

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

The present study aims at probing the socio-economic contents of the struggle for freedom in Midnapore. It is a well known historical fact that the partition of Bengal(1905) led to popular resistance movements in villages and some towns of Midnapore district (covering an area of 5,258 square miles with a population of about 43,42,000 persons, according to 1961 census). The Satyagraha movement inspired by Gandhi in between the two World Wars as well as the terrorist movements in Midnapore district, with an agrarian base without any industrialisation, are also widely known. The freedom movement was pre-eminently an agrarian movement since no significant conscious participation of the industrial urban working class could be noticed except the stray incidents of Railway strike in Kharagpur Railway Locoshed at a time when the whole world was engulfed with the economic crisis of the twentieth century. The peasant movements were naturally predominantly coloured by nationalist overtones. But since the advent of the second World War, socialist ideas formed the theoretical base of the agrarian and urban movements led by the elite middle class while the strong nationalist regionalism was not forgotten.

In this study, the traditional methodology of collecting data from the government official sources, from the contemporary newspapers and from the eulogistic narration of the role of

nationalist leaders by popular writers have been taken into consideration. But emphasis has been laid on the unutilised literary sources in different localities reinforced by the statistical and economic data from the government sources and oral history collected from the freedom fighters to prove the socio-economic content of the freedom struggle which marks an expression of the urban middle class and rural peasantry combined, striving for a better life.

1. Aim of the Study:

This study has examined the phenomenon of crisis in agrarian economy which brought vital changes like rack-renting, rural indebtedness, alienation of land, subdivision and fragmentation of landholding, increasing pressure of population on land, unfavourable effect of price movement since the first world war and the resultant world wide economic depression which besides making agricultural operations unprofitable, made the system of advance increasingly indispensable for the cultivators. It resulted in the conversion of the independent peasantry into the mass of dependant peasantry on the money power of a middle peasantry who had education, money, power, tools of cultivation as such played a vital role on the village society. Moreover, lack of alternative means of livelihood since they could not compete with the educated middle class in the towns, led the free peasants to depend increasingly on the share cropping ('bhag chasa')

but not 'barga' which was prevalent outside Midnapore) cultivation in order to supplement their income taking lease of land from the middle peasants. Due to the unprecedented crisis in agricultural operation as an impact of the crisis in colonial structure of the British empire in between the two World Wars, the rural society in Midnapore represented a picture of intra-class conflict with the changing pattern of rural leadership. The traditional caste based leadership changed into land and education based leadership since money power as liquid capital and traditional tools of production were controlled by the middle stratum peasantry entrenched in the regional rural society. But the entry of urban middle class from outside Midnapore coming as government officials and their attempts to capture the social leadership gave rise to an unprecedented class conflict which has remained so long unnoticed by the historians. The conflict between B.N Sasmal and Calcutta leadership and the consequent regional chauvinism behind the local resistance movement with socialist overtones are but the expressions of this intra-class conflict which characterised the leadership crisis in the freedom movement. Possibly this conflict between the traditional rural leadership and urban middle class coming from outside the agrarian base, started with the advent of the British rule in Midnapore since the last lap of the 18th century which was characterised by the Chuar revolt. The freedom struggle is but the last phase of the intra-class conflict in the frontier Bengal.

## 2. The Locale:

This study is confined to a particular district called Midnapore which is situated between  $21^{\circ}36'$  and  $22^{\circ}57'$  north latitude between  $86^{\circ}33'$  and  $88^{\circ}11'$  east longitude with an area of 5,258 square miles with a population of about 43,42,000 persons according to 1981 census. Midnapore with its predominantly agrarian base was situated <sup>w</sup>the south-west frontier of undivided Bengal. The geographical location of Midnapore without any mineral resources, having terminating points of many rivers and prone to cyclonic weathers from Bay of Bengal made her the granery of Bengal as its economy was based on wet paddy cultivation without any significant industrialisation. This economic base coloured her peasant movements and freedom struggle between 1919 and 1942.

## 3. Time frame:

Since the time frame of the freedom struggle of Midnapore is confined to 1919 and 1942, the period had worldwide significance. The year 1919 witnessed the end of the first World War leading to the crisis in the capitalist and colonial camp and intensified the movement for local government in India led by the nationalist elite middle class. The Montagu Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 and the advent of Gandhi's leadership in the nationalist movement was a turning point of the agrarian movement in Midnapore. The study ends in 1943 which witnessed during the Second World War a conflict between democracy based on laissez faire economics and totalitarianism and the spectacular emergence

of Japan with its Asiatic Munroe doctrine leading to the fall of Pearl Harbour and Singapore, the two naval bases of England and the United States in Asia which intensified the Japanese slogan of 'Asia for the Asians' and prompted Subhas Bose to join hands with Japan for an armed insurrection within India when indige- nous capitalist interest led by Gandhi and as well as the nascent working class movement inspired by the Russian participation in the war decided to collaborate with the war efforts of the British imperialists to keep the supply line clear from Asia to Europe. This unprecedented drainage and economic bleeding intensified the rural base of the freedom struggle in Midnapore reaching its climax in 1945.

4. An overview of the works already done:

The historical literature on the freedom struggle during this time-frame may be catalogued under biographies and memoirs (such as autobiographical writings of Hemendra Kanungo, Birendra Nath Sasmal, Susil Kumar Dhara and a life on Satis Chandra Samanta), eulogistic narration of freedom movement high- lighting the role of urban leadership by the contemporary popular writers<sup>1</sup>. The land marks of political history have been adequately covered in numerous works on freedom struggle in

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1. Benoy Jiban Ghosh, Agniyuger astraguru Hemchandra, 1952, Ishan Chandra Mahapatra, Saheed Kshudiram and Pramatha Nath Pal, Deshpran Sasmal, 1368 B.S.

Midnapore<sup>2</sup> and growing efforts to highlight the local participation in the nationalist movements have produced recently a spate of books<sup>3</sup> which focussed the spirit of nationalism at the grass-root level in the district.

But these books concentrated mostly on narration of facts and neglected the socio-economic base of labour unrests. The authors also left unanswered the historical probings such as why rural welfare measures undertaken by the government failed to stem the tide of the rural depeasantisation leading to inter-class-conflict between the rural traditional leaders and the urban elite Calcutta-based leaders. The question may be asked why the Civil Disobedience movement during the 1930s evoked little response in the north and north-western part of Midnapore; as to why strictly a non-violent satyagraha movement at the initial stage turned into a violent revolt later on and thus why the call for an open mass struggle typified by Gandhi's satyagraha had to give place so quickly to the challenge of individual terror engulfing Midnapore town and its neighbourhood, and why the movements shaping the struggle of 1942, did not intensify in other parts of the district as it was in Tamluk and Contai subdivisions? The conventional explanation for the failure of these movements found in terms of police repression may not be really

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2. Narendra Nath Das, Midnapore 1908-'19 n.d., Fight for Freedom in Midnapore 1928-'38, 1980; Basanta Kumar Das, Swadhinata Sangrame Medinipur Vol.I, 1980; Sachindra Nath Maity, Freedom movement in Midnapore Vol.I, 1975; Tarasankar Bhattacharya, Swadhinata Sangrame Medinipur, 1973; and many others listed in bibliography.
  3. Basanta Kumar Das, Swadhinatar Ganasangram Khejuri Thana, 1975; Gopinandan Goswami, Banglar Haldighat Tamluk, 1973; Panchanan and Pranab Roy, Ghataler Katha, 1371 B.S. and others listed in bibliography.

sufficient. What we need is a study in depth of the tensions within the nationalist movements at the grass-root level in the district as they reflected the social changes and leadership conflict in the frontier Bengal.

##### 5. Methodology followed:

In this study emphasis has been laid on the non-official sources, such as, contemporary newspapers which are massive, but unfortunately remained unutilised. Considerable use of vernacular dailies like Ananda Bazar Patrika, Bangabani and Dainik Basumati and of English-language dailies and weeklies like Amrita Bazar Patrika, Advance and The Musalman in particular has been made. The periodical press - in particular the Bengali monthlies like Prabasi, Bharatbarsha, Masik Basumati and certain special issues of Ananda Bazar Patrika - have proved to be useful as regards the political trends of the period. Since those days communication system was not so developed as they are today, Nationalist movements in the remote parts of Midnapore could not always be reflected in the Calcutta newspapers. So local newspapers that were few in number, like Nihar of Contai and Tamralipta Patrika of Tamruk and innumerable bulletins that were circulated from the local congress offices in course of political movements have proved to be a rich mine of information as regards the socio-economic condition and political aspiration of the region. Since private papers and dairies are not available, the present scholar had to depend on oral history by interviewing the freedom fighters to have an idea of leadership crisis in the

course of the movements. The semi-contemporary literature of biographies and memoirs has its pitfalls, and the present scholar has avoided over dependence on such secondary sources - except to some extent in the chapter on the growth of Communist Party where other types of materials are relatively scanty.

Among the official records, by far the most valuable source is the Home, Political proceedings of the Government India - the files which include fortnightly reports and police abstracts concerning political situation in Bengal - detailed confidential reports on salt satyagraha, no-chowkidari tax movement, boycott and picketing, arbitration courts; much valuable information about labour unrest at Kharagpur, communal riots, Santal unrest, and congress influence in the area, and on revolutionary terrorism and Quit India movement in Midnapore. Judging from the copious extracts from the files which are available at the West Bengal state Archives - fortnightly reports, police extracts, confidential reports, papers of State Committee for compilation of the History of the Freedom movement - much of the material there found its way eventually into the Home proceedings preserved at New Delhi. The State Archives also contain Highcourt records on Doglus and Burge murder cases, confidential report on Indian Newspapers and periodicals and proceedings of local-self government Department which deals with Union Board boycott movement in Midnapore. Finally, mention should be made of official publications-Bengal Legislative council proceedings,

Administrative reports, District Gazetteers and census reports, Land revenue Administration and two invaluable publications concerning final report on the Survey and Settlement operation in the District of Midnapore 1911-'17 by A K Jameson and District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances 1942-'45 by Bengal Govt. Home Department which are of immense help to the scholar.

6. The hypothesis tested in the study:

The Partition of Bengal(1905) led to popular resistance movement both in the agrarian and urban sectors of Midnapore district. The study would aim at analysing the socio-economic basis of the freedom movement in this predominantly agrarian district. The following questions are posed to find answer:

(a) How far swadeshi movement was a bhadralok(elite middle class) affair? To what extent economic position of bhadralok tenure holders dominated the movement in Midnapore?(b) To what extent peasant passivity due to absence of radical agrarian programme of the Raj and the then political parties, as has been advanced by a scholar, set limits to the nationalism of the elite section of the middle class (Bhadralok nationalism)? (c) Whether Muslim apathy to the swadeshi movement made a shift from method of mass action to elite action in Midnapore(the phenomenon which could be found in the then East Bengal) ?

With the launching of Non-Co-operation movement by Gandhi, Anti-Union Board Movement was started in Midnapore in 1921.

The working committee of BPCC (Bengal Provincial Congress Committee) decided not to oppose the implementation of self-Government Act at the initial stage. Yet under the leadership of B N Sasmal, common people rallied round the movement and Bengal Government invariably revoked 235 Union Boards in Midnapore. This would analyse the movement's impact an economic, social and political fields.

The Civil Disobedience movement in Midnapore was admirably noted in the history of Indian Freedom Movement. So called peasant passivity of the swadeshi period was belied, it is argued, by the spontaneous participation of the people of all strata of the society throughout the district. The point which deserve to be analysed here is that what made the peasantry, who constituted the majority of the population, tilted towards the Civil Disobedience movement.

The last theme that is to be focussed in the freedom struggle in Midnapore is the composite blend of both non-violent and violent movements. Notwithstanding district-wide intensity of the Civil Disobedience movement, youths of Midnapore town, it is advanced, were not placated with non-violent creed of Gandhi and hence the assassination of three District Magistrates. The points that naturally strike is that why the revolutionaries in the wake of farflung Civil Disobedience movement resorted to political assassinations? Whether they added one more chapter of unproductive revolutionary heroism in the freedom movement of

India or they sought to animate patriotism in the minds of countrymen and to shatter the invincibility of British imperialism by the cult of individual terrorism or they prepared the ground for final and crucial phase of 1942 movement in the District ?

One can perceive three types of strands in the field of freedom struggle. First, in the urban centres and towns of extended villages, there was the demand for Swaraj spearheaded by national bourgeoisie. This movement was confined to a narrow circle of urban middle class, elites and wealthy persons and to some extent, took significant foothold at the lower strata of the population. Secondly, in the rural sector the peasantry, artisans, landless wage-earners in the villages and mofussil towns under the leadership of 'Grama-mukhyas' and upper class Hindus were inspired by the slogan for Swadeshi and local self government, believing in the revival of traditional isolated tiny republics - an utopia which they could never attain. Third, the force which germinated with a lightening speed was the terrorist movement spearheaded by the urban youths which percolated to the labouring masses of the tribal and industrial belts of the area. The efforts to establish national governments in some isolated towns by some types of movements, the peasant and tribal unrest of Jharagram Carbonari and Narodnik and Civil Disobedience movement launched by the congress were more or less the manifestation of this third strand.

The study would analyse the socio-economic ground which gave birth to these three distinct forces in the freedom struggle at the grassroots level. It would also answer why the last two trends converged with the Indian National Congress and ultimately lost their identity. It would also explain the limitation in the revolutionary terrorism in terms of socio-economic immaturity of the period (they could not get wide spread support of the people because the socio-economic background was not ripe for a terrorist movement with mass support) for the temporary set back of the radical phase of the movement only to flare up again in the 1940s during the Second World War. Sequel to this two movements may be usmmed up as under:

- (a) There was the spread of socialist ideas within the Congress;
- (b) There was the process of depeasantisation of the peasantry, decline of village level industries and the emigration of rural landless wage earners to urban centres like Howrah, Kharagpore and tea-gardens of Assam; (c) There was the genesis and spread of Communist Party in Midnapore.

#### 7. Chapterisation:

As for the arrangement of vast mass of materials, after a brief discussion on socio-economic conditions of this predominantly agrarian district in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the present scholar analysed the political heritage of Midnapore, dating back from 1920. An attempt would be made to show how two trends Swadeshi and boycott and revolu-

tionary terrorism awakened the political consciousness of the people of Midnapore and crisis in agricultural operations inhibited the peasants and other lower class mobilization in the political movements of the elite section of the middle class. The chapter concentrates on socio-political roots of nationalism in the region where the Mahisya (a predominant agrarian community in the region) social upliftment efforts got inter-mixed with wider nationalist movement in the wake of Union Board boycott movement. Anti-Union Board movement aroused the spirit of self-confidence of the rural middle peasantry leadership to prepare the grounds for non-co-operation movement launched by Gandhi. It analysed the entry of urban middle class coming from outside Midnapore as government officials and their attempts to capture the socio-economic leadership gave rise to a class conflict, which has remained unnoticed by the historians. Conflict between B N Sasmal and Calcutta based bhadralok leaders is the expression of this class conflict which characterised the leadership crisis in the district during the period under study. It is further to be tested as to how the intriguing politics of urban leadership inhibited the progress of mass movement in the rural area by ousting B N Sasmal, snapping the link between Calcutta leadership and rural organisers, isolating the Midnapore movements from Bengal politics and by neglecting the Gandhian doctrine of rural reconstruction to achieve the goal of self-rule. Thus Bengal Congress squabbles, policies of colonial

government, socio-economic tensions of the region and leadership crisis set limits to the mass-movement. However, Midnapore became an important base of nationalism during the Civil Disobedience movement in the thirties. In Chapter II an attempt would be made to explore the causes of the intensification of peasant resistance movements by surveying the salt satyagraha, no-chowkidari tax movement, boycott and picketings, communication techniques, leadership, constructive works and organisational forms adopted in the efforts to break through to the masses. Analysis would show that apathy to peasants' economy inhibited the movement. Chapter III deals with socio-economic roots of revolutionary terrorism in Midnapore which liquidated three successive District Magistrates. But the revolutionaries could never rise to the level of real guerilla squad and their activities remained well within the orbit of the class interest of urban middle class. An attempt would be made to point out causes of mass alienation by analysing their ideology, organisation, leadership and their impact on the political life of Midnapore. After their failure in the early 1930s some young terrorists of Midnapore, as elsewhere in Bengal, turned to political leftism by founding the Communist Party in the region. The chapter includes genesis, growth and role of the Communist Party, in its initial stage, in the struggle for independence and their efforts in championing the cause of revival of peasants' economy which were denied both by the Congress and the revolutionary terrorists. It also deals with trade union movement at Kharagpur

which made its appearance simultaneously with the left politics in Bengal. Chapter IV concentrates on the last phase of the nationalist movement in Midnapore during the Second World War. Along with socio-economic roots of the movement emphasis would be made in analysing the nature of the movement in terms of violent, non-violent and left trends in, as well as its limitations. Quit-India movement in Midnapore dominated with the formation of parallel governments in the rural areas with all the administrative paraphernalia. The study in this chapter aims to throw light on the emergence of national governments and the nature of administration they carried in rural areas in terms of economic salvation of the peasantry. In the concluding chapter, apart from offering a brief assessment of freedom movement during the period and its achievement, attempts at a discussion of the socio-economic content and nature of the movement as a whole would be made. To what extent the nationalist movement in the district of Midnapore is a 'bhadralok' affair, to what extent peasant passivity due to absence of 'radical agrarian programme set limits to the nationalism of the elite-section of the middle class, what was the nature of the Muslims and other lower class peasant mobilization in political movement in the region, how far intriguing politics of Calcutta based Congress leaders set limits to the nationalism at the grass-root level, to what extent intra-class conflict with the changing pattern of leadership affects the movement, why Gandhian principles of rural welfare activities collapsed within a brief span

of time, why strictly non-violent satyagrahas turned into a violent phase in course of Civil Disobedience in the region, why techniques of open mass struggle had to give place so quickly to the methods of individual terrorism and what constituted their sudden collapse and what was its impact on the nationalism at the grass-root level, how the left politics offered alternative paths to redress economic plight of the agricultural community which were denied by the rural Gandhites in Midnapore, what were the sum-total effects of violence, non-violence and left politics on Quit-India movement in the district, and lacking a radical agrarian programme how Midnapore became a base of nationalism? In the final analysis, an answer has been sought to all these questions.