West Bengal was left with only 89 of the 250 constituencies in the assembly of undivided Bengal. This upset all the old balances and changed the standing of every political party in the new state, often in quite unintended ways<sup>66</sup>. In the 1950s, it became clear that partition had irrevocably transformed West Bengal's society and had profoundly changed every aspect of its political life. The factional fight within the Congress rank to grab the power in the newly independent province had already tarnished the party's reputation. With the influx of refugees a serious inner-party quarrels cropped up<sup>67</sup>.

Atulya Ghosh and his Hooghly faction, in their bid to destroy East Bengal's influence in the Congress, deliberately unleashed potentially dangerous 'sons-of-the-soil' sentiments<sup>68</sup>. In October 1947, a number of prominent Congressmen of the Hooghly faction met at the Tamluk Memorial Football Stadium in Midnapore. They pilloried the refugees as rude upstarts, country

cousins who had ignominiously run away from home. In his tirade, Nikunja Maity, the Mahishya leader from Midnapore, denounced Prafulla Ghosh's ministry for 'following the old politics of the Muslim League ministry by taking no interest in West Bengal people'<sup>69</sup>. Jadabendranath Panja from Burdwan insisted that 'West Bengal people were not in a position to give shelter to all East Bengal Hindus' and even branded the Eastern Bengal refugees as potential fifth columnists<sup>70</sup>.

This type of ambivalent attitude of the Congress towards the refugees had its imprint in the political canvas of a northern Bengal district, namely Malda. The Gourdoot, a contemporary local newspaper, highlighted the vacillating policy of the local Congress. Subodh Misra, the District Congress President, categorically opposed the 'infiltration' of the displaced people into the district. The unprecedented food crisis of Malda, according to Misra, was a direct outcome of the refugee migration into the district. By publishing several pamphlets he demanded their immediate expulsion from the district<sup>71</sup>. The local Communists and the R.S.S. strongly opposed his view. Even the attitude of Subodh Misra did not find favor with a section of the local congressmen, including Sourindra Misra<sup>72</sup>.

At this juncture Mr. Abdulla-al-Mahmud, the Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan, came to Malda to meet the prominent personalities of both Hindu and Muslim communities<sup>73</sup>. At this meeting he praised the effort of the district administration and local people to tackle the communal problem. But Subodh Misra, then the District Congress President, made a scathing criticism of the district administration for failing to tackle the communal problem effectively. He stated - when some Hindu anti-social elements attacked some people belonging to minority community at Gajol, the administration reflected an apathetic attitude. He further stated that the volume of oppression in the district of Malda upon the minority community was of most severe nature. The local prominent personalities present at the meeting protested vehemently and the District Magistrate asked him to give evidence. Subodh Misra however, refrained from making further statement<sup>74</sup>.

The editor of *Gourdoot*, after narrating the incident informed that a section of local people believed that the real cause behind Subodh Mesra's statement was the attempt to capture votes from the minority community. We thus notice that the attitude of the local congress towards the refugees created dissatisfaction among a section of the local people. The communists made an attempt to capitalize the situation. They started campaigning among the displace people against the hostile attitude of the local congress party<sup>75</sup>. The dissatisfaction gradually turned into resentment.

In such a situation Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, the state congress leader, came to Malda to meet the congress workers and local people. At a meeting with congress workers held in 26 June 1950 Prafulla Chandra Ghosh rebuked the congress workers for their selfishness and love for power<sup>76</sup>. An open meeting was convened next day which turned into a total pandemonium. A huge uproar began from the very beginning of the meeting. Some people occupied the dais, raised slogan against the local congress leaders, snatched away the microphone from hands of Prafulla Chandra Ghosh and pushed Subodh Misra and Sourindra Misra down from the stage. They demanded the immediate expulsion of Subodh Misra from the congress as he had taken a rather inhuman attitude towards the helpless refugees. The meeting had to be postponed<sup>77</sup>.

In the opinion of the editor of the *Gourdoot*, the communists might have exploited the situation, but at the same time he admitted that the resentment of the local people was justified. The congress attitude towards the refugees hurt the sentiment of the local populace. These local congress leaders succeeded, the editorial of *Gourdoot* ran, in sparking off resentment and hostility, not only among the refugees themselves but among a public increasingly sympathetic to their plight<sup>78</sup>.

Thus, centering round the issue of refugee infiltration, the local political scenario became complicated. The division in the congress rank came on the surface. The congress attitude towards the refugees was condemned by a section of local intelligentsia<sup>79</sup>. A group of local congress leaders contemplated that the resentment of the people was more against some

individual leaders than the congress party. It was very disappointing that, the editorial of Gourdoot ran, within a few years of independence some narrow-minded politician began to fulfill their own selfish interests<sup>80</sup>.

In such a situation the District Congress, bowing to public pressure, had to take some measures to placate the public sentiment. A Committee to Aid and Rehabilitate the Displaced Persons was formed in congress initiative<sup>81</sup>. In Gourdoot the proceedings of the committee from April 2 to June 15, 1950 was published. From it we know that during this period the committee had raised funds up to Rs. 4,204/- from donation. The expenditure of the committee in this connection was as follows :

**Table 9.5 Total Expenditure of the Congress Committee**

Aid and expenditure	Expense in Rs.
Aid in clothes	1,049
Aid in cash	112
Aid in rice and crop	95
Aid in rehabilitation	81
Aid to displaced students	18
Travel expenses	30
Expenditure for printing & campaigning	252
Office expenditure	49
Postal expenses	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,726</b>

This statement of expenditure was editorially criticized in Gourdoot and it was alleged that the collected sum for assisting the refugees was not properly utilized<sup>82</sup>. In the first place, the editor stated, the total collection fell well short of the estimated amount when no less an organization than the District Congress was involved in the venture. Moreover, the editor wrote, the fashion in which expenditure was incurred, smacked of poor thinking. While the refugees got only Rs. 95/- and Rs. 81/- for food and rehabilitation respectively, the congress committee had expended Rs. 252/- for printing and campaigning. It was, in the opinion of the editor, too much and absolutely unnecessary<sup>83</sup>. The editor referred to other instances where expenditure was grossly unreasonable. The committee had expended Rs. 49/- as office expenses, Rs. 30/- as travel expenses, Rs. 40/- as postal expenses; whereas the refugee students got only Rs. 18/- to buy books and other study materials. The committee stated that it distributed 168 pairs of clothes among the displaced persons. The area-wise distribution of clothes by the congress committee is shown below :

Table 9.6 Area-wise distribution of clothes among the refugees by the Congress Committee.

Thana	Clothes
Bamongola	46 pairs
Habibpur	55 pairs
Old Mada	55 pairs
Kharba	9 pairs
Harischandripur	3 pairs

Source : The Gourdoot, July 27, 1950

The editor indicated that this 168 pairs of clothes, distributed among the refugees, cost the committee of Rs.1049/- which in the prevailing price rate was sufficiently high<sup>84</sup>. The editor alleged that the congress committee

simply squandered away money in the name of aiding the refugees. He stated that the local public opinion was in favour of an impartial enquiry into the whole matter. According to the editor, the relief activities of the Women's Committee to Aid the Displaced Persons and the Refugee Aid Committee were more organized and reflected rather sensible approach than their congress counterpart. The Congress could make its achievements more impressive in serving the destitute, unfortunately hailing from East Pakistan. However, factional squabbles within the congress fold rendered everything impossible and congress performance was finally very dismal<sup>85</sup>.

The local communists, for their part, were initially suspicious of the refugees. They assumed that refugees were deeply infected by the communalism from which they had fled<sup>86</sup>. Moreover, the early refugees were , at first, anxious not to offend the congress, which held power both at the level of the state and the centre and from whom they expected help<sup>87</sup>. Gradually, a bridge was built between the party and the refugees. The refugees, on their part, became increasingly disillusioned with the local Congress party for its policy<sup>88</sup>. The refugees could see that the the local congress party had neither the will to give the refugees the help they wanted nor any intention of doing so. The local communists, on their part, realized that they could not ignore such a potential force like that of the refugees. Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty, the local communist leaders, threw themselves actively into the project of bringing the refugees behind the party<sup>89</sup>. Their activities got a new impetus when in August 1950 the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), organized mainly by the communists, was formed in Calcutta<sup>90</sup>. The local communists protested vigorously when the Congress-led government passed the Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorized Occupation of Land Act in 1951<sup>91</sup>. In this way, the local communists came in closer to the aspirations and demands of the refugees. The refugees of camps and colonies proved a fertile base of support for the local communists in later years<sup>92</sup>.

## OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL EFFORTS TO HELP THE REFUGEES

It was reported that several organizations came forward to help the displaced persons. The first among them was the Refugee Aid Committee. It operated under the supervision of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangha (RSS). The Secretary of the committee was Subha Narayan Giri, a rich businessman. It requested local populace to extend generous help to the refugees<sup>93</sup>. From the report of the committee it was known that it had collected money, rice and clothes for distributing among the refugees :

Table 9.7 Collection and distribution of relief items among the refugees, 1950

Collected	Distributed among the refugees
Rs. 3,255	Rs. 2,249
113 seers of rice	103 seers
216 piece of clothes	180 pieces
Source : The Gourddot, June 15, 1950	

It was further reported that on March 4, 1950 a Women's Committee to Aid the Displaced Persons was formed. Mrs. Tarubala Sen, a prominent congress worker, became its Secretary<sup>94</sup>. Upto 5 June 1950 it collected Rs. 4823/- to help the destitute. The organization spent a sum of Rs. 2500/- to build up cottages for the refugees at Ramkeli. It also planned to establish a primary school there. From its headquarter at Gandhi Dharamshala at Malda town, the workers of the Women's Committee distributed rice, barley, soap, soda etc. among the destitute everyday. Moreover, the committee also distributed some two hundred pieces of clothes among them. The editor of Gourddot spoke high of the efforts of the Women's committee in this regard in unequivocal terms<sup>95</sup>.

The Gourddot reported that the Malda Ramkrishna Mission was also active in organizing relief works among the refugees. The Mission opened a relief

camp at Singabad station in collaboration with the Malda Red Cross. From this camp dry food, milk, sugar etc. had been distributed. Moreover the Mission had established free medical centers at five places of the district, namely (i) Singabad Station ; (ii) Rishipur ; (iii) Chanpur Village at Bamongola ; (iv) Golapganj ; and (v) Gandhi Dharamshala<sup>96</sup>. Nearly 1386 patients received medical treatment from these centers upto 31 May 1950. The Mission had to spend some Rs. 200/- per month to run these free medical centers. It also distributed text books among 43 displaced students and extended financial help to some students to continue their education. The Ramkrishna Mission provided financial assistance to ten refugee families for building up cottages<sup>97</sup>.

In spite of these efforts, most of the refugees who settled in Malda led extremely hard lives and suffered great privation. In fact, society in West Bengal as a whole was profoundly affected by absorbing millions of displaced people. A scholar has recently argued that though the refugees from East Pakistan had a language, culture and religion in common with their hosts, they were not 'assimilated' or 'rehabilitated' in West Bengal in any meaningful way, and for decades after they arrived in India they remained on the margins of society<sup>98</sup>.

In the case of Malda one noticeable feature was that unlike Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar the number of Muslims who left the district for East Pakistan after partition were relatively small. So there was scarcity of vacant cultivable land. It has already been discussed that in Malda the refugees who took shelter in the camps were mostly cultivators. Therefore, a lack of access to the cultivable land for a long period of time increased their grievances. In fact, this was the picture of West Bengal as a whole. By the time of the first general election based on universal franchise in 1952, the refugees had become a force that no party could ignore. Many researchers, in fact, are of the opinion that the constant pressure of the refugees for land and rehabilitation played a crucial role in the abolition of Bengal's zamindari system in 1953<sup>99</sup>.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. Dipesh Chakraborty has translated *desh* as 'foundational homeland'. See Dipesh Chakraborty, *Remembered Villages : Representation of Hindu Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the partition*, Economic and political weekly, Vol. 31, No. 32, August 10, 1996, p. 2144
2. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta ed., *The Trauma and The Triumph : Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Stree, 2003, p. 2
3. Tetsuya Nakatani, *Away from Home : The Movement and Settlement of Refugees from East Pakistan in West Bengal*, in Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.), *State, Society and Displaced people in South Asia*, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2004, p. 80
4. Gyanesh Kudaisya, *Divided Landscape, Fragmented Identities : East Bengal Refugees and their Rehabilitation in India, 1947 - 79*, Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography 17 (1), 1966, P. 25. Concerning the partition refugees of East Bengal, some studies that reflect recent scholarly interests have been made since the mid - 180's. For example, see Prafulla K. Chakraborty, *The Marginal Men : The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, Naya Udyog, 1999; Dipesh Chakraborty (1996), op. cit.; Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), 2003, op. cit.; Ranabir Samaddar, *Reflections on Partition of the East*, New Delhi, Vikas, 1997; Nilanjana Chatterjee, *The East Bengal Refugees : A Lesson in Survival*, in S. Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta : The Living City*, Calcutta, Oxford University Press, 1990; Sanjay K. Ray (ed.), *Refugees and Human Rights : Social and Political Dynamics of Refugee Problem in Eastern and Northeastern India*, Jaipur, Rawat, 2001; Samir Kumar Das, *State Responses to the Refugee Crisis : Relief and Rehabilitation in the East*, in Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Refugees and the State : Practices and Asylum and Care in India, 1947 - 2000*, New Delhi, Sage, 2003; Anil Sinha, *Pashchimbanger*

*Udbastu Upanibesh (in Bengali)*, Calcutta, Book Club, 1995; Pranati Choudhuri, *Refugees in West Bengal : A Study of the Growth and Distribution of Refugee Settlement within the Calcutta Metropolitan District*, Working Paper, No. 55, Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1980; Joya Chatterjee, *The Spoils of Partition : Bengal and India 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2008

5. Asok Mitra, *Census 1951, West Bengal District Handbooks, Malda*, (hereafter Census 1951), New Delhi, 1954, p.72
6. *Ibid.*, p.78
7. Asok Mitra, *Tin Kuri Dash (in Bengali)*, Vol. III, Kolkata, Dey's Publishing, 1993, p. 33
8. *Ibid.*
9. Asok Mitra, *The New India 1948-55 : Memoirs of an Indian Civil Servant*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1991, p.16; Ratan Dasgupta, *Pourasabhar Karyabibaran Engrej bazar Sahar: 1900-2000 (in Bengali)*, Kolkata, Pragatishil Prakashak, 2004, p. 21
10. Asok Mitra, *Census 1951, op. cit.*, p.78
11. The Nehru-Liakat Pact was signed on 8 April 1950. By it, it was decided that those people who had left their homeland to other country would be encouraged to come back to their native land and the government would restore the abandoned property to them.
12. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Maldaha Ablambane Jibansmiriti, op.cit.*, Gourdoot, 14 July 1951
13. *Ibid.*
14. Pia Oberoi, *Exile and Belonging : Refugees and State Policy in South Asia*, New Delhi, Oxford, 2006, P. 64

15. Asok Mitra, *Census 1951*, op. cit., p.80
16. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, op. cit., *Gourdoot*, June 15, 1950; That comparatively less Muslims had left for East Pakistan was common to other parts of West Bengal also : see Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Demographic Upheaval of Partition : Refugees and Agricultural Resettlement in India, 1947 - 67*, South Asia, Vol. XVII, Special Issue, 1995, p. 89
17. Asok Mitra, *The New India*, op. cit., p.20
18. *Proceedings Book of Englishbazar Municipality*, (hereafter *Proceedings Book*), December 10, 1951
19. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1951
20. *Ibid.*, Special Meeting, April 30, 1951
21. *Ibid.*, November, 28, 1953
22. *Ibid.*, December 3, 1953
23. *Ibid.*, December 6, 1950
24. Asok Mitra, *Census 1951*, op.cit., p.84
25. J.C. Sengupta, *Malda District Gazetteer*, op. cit., p.76
26. Asok Mitra, *The New India*, op. cit., p.24
27. J. C. Sengupta, *Malda District Gazetteer*, op. cit., p.79
28. *Proceedings Book*, Malda College Governing Body, 8. 7. 1951
29. *Gourdoot*, June 15, 1950
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Gourdoot*, June 15, 1950

33. *Ibid.*
34. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay provides a detailed account of social and political life of the Namasudras in Bengal : see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India : The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*, Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1996
35. *Gourdoot*, June 15, 1950
36. *Gourdoot*, July 13, 1950
37. *Gourdoot*, June 15, 1950
38. *Gourdoot*, July 27, 1950
39. *Ibid.*
40. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Maldaha Ablambane Jibansmiriti* (in Bengali; Published serially in *Gourdoot*, during 1950 - 54)
41. Bhaktibushan Roy, *Ek Udvastur Dinalipi* (Unpublished), p.32
42. Sibendu Sekhar Roy, *Amar Dekha Maldaher Udbastu Jiban* (in Bengali; unpublished), p.42
43. *Gourdoot*, July 13, 1950; Sibendu Sekhar Roy, *Amar Dekha Maldaher Udbastu Jiban*, *op.cit.*, p. 25
44. Bhaktibushan Roy, *Dinalipi*, *op. cit.*, p. 15
45. Based on the interview of Balaram Das with the author on 8 January 2008
46. Profulla K. Chakraborty, *The Marginal Men*, *op.cit.*, p.56
47. The Government sponsored colony was a settlement where the government acquired land and prepared a layout plan, and then refugees in transit camps were brought squatters' colonies emerged as refugees sought shelter by illegally occupying vacant land and

these colonies received no government aid, private colonies were set up by the refugees themselves, with or without government assistance, mostly through legal means, i.e., by acquiring or purchasing land - see Pranati Chaudhuri, *Refugees in West Bengal : A Study of the Growth and Distribution of Refugee Settlement within the CMD*, Occasional Paper No. 55, Calcutta, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, pp. 14-30

48. Based on interview of Manik Jha with the author on 5 July 1996
49. Joya Chatterjee, *The Spoils of Partition : Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, First South Asian edition, 2008, P. 141
50. *Report of the Working Group on the residual problem of Rehabilitation in West Bengal*, Ministry of Supply and Rehabilitation Development of Rehabilitation, Government of India Press, March 1976, P. 6
51. Joya Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, P. 141
52. Pablo Bose, Dilemmas of Diaspora : Partition, Refugees, and the Politics of 'Home', *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 10, 1999
53. Anil Sinha, *Paschimbanger Udbastu Upanibesh* (in Bengali), Book club, Calcutta, 1995, P. 3
54. *Report of the Working Group on the Residual Problem of Rehabilitation in West Bengal*, Ministry of Supply and Rehabilitation, Department of Rehabilitation, Government of India Press, March 1976, P. 11
55. Anil Sinha, *op.cit.*, P. 20
56. Prafulla K. Chakraborty, *The Marginal Men*, *op. cit.*, Appendix - E, P. 485

57. Based on interview of Gokul Das, Rampada Sarkar of Buraburitala Krishnapally Colony, Dharani Sarkar, Mani Biswas of Adina colony, Rasbehari Choudhury, Madan Gopal Karmakar of Dalla Colony, Harendra Nath Mondal, Kanai Sarkar of Kendua colony, Nitai Das, Abani Sarkar of Bhangatola colony. The conditions of such squatters' colonies were similar in other refugee populated parts of Bengal as well - see *Report of the Working Group on the Residual Problem of Rehabilitation in West Bengal*, p.11; '*Report on Rehabilitation of displaced persons from East Pakistan squatting on Government and Requisitioned Properties in West Bengal*', Committee of Review of Rehabilitation in West Bengal, Ministry of Labour Employment and Rehabilitation, Government of India Press, May 1970, pp. 39-40
58. Based on the interview with the present researcher on 22 June, 2008
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 30 June 1948
61. *ibid.*, 18 August 1948
62. Lalbihari Majumdar, *Jibansmiriti*, *op.cit.*, Gourdoot, July 2, 1951
63. *The Gourdoot*, July 13, 1950; Sibendu Sekhar Roy, *Amar Dekha Maldaher Udbastu Jiban*, p. 25
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.*
66. Joya Chatterjee, *The Spoils of Partition*, *op.cit.*, p.221
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*, pp.221-222
69. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 June 1950
70. *Ibid.*

71. *The Gourdoot*, 4 July 1950
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*, Anil Sinha, *op.cit.*, p. 20
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Maldaha Samachar*, 30 June 1950
78. *The Gourdoot*, 8 July 1950
79. *Ibid.*, 27 July 1950
80. *Ibid.*
81. *Maldaha Samachar*, 2 August, 1950
82. *The Gourdoot*, 27 July 1950
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*
85. *Ibid.*
86. *Maldaha Samachar*, 3 August 1950
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*
89. Bhktibushan Roy, *Dinalipi*, *op.cit.*, p.25
90. In August 1950, Communists organized the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), which brought to its standing committee representatives of the Forward Block, the Socialist Unity Centre, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (rebel group), the Democratic

Vanguards, the Bolshevik Party, the Socialist Republican Party and even the Hindu Mahasabha - see Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*, op.cit.P.76

91. 'Memoir' of Manik Jha (unpublished), one of the founder members of the local Communist Party.
92. *Ibid.*
93. *The Gourdoot*, 15 June 1950
94. *Ibid.*
95. *Ibid.*
96. *Ibid.*
97. *Ibid.*
98. Joya Chatterjee, *The Spoils of Partition*, op.cit., p.150
99. Prafulla K. Chakraborty, *The Marginal Men*, op.cit., p.259

## CHAPTER – TEN

### ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF LEFT POLITICS 1935-1953: AGRARIAN DISTURBANCES AND THE ABOLITION OF THE ZAMINDARI SYSTEM.

Leftism in India emerged out of the matrix of the Indian National Movement. It was both a nationalist as well as revolutionary movement. The disillusionment of radical middle class youths with Gandhian constraints which found initial expression through a last outburst of terrorism in Bengal and Punjab between 1928 and 1934, was also contributing significantly to the growth of the Left by the end of this period, as revolutionaries abandoned the path of individual violence for mass struggle and Marxism. The Communist Party of India (C.P.I.) which was formally banned in 1934 adopted the programme of a broad united national front of all anti- imperialist forces. The shift of many terrorists to C.P.I provided the cadre-base for a major extension into districts.

The theoreticians of the Bengal Provincial Communist Party, in their prepared lectures in the Party Training School held in Calcutta in 1943, divided the communist movement in India into the following stages: first stage, 1933-39; second stage, 1930-41; third stage, June 1941- 43<sup>1</sup>. From 1933 onwards the Bengal Provincial Communist Party began to function in a much more organized and systematic manner<sup>2</sup>. As the C.P.I was then an illegal party, the members had to work underground. This was the time when a large number of political prisoners in various jails and detention camps in Bengal were drawn to the ideas of communism and they became members of Communist Consolidation. Most of them came from Anusilan Samiti and Jugantar Party<sup>3</sup>. After 1937, when the government released the political prisoners, the Communist Party got large number of new cadres from them. These cadres went to their respective districts to form party units there. The Party was transformed from a small group to a full-fledged party during the period 1937-39<sup>4</sup>.

It was against such a political background that new political developments began to take place in Malda, particularly in some parts of the district. In Malda, from late 1920 onwards the radical views within the District Congress

began to develop. Disillusioned with the factional squabbles within the local congress, a group of youth said to be the followers of Subhas Chandra Bose rose to the occasion under the leadership of Atul Kumar. Kaliranjan Das, Jotirmoy Sharma, Sudhir Kumar Raha and Atul Kumar founded the District Youngman's Association in 1927. A meeting of the Association was held on 7 and 8 November, 1928 in Malda. The meeting was attended by Philip Spratt, Dharani Kanta Goswami and Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta<sup>5</sup>. Philip Spratt was of opinion that communism was the only way to end the present plight of the society. However, communism could not be attained without revolution, which involves bloodshed. He pointed out that the youth movement must have some political aims and in this aspect, he wanted that the Bengali youth community should follow the examples of Italy and China<sup>6</sup>. Dharani Kanta Goswami explained in details in Bengali the speech of Philip Spratt, and observed that 'I find before me a gathering of some people of the depressed classes. It appears to me that the Youngman's Association of Malda has directed attention towards people belonging to the lower stratum of society--people whom we are used to hate as of low origin. I have not come across people of such a class in any other youth association or any national institution. I am not sure if you have seen any<sup>7</sup>.

From this time onwards, we can trace the emergence of a "Left" trend in the congress politics of Malda, under the leadership of Atul Kumar. Although there were various ideological differences or factional rivalries among these 'Left' forces and their leaders who later on joined various leftist political parties, yet a sharp difference within the district congress leadership could be witnessed since then. Interviewing the persons who were closely connected with the affairs of the district it may be said that the rightist forces were very powerful in Malda District Congress and they never allowed the left forces to assume the direction of affairs<sup>8</sup>.

The withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1934 was a great disappointment for the youth and student of Bengal. They began to think of changing their ideology and to search for an alternative ideology different from the traditional one. Thus, under the impact of this trend, as elsewhere in

Bengal, youth activists who had previous links with revolutionary groups, young congress workers and politically advanced student cadres of Malda, began to lean toward Socialism and Marxism and some accepted these. In Malda, this new genre of young political activists found an energetic leader in Sudhendu Jha, popularly known as Manik, who later became one of the founder members of the district unit of the Communist Party. Manik Jha was born in 1917 in a Maithili Jotedar family of Nagharia in Malda. His family was closely related to Harimohan Jha, one of the chief organizers of revolutionary terrorist activities in Malda. Another of his relation was Atul Kumar, one of the prominent leaders of the District Congress and a close associate of Subhash Chandra Bose<sup>9</sup>. The radical ideas of Harimohan Jha left a strong impression on his mind. In 1928, Harimohan Jha attended the conference of Peasants and Workers Party in Calcutta. On his return, he gave Manik some periodicals and literatures like *Bijali*, *Langal* and *Dhumketu* to read. It was through these writings that Manik first were exposed to Socialism and Marxism. In 1937, Atul Kumar introduced Manik with Naren Chakraborty who was an active member of the Anusilan Party. Naren Chakraborty had to undergo prison and detention camps for a number of years. While in Berhampur Jail, he read Marxist literature and soon accepted a Marxist position. Through Harimohan Jha, both Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty got in touch with the illegal Communist Party<sup>10</sup>. In 1937, they went to Bankura to attend the *Bishnupur Rashtriya Sammelan* where they met M.N. Roy. M.N. Roy suggested them to form the units of B.P.S.F and Krishak Samiti in Malda<sup>11</sup>.

When Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty came back to Malda, they brought in new political and organizational ideas and propagated these among the Malda students. In fact, since the formation of the Bengal Provincial Students' Federation in 1936 in Calcutta and All India Students' Federation in the same year in Lucknow, a new wave started to develop in the students' movement in Bengal<sup>12</sup>. A new infrastructure was framed out of which a militant anti-imperialist, anti-feudal and anti-fascist students' movement emerged in Bengal. Centering round various current issues like the unconditional release of all political prisoners including the prisoners of Andaman, complete independence of India, withdrawal of all oppressive Acts

and Ordinances imposed by the government, recognition of the students' organization by the government and universities, introduction of compulsory and free primary education throughout Bengal etc. an united students' movement of all left wing students' created a sensation in the political movement in Bengal since the late thirties<sup>13</sup>.

The efforts of Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty to form a district unit of the BPSF soon found organizational shape. The first unit of the BPSF was formed in the Maldaha Zilla School on 14 May 1937 of which Sudhir Chakraborty was elected the secretary. The other members were Krishnabandhu Das, Chuni Sen, Basudeb Prasad Behani and Md Yasin. Later another unit was formed with the students of A.C.Institution. Soon the leaders felt the necessity of expanding their activities to village areas also. At the initiative of Manik Jha, a students' unit was formed at Nagharia High School. The district committee of Students' Federation was formed in January 1938 and Baidyanath Sarkar, a student of A.C Institution was elected its first secretary<sup>14</sup>.

Calcutta experienced a massive movement throughout the period 1937-38 for the release of the Andaman prisoners under the leadership of the BPSF. A mass meeting, organized by the BPSF, was held on 14 August 1937 at the Calcutta Town Hall demanding the release of all political prisoners of Andaman<sup>15</sup>.The youth and student of Malda also demonstrated their protest against the government's attitude and showed sympathy with the hunger strikers in Andaman. The 'Andaman Day' was observed by the Students' Federation of Malda on 14 August 1937<sup>16</sup>.

Another significant development in Malda during this time was the formation of the district unit of the Krishak Sabha. In March 1937, the first session of the Bengal Provincial Peasants' Conference was held at Patrasayer, Bankura. In this conference Bangiya Pradeshik Krishak Sabha (BPKS) was formed<sup>17</sup>. In Malda, the district organizing committee of the Krishak Sabha was formed in 1938<sup>18</sup>.Its prominent leaders were Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty, Phanibhusan Sarkar, Ajoy Ghosh, Nakul Karmakar of Nababganj<sup>19</sup>. Thus, for the first time in the political life of the district, serious attempt was made to

organize and activate the peasants not only around broad national political questions but also around explicitly stated peasant issues.

The chief slogans of the District Krishak Sabha were abolition of the zamindari system and land to the tillers. Along with these, demands were raised for stopping collection of *hat tola* or levy by *hat* owners and *ijaradars* from the middle and poor peasants who came to the *hats*. This practice was widely prevalent in many parts of Bengal. There was extensive rural resentment against this practice. An enquiry by the Government of Bengal in 1940 showed that zamindars collected tolls from both sellers and buyers at the 6000 *hats* in the province at excessive rates. The *tolas* were collected either by his staff or by *ijaradars*<sup>20</sup>.

In Malda, the Hat Tola movement first started at Nababganj under the leadership of Ramendranath Mitra. The peasants were called upon by the Krishak Sabha to refuse payment of *tolas*. A movement around this issue took place at Ramchandrapur *hat* of Nababganj. In organizing the movement at Ramchandrapur, Ramendranath Mitra was assisted by a number of Krishak Sabha activists like Mokim Karmakar, Sadhua Tanti, Taru Mian, Naba Biswas, Mainuddin Ahmad, Tamijuddin Biswas and Altaf Hossain Mian<sup>21</sup>. Manik Jha and Naren Chakroborty also came from Malda to organize the movement. The pattern of the movement was: '... volunteers moving in a procession with *lathis* and flags throughout the fair and asking the shop and stall keepers not to pay *tolas* to zamindars. They threatened some of the shopkeepers with social boycott if they did not pay heed to their order and several times, they cordoned the zamindar's men who went to collect the usual *tolas*'<sup>22</sup>.

The *hat ijaradars* and his hired men threatened the peasants. However, all their attempts to crush the movement failed which eventually led them to arrive at a compromise settlement. The success of the Hat Tola movement at Ramchandrapur inspired the Krishak Sabha activists to start similar movements in other areas of the district. Successful campaigns were launched in other villages of the district like Sripur of Ratua p.s., Mathurapur of Manikchak p.s. and Aiho of Old Malda p.s.<sup>23</sup>. This successful agitation against the arbitrary toll collection provided great impetus to the peasant movement.

The broad peasant unity shown during the movement assumed a new dimension a few years later when the district of Malda witnessed a more militant type of peasant movement that came to be known as the Tebhaga movement.

In this way, a large number of peasants in Malda were acquainted with the demands of the Krishak Sabha. The Krishak Sabha leaders put emphasis on basic agrarian issues, which were, however, linked up with the freedom struggle of the country. The peasant leaders clearly stated that the success of agrarian revolution mainly depended on the liberation of the country from foreign yoke. The major task would remain unfulfilled without the participation of peasants in the anti-imperialist struggle of the country. After the success of the Hat Tola movement Manik Jha, under the banner of the Krishak Sabha, organized another movement of the peasants against the zamindar of Chanchal who owned vast landed property in the district. In 1938, a devastating flood occurred in Malda which resulted in a massive loss of crops. The peasants wanted exemption from payment or rent. However, the zamindar denied to consider their appeal and resorted to oppression to collect the arrear of rent<sup>24</sup>.

Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty realized that the time was ripe for organizing a movement in Chanchal. Thus, a 'No Rent' campaign was organized. In this context, the name of Dahari Bin, a turbulent peasant activist should be mentioned who played an instrumental role in organizing the No Rent movement in Chanchal<sup>25</sup>. At this stage, Manik Jha made contact with Muzaffar Ahmed who deputed Sujat Ali, one of the earliest leaders of the BPKS, to give the agitation of the peasants a definite shape. Manik Jha and Sujat Ali succeeded in organizing a large number of peasants. A huge procession of nearly six thousand peasants marched through the town of Englishbazar and *gheraoed* the Ramnagar *cutchery* of the Zamindar of Chanchal<sup>26</sup>. The peasants demanded not only exemption of rent, but also better irrigation facilities and stoppage of payment of *hat tola* to ijaradars. The peasant demonstration put the Raja of Chanchal under tremendous pressure and he announced exemption of payment of rent for a certain

period<sup>27</sup>. The "No Rent" campaign in Chanchal was so popular that it received wide sympathy and support throughout a vast area of the district<sup>28</sup>. It was the first peasant rally of this kind in Malda and thus occupies a distinct place in the annals of peasant agitations in the district.

All this activity was coincided with the preparation for the holding of the district political conference by the left wing section of the local congress. Both the Krishak Sabha leaders and left- wingers of the District Congress led by Atul Kumar were eager to link up emerging peasant movement with the nationalist politics. They were also keen to strengthen the congress Left. Atul Kumar ,the undisputed leader of the left- wing section of the District Congress, entrusted Manik Jha the duty of organizing the District Political Conference in Malda<sup>29</sup>.Nagharia was chosen as the venue for the District Political Conference held on 29 January 1939. The conference was presided over by Kiran Sankar Roy. Subhas Chandra Bose attended the Conference as the Chief Guest, who received a most enthusiastic reception by the people of Nagharia<sup>30</sup>. A great enthusiasm prevailed among the peasants who attended the Conference. The people of Amanura, Rohanpur and Singhabad responded positively to the call of the Conference at Nagharia and marched in procession with Bose and Kiran Sankar Roy<sup>31</sup>. The conference raised voice against imperialism and demanded the abolition of the zamindari system<sup>32</sup>. Addressing the people at Nagharia, Bose stressed on the need of establishing rural committees and Mahila Samities as many as possible. In his opinion, the struggle for *swaraj* had not ended yet. The country could achieve independence if it could maintain its unity and harmony, whereas the global political situation was favourable<sup>33</sup>.

The Hat Tola movement, No Rent movement against the Zamindar of Chanchal and participation of a large number of peasants at the Nagharia Conference reflected the increasing radicalization of the masses in the district. In April 1937, Manik Jha attended the All India Kishan Conference in Gaya as a delegate from Bengal. As Manik Jha recalls, 'during the conference Sujat Ali told me that "Kakababu" ( Muzaffar Ahmed) want to meet you. I went to his room with Sujat Ali. Kakababu told me that the Krishak Sabha leadership is

interested in holding the coming state conference in Malda and we like to entrust you the task of making the conference a success. I became so nervous and told Kakababu that the task is difficult one, because there is no district unit of the Communist Party in Malda yet. Kakababu replied that everywhere communist party is formed through such process of struggle that Malda experienced lately. we assure him that we will try our best to make the conference a successful one and proposed Nagharia as the venue of the conference as the area in recent times organize the District Political Conference with much success'.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, the third session of the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha was held at Nagharia on 4-6 May 1939. Earlier it was decided that the conference would be held in the district of 24 Parganas. But due to the oppressive measures taken by the Government, the venue was shifted to Nagharia of Malda district. At that time, the total number of members of the BPKS stood not less than fifty thousand.<sup>35</sup> Prior to the conference, a number of peasant movements, organized by the Malda Krishak Sabha, established the organization in the mindset of the peasant of the district and contributed to the success of the Nagharia Conference. Abdullah Rasul demanded that not less than seventy five thousand peasants attended the Conference. The District Magistrate, however, reported that the Conference was attended by nearly fifty thousand people. At the same time, he admitted that the conference of BPKS at Nagharia created a sensation throughout the district<sup>36</sup>. The Conference resolved to intensify peasant struggle, bring greater numbers of poor peasants and *adhiaars* into the movement, train up peasant volunteers and make them class- conscious through political training and to activate the priming units of the Krishak Sabha for further struggle<sup>37</sup>.

#### FORMATION OF COMMUNIST PARTY IN MALDA DISTRICT

After the Krishak Sabha conference at Nagharia, the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party felt the necessity of forming the party unit in Malda district on an organized basis. Accordingly, Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty and Kshitish Das were given party membership. In July 1939, Biswanath Mookherjee was sent by the Provincial Committee to Malda to organize the

party there. Three party members of the district-- Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty and Kshitish Das were present in a secret meeting held in Malda town in the house of B. Poddar in July 1939. Biswanath Mookherjee conducted the meeting. The Malda District Organizing Committee of CPI was formed in that meeting. Manik Jha proposed the name of Naren Chakraborty as the secretary of this organizing committee, which was seconded by Kshitish Das. Manik Jha, Kshitish Das and Biswanath Mookherjee became the members of this committee<sup>38</sup>.

This organizing committee was authorized to `give party membership to other workers. Within a short time, a number of political workers belonging to the Anusilan Samiti joined the CPI. Ramprafulla Roy, Moni Gosain and Kali Das, former Anusilan Samiti activists, were given party membership. Ramprafulla Roy took the initiative in forming a party unit at Chanchal. Mahesh Sarkar and Suresh Sarkar became the first two party members at Chanchal . Ramraghab Lahiri and Jiban Goswami of Kaligram joined the CPI and played a vital role in forming a party unit at Kaligram<sup>39</sup>. At Gajol, one of the important centers of the Tebhaga movement in later years, the initiative of establishing a party unit was taken by Amrita Turi<sup>40</sup>.Naren Chakraborty and Mani Gosain collected a band of young people in the Golapatty Byayam Samiti in 1939. This was outwardly a physical training centre of local youth. However, this was actually utilized as a forum of the CPI. The leaders of the Samiti secretly baptized the members with communist philosophy and acquainted them with CPI literature<sup>41</sup>.Thus by the end of 1939 the CPI unit in Malda district was consolidated as an organized political party.

The district party was successful to forge a link with a sizeable section of the middle class of the town, such as lawyers, doctors, teachers etc. which indicated the growing strength of the party<sup>42</sup>. During this time the communists worked within the Indian National Congress. Sometime they became office-bearers of the District Congress Committee. Manik Jha became the Assistant Secretary of the Malda Congress. During 1939-40, the number of communists in the executive committee of the District Congress was five<sup>43</sup>. In fact, the communists in Malda were following the general trend of the communist

movement in India. In 1935, the Indian communists were told by the Comintern that they should form a 'united front' with the congress against British imperialism and organize peasants for "agrarian revolution in India". In sum, it meant that CPI should join hands with left wing of the congress and British imperialism<sup>44</sup>. This directive was enunciated in the well known Dutt-Bradley thesis which stated that the Congress was no longer a "bourgeois reformist political organization" but a revolutionary party of Indian people, and leaders as Gandhi and Nehru were regarded as "the popular leaders of the movement"<sup>45</sup>. Therefore, following this general line, the young Marxists of Malda used the political platform of the congress in the best possible way. Although the landlord-dominated congress committee in Malda proved to be unfriendly, the necessity of forming a united front against imperialism and feudalism was aptly realized by the communists<sup>46</sup>.

A new period began in the history of the CPI along with the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. Following the outbreak of the war, the CPI Politburo in a resolution adopted in October 1939 characterized the war as an 'imperialist war'. As the communists considered the Congress as the main platform of the liberation struggle, it urged the Congress to launch mass struggle against British Imperialism for the emancipation of the country. The local CPI leaders carried on anti-war propaganda through meetings and posters. The communists announced '*Na ek pai, na ek bhai*'- means not one *paisa* for the expense of war or a brother to fight in the war<sup>47</sup>. The district administration reacted sharply and Manik Jha, Naren Chakraborty along with a number of communist activists were arrested under D.I.R. for anti-war activities. The Police and Intelligence Branch made wholehearted efforts to suppress the communist activities in the district<sup>48</sup>. A number of leaders of the local Communist Party including Kshitish Das, Moni Gosain, Kali Das, Ramprafulla Roy were able to evade arrest and went underground<sup>49</sup>.

Therefore, in the early 1940 the district party organization was in great crisis. At this critical moment several party workers and active sympathizers, who were not exposed to the administration, carried the party's messages to the people. The mass fronts of the party, such as the Krishak Sabha and the

Students Federation played an important role in keeping alive the party organization<sup>50</sup>. In a police report of February 1941, it was stated that the Krishak Sabha activists and students functioned in the districts of Dinajpur, Malda, Rajshahi and Faridpur and the communists were working up popular issues<sup>51</sup>.

With the German attack on Soviet Union in June 1941, there came a dramatic change in C.P.I.'S attitude towards the War. After some initial confusion the communists declared the war as a '*peoples' war*' and decided to support the British against Fascism. They characterized the fascist powers as the main enemies of the Indian freedom struggle and urged the people to take side with those forces, which were engaged in war against the Axis Powers. Being guided by this policy the Provincial Committee launched anti-Jap movement throughout Bengal during December 1941- March 1942. An important anti-Fascist meeting was held at Kaligram in March 1942 under the leadership of Ramprafulla Roy, which was attended by a large number of people. The Indo-Soviet Friendship Association was formed in Malda in 1942<sup>52</sup>. A Student meeting was held under the banner of Students Federation at A.C Institution in Malda town on 4 April 1942. The speakers extolled the Soviet Union and urged the Indians to fight against the Fascists so that India might overthrow British imperialism through Soviet leadership<sup>53</sup>. The report of Superintendent of Police, Malda indicated that the students were helping the main organization of the communist party in their anti-fascist propoganda by the formation of Civil Defence Committees and enlistment of volunteers<sup>54</sup>.

In July 1942, the ban imposed on the CPI was withdrawn and legal rights were restored to the party. The district leaders came out of the prison and devoted themselves to party work. In such a situation, the congress adopted on 8 August 1942 the famous Quit India resolution. Following its adoption, Indian masses rose into revolt, which became famous as the Quit India Movement. However, the Krishak Sabha and the CPI were reluctant to support an anti-British campaign in accordance with the '*people's war strategy*'. For the CPI, the challenge to the state power through a mass

mobilization was unwarranted at a time when the fascist aggression was imminent. To P.C. Joshi, the Quit India Movement was a national suicide<sup>55</sup>.

But the theory of the “Peoples War” and “United Front, could not at all impress the middle class of Malda. On the contrary, the local CPI workers were bitterly criticised by the District Congress<sup>56</sup>. The pro-War strategy caused a schism not only among the CPI activists, but among the sympathizers as well. ‘Those of the younger generation’, as an official report claims, were not inclined to ‘committing them to support the government’<sup>57</sup>. In fact, 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 shop selling English products<sup>58</sup>. The confusion among the people, arising out of the communist strategy, would be clearer if we examine the Malda communists’ attempt to organize the silk- reelers (*basnis*) to support the war – effort of the government.

During the time of the Second World War the British Government was in dire necessity of Indian silk, because silk thread was essential for manufacturing of parachutes<sup>59</sup>. When Britain was engaged in war with Japan, one of the foremost silk producing countries, the government was forced to buy from the reelers as much silk thread as possible<sup>60</sup>. So in 1943, the Bengal Silk Control Order was passed in accordance with the Safety of India Act. By it, all the *basnis* (producer of silk- worm) and *ghaiwalas*(hand-reelers) were asked to sell all their cocoons to the government. The government’s fixed rates of the cocoons was rather low which displeased the *basnis* and *ghaiwalas*. The Act was however not strictly implemented in Malda up to 1944<sup>61</sup>.

The Deputy Controller of Silk at first tried to play a balance by satisfying both the interests of the *basnis* and the government. He assured the *basnis* that they would not sustain a loss if they sell their production to the government. However, his attempt did not succeed due to two reasons:

- a) The customers of silk from Jangipur offered the *basnis* higher rates and provoke them not to obey the government’s regulations;

- b) Some dishonest local merchants rendered the Act abortive by smuggling and hoarding of cocoons<sup>62</sup>.

As the repeated warnings of the Controller produced no result, the government in 1944 decided to modify the Act to make it more stringent. The Government declared that if anyone were found to possess cocoons without permit, he would be arrested and put to trial according to the Safety of India Act<sup>63</sup>.

In such a situation, the local communists came forward to support the war-effort of the government. They held meetings at Sujapur, Milki and Kaliachak (the major silk-producing areas) with the reelers and weavers to show obedience to the Act and promised that they would try their best to persuade the government to increase the price of the 'koas' (Cocoons)<sup>64</sup>.

At the initiative of the local Communist Party, a meeting was held at Sujapur between the *basnis* and the representatives of the district administration. Manik Jha, a noted communist leader and member of the District Board was present at the meeting<sup>65</sup>. The Deputy Controller of Silk at first explained the gravity of the situation. In his speech, Manik Jha categorically declared Party's sympathy with this war-effort of the government. He told that:

- a) The *basnis* should help the war-effort of the government by selling their cocoons in their possession to the latter.
- b) Enough cocoons had been hoarded by dishonest merchants.
- c) Black marketers must be punished.
- d) The government should increase the price of the cocoons.
- e) An organization of the *basnis* would be formed under the guidance of Naren Chakraborty, the Secretary of the local Communist Party. The organization would look after interests of the *basnis*<sup>66</sup>.

However, within a very short time the role of the communists were questioned by the *basnis*. The promise given by the communists were not fulfilled. The

price of cocoons did not increase. They started believing that these urban communists were acting as the agent of the government<sup>67</sup>. At a conference of *basnis* at Sujapur the interference of the communists in their 'own affair' was resented by them. The endeavour of the local communists failed and smuggling and illegal hoarding of cocoons continued unabated<sup>68</sup>. The editor of *Gourdoot*, a local pro-congress newspaper, was surprised by this rapid change of the situation. He was of the opinion that this sudden loss of communist credibility before the *basnis* was a matter too serious to be investigated by the party leadership<sup>69</sup>.

Thus, the case of Malda clearly indicates that the mass people did not properly realize the party's strategy of supporting the war-effort of the government. The effort of the local communist party in identifying too much with the British Government created confusion among the people. It provided an opportunity for the District Congress to criticize the communists for joining the 'other side of the independence struggle'. Naren Chakraborty, the then Secretary of the local Communist Party, regretted that the congress leaders of Malda and their supporters misbehaved with the communists during the Quit India Movement, as they kept themselves aloof from it<sup>70</sup>.

## THE COMMUNISTS AND 1943 FAMINE

During 1943-44, Bengal was in the grip of a devastating famine. The famine was due not to the shortfall in production which had been small, but to hoarding, caused by popular panic and greed as well as government mismanagement<sup>71</sup>. Careful calculations suggest that there was more food in 1943 than in 1941 and thus it seems safe 'to conclude that the disastrous Bengal famine was not the reflection of a remarkable over shortage of food grains in Bengal'<sup>72</sup>. In this sense, the famine was man-made.

The impact of the Bengal Famine of 1943 on Malda district was not as severe as in some other districts of North Bengal. In Malda, mortality rate was

relatively low<sup>73</sup>. Mass suffering was nonetheless extensive and acute. A contemporary local newspaper of Malda depicted the misery of the common people in the district at the time of the famine of 1943. It reported that the rural areas were mainly hard- hit by the famine. The misery of the *malos* (Fishermen), agricultural labourers and workers engaged in silk weaving was beyond description. The district administration opened up some relief camp, but the measure was inadequate<sup>74</sup>.

In such a situation, the local communists came forward to help the distressed people. The Krishak Sabha urged the district administration to bring the price-level under control, to open fair- price shops in different market places for the distribution of essential goods, to fix up prices of agricultural produce and to provide employment for the landless and helpless people<sup>75</sup>. The communist opened up five relief camps in different parts of the district<sup>76</sup>. The young communist volunteers in various parts of the district started relief work and at the same time launched agitations against black marketers and hoarders<sup>77</sup>. All the mass fronts of the party, particularly the Krishak Sabha actively took part in this movement. Several Food Committees were formed throughout the district in which the communists took an active role. Ramendranath Mitra, a noted communist leader of Nababganj, was nominated as the Secretary of the Food Committee of Ramchandrapur. The Ramchandrapur Food Committee did a commendable job in organizing famine relief at Nababganj<sup>78</sup>. Ramendranath Mitra later became the General Secretary of the Malda Zilla Krishak Sabha<sup>79</sup>.

Therefore, the 1943 famine provided an occasion to CPI to redeem its position in Malda through sustained relief work among the poor peasants. An official report reveals that through such activities the communists and the Krishak Sabha were able to expand and strengthen their influence and support base in the district particularly at Barind and Nababganj and Nachol p.s.<sup>80</sup> CPI now changed its strategy of 'People's War' phase and gradually came out for peasant movements like Tanka or Tebhaga<sup>81</sup>.

## CPI AND THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT IN MALDA.

The Tebhaga Movement ( 1946-47 and 1948-49) was a major peasant upheaval in Bengal (and West Bengal) in the twentieth century. The movement failed after tremendous sacrifices by sharecroppers and their allies, the landless labourers and petty artisans. However, it left a deep impression in the peasant psyche. The powerful impact of Tebhaga is clear from the fact that the ruling classes which came to power in the wake of the uprising in both the divided parts of Bengal were forced to make legal concession to the peasantry.

In September 1946, the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha executive had resolved to launch the Tebhaga agitation during the harvest season in the coming winter. The principal demand was for a two- thirds share of the crop for the *bargadar* one third for the landlords<sup>82</sup>. In fact, there had already been stirring from below before the BPKS formally gave the call in September 1946 for a Tebhaga agitation. The Land Revenue Commission, Bengal (popularly known as the Flood Commission) had recommended two thirds share of the crop for *bargadars* in 1940. The same year, the Krishak Sabha accepted Tebhaga as a matter of policy at its annual session at Panjia, but at subsequent sessions no further progress was made on the issue. At the Moubhag Conference, which was held a few months before the Tebhaga uprising broke out, there was no discussion on launching of the movement far less any measures to prepare the peasantry for the movement. Suguta Bose thinks that the decision of the Communist Party to align itself with the Tebhaga agitation stemmed from its national and international concerns wholly extraneous to agrarian questions in Bengal. It was an attempt by the Party to rehabilitate itself having alienated Indian public opinion because of wartime collaboration with the British and having met with a recent rebuff from the CPSU<sup>83</sup>. M.Abdullah Rasul laments the utter weakness of the leadership to gauge and grasp the mood of the peasantry on the eve of such a big movement<sup>84</sup>. It is quite evident from the records of the period that the leadership was totally unprepared for the nature of response of the demand they raised would evoke<sup>85</sup>.

The revolt started in November 1946, at the northwestern tip of Dinajpur district at the border with Bihar and to the contiguous districts in North Bengal (Jalpaiguri, Malda, Rangpur) and to 24- parganas in south. Pockets of revolt also flared up in Jessore, Khulna and Mymensingh<sup>86</sup>. The chief slogans were *tebhaga chai*- a demand for two third share and *nij khamare dhan tolo*- urging the *adhiars* to take the paddy to their own houses instead of the *jotedars*' yards<sup>87</sup>.

In Malda, the chief centers of the Tebhaga movement were Gajol, Old Malda, Habibpur, Bamongola and Nachol of Nababganj. In these areas the Krishak Sabha had a strong support base<sup>88</sup>. Naren Das, himself an organizer of the *Tebhaga* movement in Malda, stated that the movement in Malda evoked much response from the tribal and Rajbansi *bargadars* of Barind region. In fact, the *santals* of Barind and Nachol were the most militant vanguard of the Tebhaga movement in Malda<sup>89</sup>. Communist and Krishak Sabha activists like Naren Chakraborty, Manik Jha, Mihir Das, Joygopal Goswami, Deben Saha, Naren Das, Himanshu Bannerjee took active role in organizing the Tebhaga movement in Malda<sup>90</sup>. The district administration took alarm and some criminal cases were instituted and "orders under Section 144 were issued to stop meetings of communists to incite aboriginals particularly"<sup>91</sup>.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT.

A widespread and intense peasant movement like Tebhaga cannot be staged without proper organizational set up. The organizational set up depends on the leadership of the movement, its attitudes and methods of peasant organization, the emergence of grass roots leadership, and the role of volunteers, women, students and workers, as supporting factors<sup>92</sup>.

Asok Majumdar has shown that there were three types of leaders who organized the Tebhaga movement. First, the urban-based middle class provincial leaders of CPI and BPKS. They provide a general organizational sketch of the movement and supervise over the local leaders with regard to the programme and coordination of the movement. Bhowani Sen and Muzaffar Ahmed are good examples of this type of leadership. Below there

were three kinds of leaders : a) those urban leaders who coordinated movement in a few districts or one district, b) urban middle class leadership at the village level which stayed with the villagers and became a part of their life and thus organized their movement, and c) gras-roots leadership emerging from the ranks of rural peasants which played the key role in the movement<sup>93</sup>.

If we apply this model in the Malda Tebhaga movement, we will find that Abani Lahiri who coordinated the movement in Malda and Dinajpur is an example of second type of leadership who maintained a link with provincial leaders like Muzaffar Ahmed and Bhowani Sen<sup>94</sup>. Naren Chakraborty, Manik Jha, Naren Das, Romendranath Mitra, Joygopal Goswami and Himanshu Bannerjee were example of second type of leadership. We have already discussed the role of Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty in organizing the communist and Krishak Sabha movement in Malda. Romendranath Mitra was born in a *joteder* family at the village of Ramchandrapur of Nababgang P.S. While studying in Calcutta, he came into contact with the Communist Party. Gopen Chakraborty and Jogen Sen, two leaders of the communist trade union movement, brought Ramendranath into the arena of labour movement. At the time of the 1943 Famine, Romendranath was the secretary of the Ballygang unit of the Communist Party. In 1944, he came back to Malda and took a leading role in organizing Hat Tola and Tebaga movement at Nachol-Nababganj region<sup>95</sup>. Naren Das, Joygopal Goswami and Himanshu Banerjee had also urban middle class background. Earlier they were associated with Anusilan Samiti<sup>96</sup>. However, it was the grass roots leadership, which played the key role in the movement. In this category, we can mention Matla Majhi, Sagar Majhi, Sukhbilas Barman, Nakul Karmakar of Nachol P.S.<sup>97</sup> Bhubhan Deshi, Bebhul Deshi, Bhaga Deshi, Raghu Deshi, Dharani Sarkar and Ramu Santal of Gajol P.S.<sup>98</sup> In Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, these peasant leaders made possible a regular and lively functioning of the Tebhaga Committees at the village levels. This grass-roots leadership sustained the movement and helped it to become the greatest peasant movement in twentieth century Bengal<sup>99</sup>. The middle class organizer maintained a regular contact with these community leaders. For example, during the Tebhaga agitations, Manik Jha and Naren Chakraborty approached Dharani Sarkar, a

Rajbansi and Ramu Santal, to lead the struggle in Gajol. Similarly, when Romen Mitra went to Nachol, *santal* community leaders like Matia Majhi were contacted<sup>100</sup>.

At the lowest level of the organization there were Tebhaga Committees of the Krishak Sabha and Volunteers. In Barind region of Malda, a number of Tebhaga Committees were formed which look after the day to day problems arising out of the peasant movement. However, the most effective weapon for the struggle was the Volunteer Force. They maintained communications with other villages, harvest paddy or carried the crop from the *jotedar's* field or *kholan* to the *bargader's* place and resisted police or the *jotedar's* agents<sup>101</sup>.

### PHASES OF THE MOVEMENT

In Malda, the Tebhaga movement was organized by local CPI and Krishak Sabha leaders from October 1946. In this phase, the most active Tebhaga activists were the *santals* of Barind who had a long history of struggle against the *zamindar-jotedar-mahajan*. In this phase the district administration was hesitant in coming out a firm policy. As the District Magistrate of Malda wrote that 'the communists were inciting the aboriginals and we took immediate steps. Aboriginals being simple were incited by fake hopes of communists. I showed leniency to them. But the problem has reached provincial level now and government will have to take action for the whole province and declare their policy finally'<sup>102</sup>. He further stated that some criminal cases were instituted and orders under Section 144 were issued to stop meetings of communists to incite aboriginals particularly<sup>103</sup>.

During February 1947, the Tebhaga movement was intense in the Barind region of Malda, an area where sharecroppers had been active before. Activists had campaigned here, holding discussions on Tebhaga<sup>104</sup>. They selected people to lead the movement, enroll members for the Krishak Sabha, raise volunteers and organize the movement. Slogans like *adhi nai, tebhaga chai, nij kholane dhan tolo, patit jami dakhal karo* etc. become very popular. *Ek bhai, ek taka, ek lathi*, became a major rallying slogan. It signified a militant peasant solidarity<sup>105</sup>.

The most important task was to generate support for the movement through *baithaks*, meetings, assemblies, campaigns, *hat sabha*, and through literature and slogans. The urban party workers used to go to the various fairs and *hats* like Ramkeli fair, Kaismbazar fair of Bholahat, Nababganj *hat* and campaigned for Tebhaga shouting their demands. They also used to sell party pamphlets like 'Langal Jar Jami Tar' of Bhowani Sen, 'Rush Biplabe Chasir Larai' of Somenath Lahiri at these hats and fairs<sup>106</sup>.

Soon the agitation took the form of breaking into the landlords' *kholans* and taking away the sharecroppers' shares of the crops. The peasant activists asked the smaller landlords to compromise and several agreed to their demands including bearing the costs of carrying the paddy and giving receipts<sup>107</sup>. The more adamant landlords retaliated by threatening arrests, eviction, stopping water and fuel supplies, bribing union and *panchayat chowkidars* to spread false rumours of arrest<sup>108</sup>. The District Magistrate, convening, a meeting attempted to negotiate a settlement. However, the peasant activists did not attend the meeting for fear of arrest.

The *jotedars*, as an influential part of the social structure, met the local authorities frequently to enlist their help. The urban middle class was also suspicious as the peasant actions went directly against their economic interest<sup>109</sup>. The police started to enter villages, though often in the face of strong peasant resistance. At Canot village in Gajol P.S., a police party arrested Bhupen Desi and others and was *gheraoed* by villagers who took away their warrants and uniforms. A landlord's servant was sent to the police station and armed police came to release the first group of constables. There were other similar instances of resistance. In another village in Old Malda peasants *gheraoed* a police force<sup>110</sup>.

The police now began to retaliate. Hundreds of peasant, particularly *santal* and *rajbansis* who were more militant, fled from the village. Police started to snatch paddy from *bargadar's khamars* and took them to *jotedars*. Peasants were arrested under false charges, women were molested, houses were looted and destroyed<sup>111</sup>.

After Independence, particularly in 1948, the movement in Malda began to take a different form. The basic difference between the CPI and ruling Congress Party became clear and the Congress attitude to CPI became hostile. More and more cases were instituted against peasant activists. The focus of the CPI line from 1948 onwards was an intensive peasant struggle taking the poor peasant as its main force. The Nachol P.S and the Barind region of Malda became two major centres of sharecroppers' struggle in Malda.

In this connection, we would like to mention here that Nachol went to East Pakistan in 1947 Partition because of the Radcliffe Award. However, the preparation and organization for Tebhaga movement in Nachol began before Independence and Partition. Ramendranath Mitra, Ila Mitra, Matla verySardar, Phanibhushan Roy and SK Ajhar Hussain were the leaders of the Nachol movement who organized the *santal* and *rajbansi* peasants for the demand of Tebhaga<sup>112</sup>. Therefore, in order to understand the dynamics of the Tebhaga movement in Malda, we would made a passing reference of the sharecroppers struggle in Nachol in the post-Independence phase.

In Nachol, the most organized areas were Chandipur, Kendua, Sibnagar, Golapara, Mallickpur, Kalupur and Mahipur<sup>113</sup>. Chandipur was the centre of the movement. The sharecroppers here were predominantly *santals* and had participated in the movement of Jitu Santal in the late 1920s and early 1930s. A small group of communists, led by Ramendranath Mitra and Ila Mitra, in conjunction with an influential *santal* leader, Matla Sardar, led the campaign for tebhaga<sup>114</sup>. The movement gained considerable support. The *santal* sharecroppers harvested crops collectively over an area of five hundred *bigha* approximately. The activists printed leaflets, which were taken as legal documents by the sharecroppers authorizing the agitation. Initially on the Mitra estate, sharecroppers took the crops to their own *khamars*<sup>115</sup>. Many landlords accepted the *tebhaga* demand. An area of about twenty square miles, similar to a *tebhaga elaka*, was set up with village warning systems every two miles and armed peasant guards<sup>116</sup>.

The agitation for *tebhaga* at Nachol gradually became more violent. The movement had mass support from the *santal* sharecroppers. On 5 January 1950, a police party arrived at Ghasuda village of Nachol on receiving complain of crop *looting* from local *jotedars*. When they entered the village, the *santal* sharecroppers attacked them. Five police were killed<sup>117</sup>. Full-scale repression began soon after. Hundred of armed police entered the area, people were arrested, and houses were set ablaze. Cases were lodged against the peasants and communists on charges ranging from rioting and murder, to the overthrow of the government. Twenty-two people were beaten to death, many tortured and hundreds of peasants fled to India. It was said that the *santals* were so militant because of 'their old bitterness at losing land.' When the police were killed, it was asserted by a communist activist that, 'the movement went beyond our control'<sup>118</sup>.

In Malda also, the Tebhaga Movement did not end with Independence in 1947. In the Barind area of Malda, the local communists continued to organize agricultural labourers, poor peasants and sharecroppers around the demands of abolition of the zamindari system, *tebhaga*, better wages and redistribution of land<sup>119</sup>. Women cut crops to their own *khamar*. Landlords were *gheraoed*, their property *looted* and their agents beaten. People were rescued from the hands of the police and arms were snatched. The police retaliated by opening fire on the sharecroppers and several people were injured and killed for example, at Englishbazar and Basudebpur<sup>120</sup>.

The role of women in Malda Tebhaga Movement was a significant factor. Like in Dinajpur, women activists led the attack on police and *jotedar's* armed agents. They also joined in harvesting paddy, gave shelters to leaders, worked as couriers, gave the danger signal in villages<sup>121</sup>. At Bhawanikotha village of Gajol, women led attacks against the police to rescue peasants, who had been arrested. At Canot village of Gajol, a *nari bahini* was formed under the leadership of Pratima Roy, a rajbansi woman. Senior local leaders like Naren Chakraborty, Manik Jha, Kali Sarkar held *baithaks* of women activists of Gajol to explain to them the aims and objectives of the struggle<sup>122</sup>.

For rural poor women in general, as Peter Custers observes, the Tebhaga struggle had a deep emotional significance. When during the Tebhaga Movement paddy was stacked at their own threshing floor, women bowed with folded hands in front of the paddy. This-- the emotional upsurge regarding rice-- is not understood by urban man. Many women never saw unthreshed rice before in their lives. They thought that this (the stacking of rice) was a revolution<sup>123</sup>.

Thus, it may be stated that Tebhaga had taken the form of a spontaneous movement in Malda along with other North Bengal districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Jalpaiguri. However, the major weakness of the Tebhaga Movement in Malda was that the agitation flared in small pockets in the Barind region consisting of Gajol, Habibpur and Bamongola P.S. The movement, even at its height, remained in a state of isolation from most of the rural areas in the district. Apart from this, there was a general transformation in the political climate of the province in general and Malda district in particular. That Freedom with Partition was in the horizon overshadowed all other events. These factors, combined with massive state repression, contributed to the setback of sharecroppers' struggle<sup>124</sup>. In the summer of 1947, the Krishak Sabha formally called off the Tebhaga agitation. The Communist Party sought to revive the movement in the harvest season of 1948- 49, but it was unable to repeat the performance of 1946-47<sup>125</sup>. Nevertheless, the Tebhaga Movement of 1946-47 was unprecedented in extent and intensity as a sharecroppers' struggle. It contributed to increase the pressure on the government for abolition of the Zamindari System and gained recognition of the major political parties for the situation of the sharecroppers.

The first serious proposal for the abolition of the zamindari system was made in 1932 at a conference of the Bengal Provincial Praja Samity (later renamed as the Krishak Praja Party). The Krishak Praja Party contested the provincial elections of 1937 on the basis of its programme for the abolition of landlordism without compensation. The coalition ministry which was formed under the premiership of A. K. Fazlul Huq, the leader of the Krishak Praja Party, appointed a Commission to devise ways and means to replace the

Permanent Settlement 'by a more equitable system and laws suitable to the needs and requirements of the people'. The Commission recommended the abolition of landlordism with compensation, but this was not implemented.<sup>126</sup>

The demand was raised on several occasions later on, but no decision was taken. After the attainment of independence, the West Bengal Government took up the scheme of land reform. The West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act of 1953 abolished the estates created by the Permanent Settlement in 1793. This was virtually an agrarian revolution by legislation to benefit the rural poor. But the law was so framed as to admit of serious loopholes. Homestead, 15 acres of non-arable land, 25 acres of personal farm, fish tank orchards, tea gardens, land for poultry and animal husbandry, land for factory, building and structure and land consecrated to Gods were all exempt from the operation of the WBEA Act of 1953.

As a result, in Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, arable acres were overnight converted into fishponds and transferred in the name of household deities. Land alienation was most rampant in Malda through *benami* or collusive transfer. As 'family' was not clearly defined, the giant estates (as in the case of Chanchal Estate of Malda) were parcelled out to relatives, friends, servants and even the unborn in units legitimate under the land ceiling<sup>127</sup>. To plug these loopholes, the government had to pass another act – the West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955.

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106. Naren Das , *Maldahe Tebhaga Andolan*, *op.cit*, p.77
107. *GB, Land and Land Revenue Department, File No. 6M-37/47 B December 1948*
108. *Swadhinata*, 1 April 1947.
109. Naren Das and Haripada Chattopadhyay, *Maldahe Tebhaga Andolan*, *op.cit.*, p.76.
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111. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 February 1947; Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggles in Bengal 1946-47*, *op.cit*, P.66
112. Mesbah Kamal and Eshani Chakraborty, *Nacholer Krishak Bidroho*, *op.cit.*, pp.22-23
113. *Ibid.*, p.104

114. Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal 1930-1950, op.cit.*, p.229
115. *Ibid.*, p.230
116. *Hindustan Standard*, 19 November 1949
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118. *Ibid.*; Mesbah Kamal and Eshani Chakraborty, *Nacholer Krishak Bidroho, op., cit*, pp. 113-135
119. Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal 1930-1950, op.cit.*, p.229
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## CONCLUSION

The society of Malda was composed of numerous and diverse social groups. The population belonged to different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, to various creeds and religious communities. The district in fact, as our study has shown, represented a prototype of a colonized economy and society. The changes introduced by the Permanent Settlement affected the position of the *raiya*s, the cultivators of land. The *raiya*s of Malda were differentiated more or less. Differentiation among the peasantry with the predominance of the small peasants is thus focused in the agrarian structure of the district in the nineteenth century and the same picture can also be found in the twentieth century. During our period of study progressive enhancement of rent as well as illegal enhancement of rent were fairly common in Malda. The tribal people was the most susceptible to pressure by the landlords. It propelled the sharecroppers towards indebtedness. Its volume was steadily increased during the first three decades of the twentieth century. It ultimately led to alienation of land from agriculturists to non-agriculturists. A process of depeasantization was thus set in the scenario in Malda, particularly in the tribal belt of Barind region.

The *santals* lost their lands to the *mahajans* not only in consequences of their debt to them. They were dispossessed of their land, as our study indicates, also by means of deliberate fraud committed on them, which was possible because of their complete ignorance of laws relating to occupancy rights. The loss of land meant to them loss of identity. Their search for identity led the *santals* to initiate movement to lift the members up towards the custom of the dominant society by emulating them. Attempts were thus made by the Barind *santals* to revise tribal custom through waves of conversion to Hinduism. Yet they did not entirely identified with the Hindus. The Satyam Shibam movement was a striking case of self-reform among *santals*, in interaction with ideas and images from outside, but according to terms decided by the *adivasi* leader. With the passage of time, this religious movement swivels into a political nature, confronting the British government. It has been shown that the element of religion, though used sometimes as

ideology or an ingredient of organization build-up, was never a determining force in the revolt. The revolt of Jitu Santal was against an entire system of oppression.

It has been shown that the town-based nationalist leadership lacked adequate integration with this movement of the *santal* sharecroppers, aiming to establish Santal Raj. The Congress leadership at the district level failed to evolve any programme oriented towards the subordinate groups and classes at the base. Between 1920 and 1944, the Congress played decisive roles in articulating anti-British sentiments because the Congress's political basis had been consolidated with the incorporation of a large section of tenure holders who articulated their anti-British role through participation in the institutions of colonial governance in the localities. By articulating the class interests of the broad range of tenure holders, the Malda Congress postulated its own version of political struggle which, though militant vis-à-vis imperialism, opposed movements potentially harmful to the existing socio-economic order. As a result, the local Congress based on rural property successfully conducted anti-British movements that displayed considerable militancy without correspondingly upsetting the existent pattern of class relationships in rural society.

It was against such a dichotomy in the Congress politics, radical views within the district Congress began to develop which led to the emergence of a "Left" trend and ultimately to the formation of the district unit of the Communist Party. The Krishak Sabha organized successful Hat Tola movement at different areas like Nababganj, Ratua, Mathurapur and Old Malda. The successful agitation against the arbitrary toll collection provided great impetus to the peasant movement. The broad peasant unity shown during the movement assumed a new dimension a few years later when the district of Malda witnessed a more militant type of peasant movement that came to be known as the Tebhaga Movement. But the story of Malda suggests that the Communists too had their own weaknesses and confusion. So the radical potential created by the Left and the popular forces could not develop into reality.

However, the most significant development that decisively shaped Malda politics in the decades before the 1947 partition was undoubtedly the emergence of Muslims as a district socio-cultural group, and their importance in the political arena with the introduction of the 1932 Communal Award. The emergence of a new sense of identity among the Malda Muslims may be traced back to a series of religious reform movements. The prominent among these were the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah (erroneously called Indian Wahabism). The Wahabi State Trials in the Malda Court created a sensation among the urban educated Muslim community. It was reflected in the argument of the Maldah Mohammedans Association in favour of *Islami Bangla*. The percentage of Muslim participation in the Swadeshi Movement in Malda was quite negligible. It has been shown in our study that the relationship between the two major communities in Malda was at least, until the end of the second decade of the present century, free from any tension and conflict. However, in the thirties, signs of tension were clearly discernible in the local scenario. The caste consolidation programme in Malda, initiated chiefly under Hindu Sabha and Hindu Mahasabha auspices, created tension in the local political scenario. The Muslim League activists were not sitting on the fence. Often they rose to the occasion and gave provocation to intensify communalism to serve their vested interest. Thus, in the 1940s Hindu-Muslim communal and political rivalry became acute in Malda. Mutual suspicion and distrust loomed large on the horizon. The process culminated in the construction of a Muslim block and consequently the 'othering' of the Hindus.

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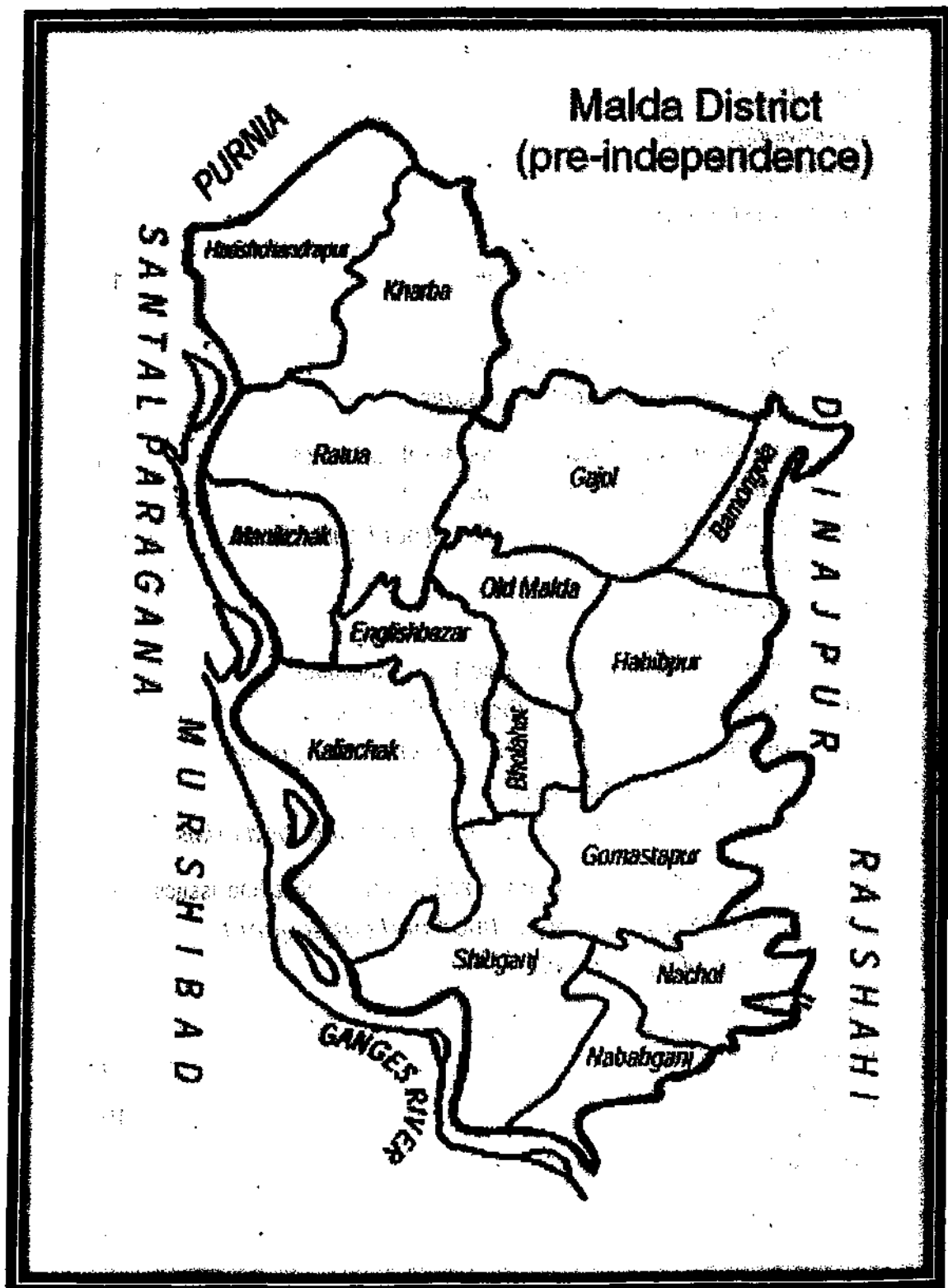
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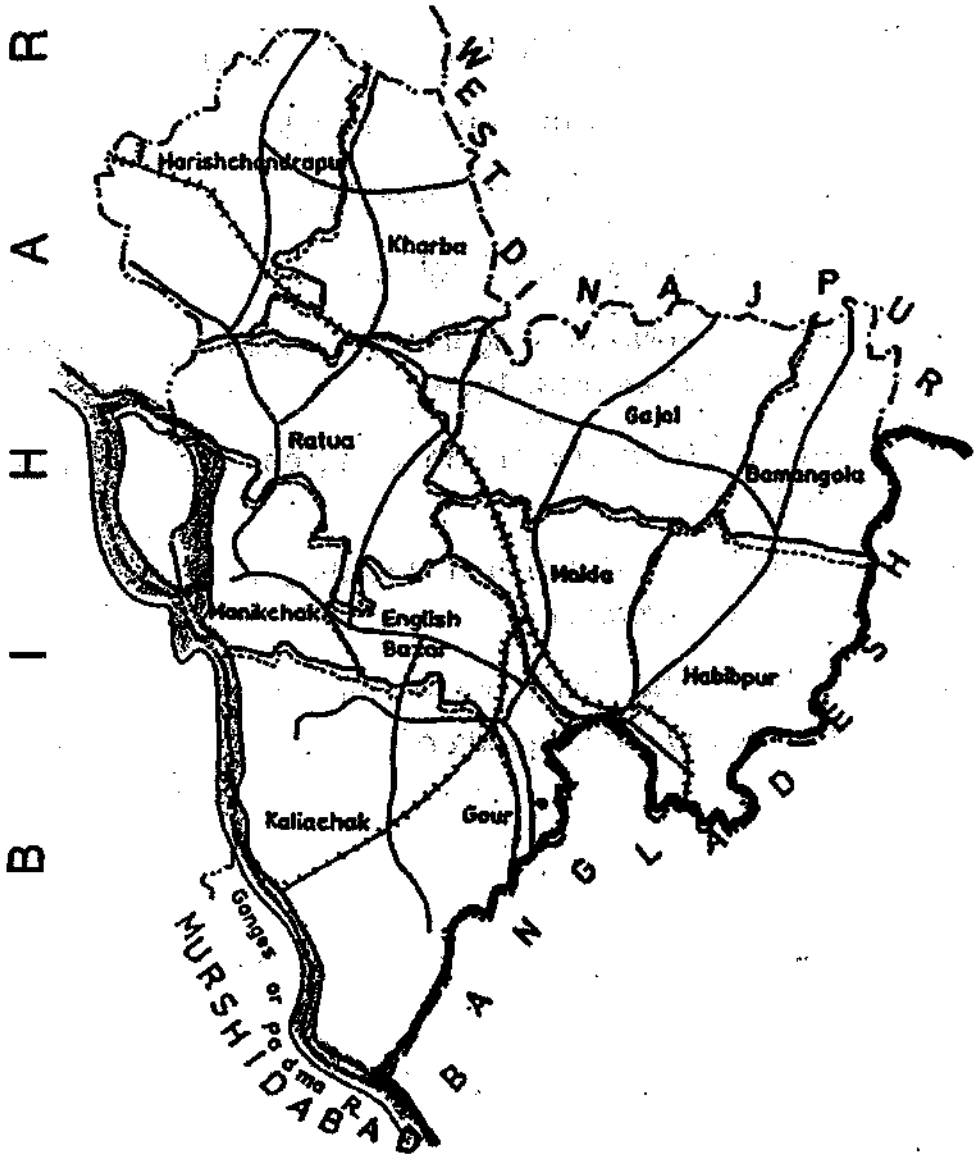
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# APPENDIX



# Malda District (After 1947)







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কোন-১-আলফ ৩৮



সম্পাদক-শ্রীলালমিত্রাণী সঙ্কুসদান।

মহঃ সম্পাদক-শ্রীমাপ্রসাদ সঙ্কুসদান।

৩১ খ্রি

আলফ ৩৮, ১৯৪৮/৪৯; ১৯৪৮/৪৯

৩১ খ্রি

সম্পাদক

# গৌড়দূত

সম্পাদক-শ্রীলালমিত্রাণী সঙ্কুসদান

## সেনদিয়া—

### পশ্চিম-প্রান্তিক!

শিলাঙ নই টোকা মন্ডলসদান  
(১৩৮৮) মন্ডলসদান ও মন্ডল মে কেমের উন্নয়  
টানন নই টোকা, মন্ডলসদান কি মন্ডল সেনদিয়া  
মন্ডল মন্ডলসদান এম পশ্চিম সেনদিয়া  
সদান—(১৩৮৮)

করিমপুর জিলা ( মন্ডলসদান ) মন্ডল  
মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান এম ১০০  
মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান এম মন্ডলসদান

মন্ডলসদান-মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান  
মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান এম এম; মন্ডলসদান

মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান—(১৩৮৮) মন্ডলসদান; মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান—(১৩৮৮)

মন্ডলসদান এম, মন্ডলসদান, মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান  
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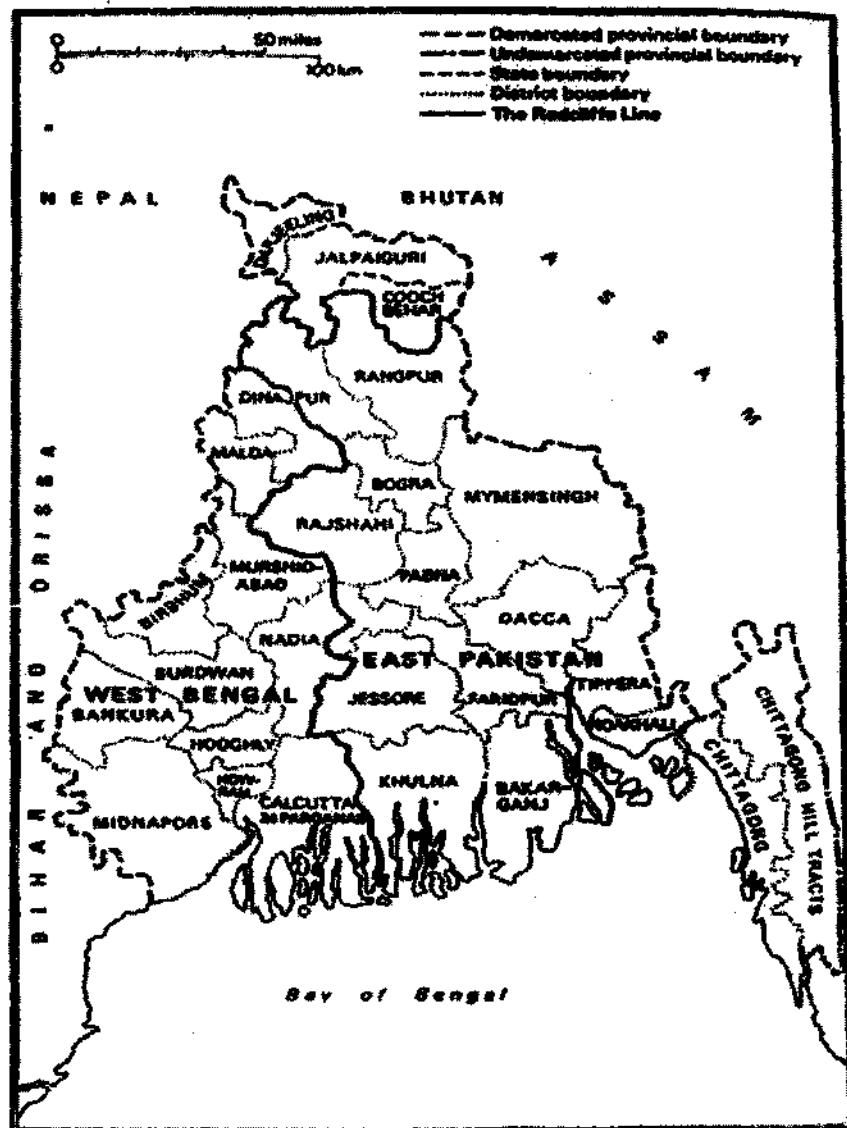
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মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান  
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মন্ডলসদান এম মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান-মন্ডলসদান  
মন্ডলসদান, মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান মন্ডলসদান

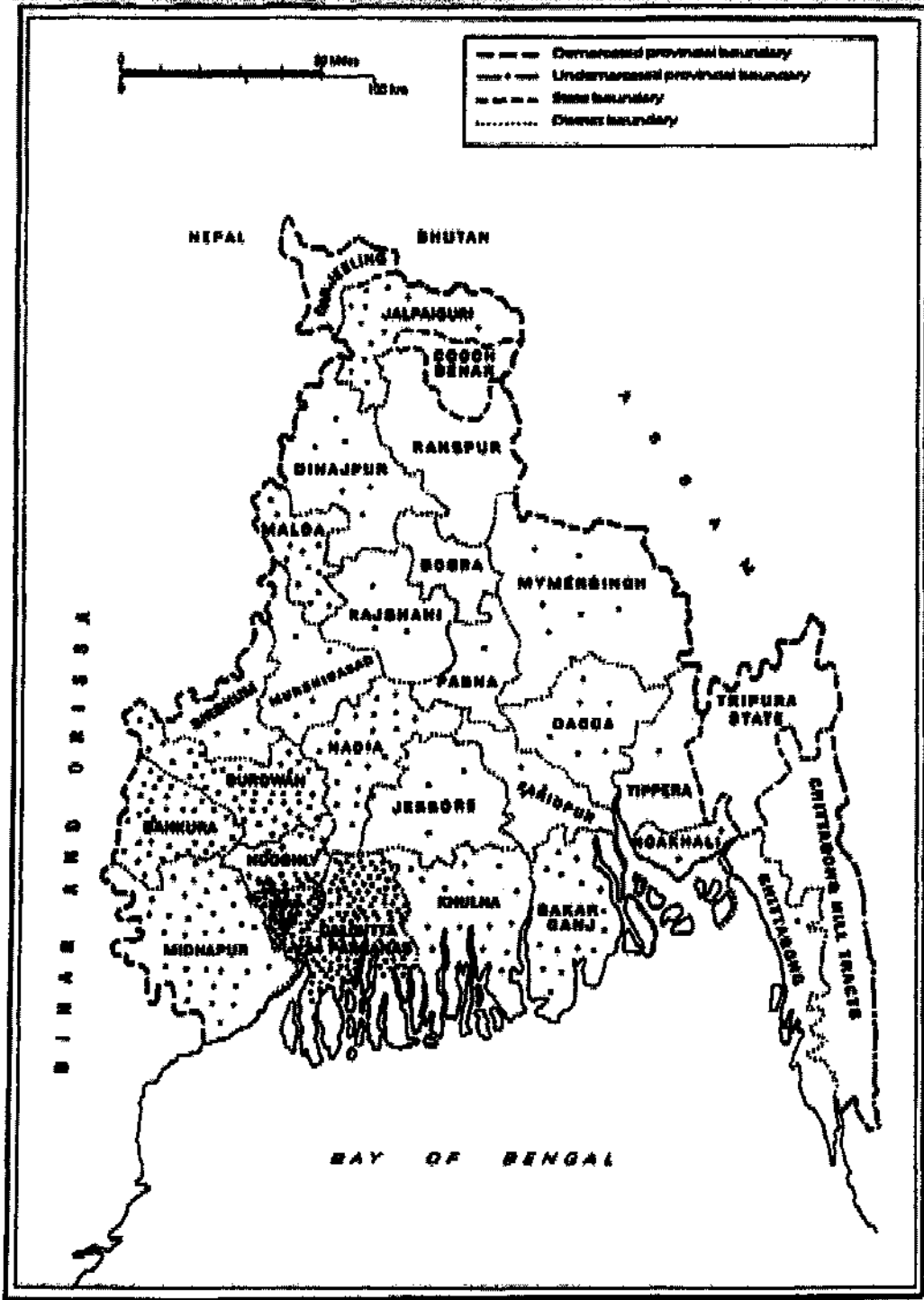






**The Radcliffe Line**

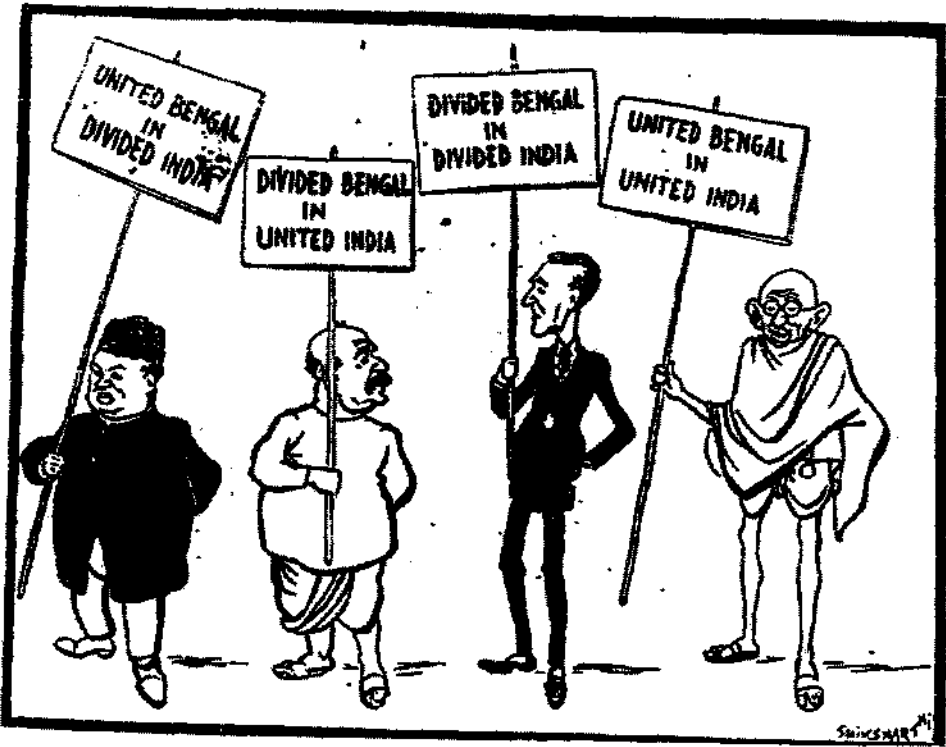
Source: Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 258.



1.8 The Hindu campaign for the partition of Bengal: distribution of petitions, by district.



WHO IS RIGHT ?



HS, May 17, 1947, 5.

