
South 24 Parganas: Revisiting 1942

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Abstract

The history of Indian Freedom Movement is well glorified with numerous mass-movements, which by themselves are well noted for their patriotic boldness in the annals of Indian history. The Quit India movement of 1942 did actually mark a new era in the history of Indian freedom struggle. The affirmative and emphatic role and participation of Bengal in this freedom crusade of the country has long been boldly recognized. In this context the involvement and contribution of the southern fringe of Bengal, which incorporates the Sunderbans and the south 24 Parganas are worth mentioning. Demonstrations, protests, mass uprisings, patriotic programs by the farmers and workers and not to mention the total sacrifice of the innumerable freedom fighters marks the freedom movement from this part of Bengal, which struck like the tidal waves from the adjacent seas and spread like wildfire. In this essay, entitled, 'SOUTH 24 PARGANAS: REVISITING 1942' I have humbly tried to catch a glimpse of the bold and daring role of the valiant men of this river, canals, creeks, bayous and forest girdled landmass, in the freedom movement of the country. The course through which this part of Bengal gradually metamorphosed into one of the primary seats of the 1942 movement is indeed an area of earnest research and discussion. Along with the whole country the martyrs of this land also dedicated themselves in favor of the drift of the freedom movement.

KEYWORDS: revolutionary tradition, pre-struggle rhetoric, outline, personality, flowing

INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian Freedom Movement is well glorified with numerous mass-movements, which by themselves are well noted for their patriotic boldness in the annals of Indian history. The Quit India movement of 1942 did actually mark a new era in the history of Indian freedom struggle. The affirmative and emphatic role and participation of Bengal in this freedom crusade of the country has long been boldly recognized. In this context the involvement and contribution of the southern fringe of Bengal, which incorporates the Sunderbans and the south 24 Parganas are worth mentioning. Demonstrations, protests, mass uprisings, patriotic programs by the farmers and workers and not to mention the total sacrifice of the innumerable freedom fighters marks the freedom movement from this part of Bengal, which struck like the tidal waves from the adjacent seas and spread like wildfire. In this essay, entitled, '**SOUTH 24 PARGANAS: REVISITING 1942**' I have humbly tried to catch a glimpse of

the bold and daring role of the valiant men of this river, canals, creeks, bayous and forest girdled landmass, in the freedom movement of the country. The course through which this part of Bengal gradually metamorphosed into one of the primary seats of the 1942 movement is indeed an area of earnest research and discussion. Along with the whole country the martyrs of this land also dedicated themselves in favor of the drift of the freedom movement.

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was typically an unmonitored, leader-less, voluntary and emotional unrest of the general and teeming mass of the country. The 2nd world war along with yielding a total unrest in the global political scenario, did also furnish a new direction to the freedom movement of the country. Prior to the war, negotiations and adjustments with the imperial rule had been the pathway for the movement. But the war demanded severe combats of the British in different parts of the world and so they earnestly desired active co-operation from the Indians ¹. Under the scenario, the then leaders of the freedom movement couldn't find justification in engaging in war for the British, since they rightfully hollered the impression that fighting for independence for another country by soldiers of a nation, itself immersed in bondage was an absolute impossibility. Naturally the voice of liberating India from the captivity of foreign rule gained voice. However this opinion was promptly rejected by the British. In 1940, Gandhi, with a few selected leaders of the Indian National Congress first called for a 'Satyagraha Movement'. The idea was not to bother the British with mass-uprisings in India and hamper their preparation for war. However, within the middle of March the next year, more than 25000 protesters were already jailed in different parts of the country. The rejection of the proposal of Sir Stanford Cripps in March 1942, only aroused displeasure and resentment in the population. The next few months the Indians experienced days of daily unrest and turmoil, marked with constant panic of Japanese invasion. The grave situation compelled Gandhi to alter his course of action. It was in the meeting of the Indian National Congress in the month of July, he first voiced the words 'QUIT INDIA'. The primary motive was to compel the British to accept the mandate for independence. The primary triumph of the Axis power in the war roused the idea of fall of the British Empire. However the final outcome of the war radically changed everything ².

The leaders of the Indian national movement were of the firm opinion that independence can never be achieved with the help of imperialist powers. Keeping this in mind the draft proposal of the movement, prepared by Gandhi was placed in the meeting the Congress on 7th and 8th August, by Nehru and was approved and gracefully

accepted. It was resolved that a non-violent mass movement will be initiated under the leadership of Gandhi. It was advocated that if the suppression and torture of the British Government continued and if the leaders were brought into captivity every Indian should self-motivate and guide themselves and act accordingly. The fellow countrymen should adopt any necessary and useful methodology for the freedom of the country alongside jailing. On the night of 8th August in his address to the nation Gandhi urged all Indians to soak the motto of 'Kareenge ya Mareenge' in their heart and reflect the theme of 'Do or Die' ³ in their every breath. According to the eminent scholar Gyanendra Pandey, 'Bapu induced a mental and emotional strength in the heart of the fellow countrymen'.

The celebrated Professor Ranjit Sen opines that it was back in 1906, when Gandhi first spoke of Quit India. But then he was utterly incapable of monitoring and governing the youngsters of the country and hence was not in a position to organize the movement. So he called for the movement after Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose left the country. The agitation of 1942 was utterly unplanned. Neither did it have a plan of action nor any definite course. But however before the actual onset of the movement, the British fearfully on the morning of 9th August, imprisoned Gandhi and few other frontline leaders and declared the National Congress as illegitimate. The news of imprisonment only brought anguish and sorrow to the Indians ⁴. Accumulated anguish revolted out in the form of protests, clashes and demonstrations throughout the country. In some regions the protests turned significantly violent and Bengal was such an area.

The geographical location of the district of South 24 Parganas played a significant role in its vibrant activity in the freedom struggle and gave it a distinct identity. The then, center of British power, Kolkata was a part of this district. Henceforth it was quite apparent that, the mass of this district was potentially influenced by the contemporary anti-imperialistic movements and ideas. Being nearby Kolkata, the people of the district had the benefit of both Indian and oriental education. This education indoctrinated fresh ideas in the mind of the youngsters who brought about a renaissance in the socio-cultural system. The different regions of South 24 Parganas, which deserve special mention are: Jaynagar – Majilpur, Harinavi, Mahinagar, Kotalia, Malancha, Changripota, Rajpur, Kulpi, Diamond Harbour, Bujbuj, Canning, Bishnupur, Falta, Kakdwip, Karanjali, Bhangar, Govindpur, Jaggadal, Dhamua, Magrahat, Hatuganj, Dighir Par, Rajnagar, Madhusudhanpur, Dakshin Barasat and the interior jungle region ⁵.

Development of transport system facilitated the spread of revolutionary ideas. New roads were laid. Within the years 1862 to 1890, railway lines were laid down in Sealdah – Sonarpur-Magrahat, Sealdah- Baruipur, Sonarpur – Canning, Ballygunj – Budgebudge and Kalighat – Falta sections and was extended to Baruipur – Laxmikantapur section in 1928⁶.

The background of struggle was long laid out. Hence a brief outline of the freedom struggle of the district is first laid down. Revolutionary ideas were first injected in the mind of the common mass of the district when Rajnarayan Basu (Grandfather of Indian nationalism) from the Boral village set up the organization ‘Jatiya Gaurav Sabha’ in 1861⁷. Introduction of native carnivals like ‘Chaitra Mela’ and ‘Hindu Mela’ (in 1869, 1871 and 1872) was a stimulating step in the introduction of revolutionary ideas in the common folk⁸. An ardent sponsor and organizer for these fairs was the local zamindar Rajendrakumar Raychowdhuri. The ideas and faith of the Brahma Samaj and its religious concepts spread amongst the people with active assistance from Sibnath Shastri from Majilpur. He started an organization, ‘Chattras Sangha’. In the tabloid ‘Somprakash’ edited by Dwarkanath Bidyabhusan the first rational political criticisms were published to the people. The first claim for Independent India was first raised by Sri Aurobindo, the son-in-law of Rajnarayan Basu, in the English magazine ‘Bandemataram’ in 1907.

The noted revolutionaries Aurobindo, Bipinchandra, Shyamsundar etc. raised their voices and protested against the humiliation of the honest boycotters of ‘Samantasakti’ in Baruipur. In the Swadeshi era (1905 – 1920) secret revolutionary organisations bred in every corners of West Bengal⁹. The district of South 24 Parganas was no exception. An important branch of the revolutionary organization ‘Anushilan Samity’ was set up at Changripota, Subhasgram. Distinguished leaders were Harikumar Chakraborty, Narendranath Bhattacharya, Soileswar Basu at Kodaliya, Satkari Bondhopadhyay at Mahinagar, Kanailal Bhattacharya at Joynagar-Mojilpur, Jagdananda Mukhopadhyay at Jagaddal. In these branches of revolutionary organizations various martial arts and body-fitness exercises like wrestling, knife and stick playing and yoga were intensely practiced and vigorous training was imparted to the local youths. Alongside, under the patronage and active support of the patriotic leader Satkari Bandopadhyay (who was locally popular as Satu’da) and Harikumar Chakraborty, patriotic centres, coined as ‘Akharas’ flourished in plenty in regions of Harinavi, Rajpur, Malancha, Garia, Karanjali, Shyambasurchawk, Majilpur, Falta, Sarisha, Diamond Harbour, Behala and various other. The first instance of indigenous

dacoity was also registered at that time when the railway stations of Natra and Chingripota were looted, fooling the British. The accomplishment was spearheaded by Narendranath Bhattacharyya, with patriotic leaders like Kuntal Chakraborty and Tinkari Das of Jaynagar, Alope Chakraborty and Makhan Chakraborty of Chingripota and others participating in the loot¹⁰. Another patriotic organization was the 'Jugantar Dal', where the patriotic leaders Narendranath and Harikumar were actively engaged in planning for trafficking arms and weapons from Germany. However the plans and programs were foiled due to some treachery and betrayal from the localities in 1914. Other organizations like 'Atmonnoti Sabha' and 'Palli Hitoishi Sabha' matured with the sole intention of protests and demonstrations. Under the circumstances, Narendranath (Manabendranath Ray) visited Russia for collection of arms and ammunitions and there he framed the Indian Communist Party on 17th October, 1920. Patriotic leader Santosh kumar Bhattacharyya from Mahinagar, also known as Miya'da, was proficient in singing patriotic songs and he was an active member of the armed section of 'Jugantar Dal', 'Sadhan Sangha'¹¹. All these patriotic organizations troubled the British administration extremely. The words of Swami Vivekananda 'Anandamath' of Bankim Chandra were primary inspirations for the contemporary youths¹².

Within the years 1920 to 1922, party offices of Indian National Congress were opened in regions like Baruipur, Harinavi, Changripota, Diamond Harbour, Falta, Dhamua, Rajnagar and various others, a direct evidence that Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement largely swayed the region. After the movement was recalled in 1923, with directives from Deshbandhu Chittaranjan, the prominent leaders of the district like Subhash Chandra Bose, Harikumar Chakraborty, Satkari Bandopadhyay and others joined the 'Swaraj Party'. The wave of the Non-Cooperation Movement was successfully propagated within the entire district by various leaders like Hemantakumar Basu from Baruipur, Pannalal Chakraborty from Rajpur, Madanmohan Bandopadhyay from Govindapur, Biswanath Ghosh from Jagaddal, Harisadhan Bhattacharyya from Kotalia and many others. The organization 'Chattra Sangha' was formed with the local students in 1927 with the sole goal of independence by Bijoy Dutta from Kotalia¹³.

In 1930, Gandhi started his 'Dandi March' and urged the Indians to participate actively in the 'Satyagraha Movement' for disobeying the Salt Act. The Movement swung the Indians who actively participated and were jailed by the British in thousands. It was during this Satyagraha Movement that the first martyr of India laid his soul for the

independence of his motherland. The young farmer, Ashutosh Dolui, hailing from the Nila village of Diamond Harbour was only sixteen when he died in civil disobedience¹⁴. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose promptly in a letter admiring his sacrifice remarked him as the 'Great Son of the Country, who made his nation Proud.' Nila village came under limelight overnight. Section 144 was commissioned everywhere. Aswini Kumar Deb, Saradaprasad Halder, Padmalochan Sardar and other front liners were assaulted by the British police. Laxmikanta Pramanik from Rajarhat and Gangadhar Das from Sagar also achieved immortality by embracing martyrdom. The celebrated actor Durgadas Bandopadhyay supported the protesters actively in Kalikapur¹⁵. Besides several other leaders were brought into captivity by the British police for patriotic activities in the Salt Disobedience Movement, the most notable being Professor Rashbehari Chatterjee (hailing from Sashan), Dr. Tulsi Pal, Satish De, all being captivated from Baruipur, Bijoy Dutta (hailing from Kodalia) and his young brigade, being captivated from Nila, Sachindranath Mitra being captivated from Jaynagar and many others. The notable patriot Nripendranath Chakraborti, hailing from Changripota, along with other notable leaders like Thakurdas Chakraborti, Bijon Chakraborti, Kali Chakraborti, Bijon Bhattacharyya, successfully organized non-violent Satyagraha protest against the narcotics and wine shops in Rajpur. The upsurge of the movement struck almost every corner of the district and areas like Garia, Bhangar, Karanjali, Kulpi, Falta, Magrahat were literally washed with it. In Diamond Harbour the Civil Disobedience movement was spearheaded by the activists of the organization, 'Bani Mandir', which was controlled by Bhudharchandra Naskar and Aurobindo Purkait. At this crucial juncture Netaji was struck in jail, but however this only infuriated the common mass. Here it would be worthwhile to mention that it was Netaji who visualized of foreign help for ousting a foreign power.

The people of the district were not only involved in various non-violent movements, but they were actively involved in armed patriotic actions. It was a time when the countrymen swing in hopes and aspirations. The patriotic literature "Pather Dabi" of Saratchandra was banned by the British Government but was sure to be found in the pockets every young liberationist. Satkari Bandopadhyay from the district masterminded a plan for assassinating Police Commissioner Charles Tegart. Under his directives the patriots Dinesh Majumdar and Anuja Sen bombed Tegart in Dalhousie Square in Kolkata on 25th August 1930. They were soon captured and both of them embraced martyrdom. The Jaynagar Majilpur region was a stronghold of the patriots and the fighting here was spearheaded by Sunil Chatterjee of Baharu, Gangaghata.

Prabodh Bhattacharyya after joining the organization led by Dinesh Majumder got imprisoned (1933-1937) in the Grindlays Bank forgery case. On 27th July 1931, Kanailal Bhattacharyya from Majilpur committed suicide after shooting Judge R R Garlic of Alipur Court ¹⁶. Patriots Mani Lahiri and Anil Bhaduri joined the esteemed list of martyrs after killing Alfred Watson, the Editor of Statesman newspaper, under the planning of Sunil Chatterjee. In 1937 with active inspiration from Bhupendranath Dutta, Mujjafar Ahmed and Bankim Mukherjee, the patriots Prabhas Ray from Borul, Jatin Roy from Falta and Bhutnath Bhattacharyya from Jaynagar formed the 'Krishak Sabha' and led the protests of the farmers. Patriot Bijoy Dutta enthused the youth in different corners of the district with his impressive 'Lanthan Lecture'. The entire district was immersed in the sanctified water of patriotism. Hriday Chakraborty from Bhangar, Hansaraj Dhara from Kakdwip, Murari Chakraborti and Khagen Das from Falta, Sukumar Dutta from Karanjali, Sudhir Manna from Budgebudge, Kishorimohan Naskar from Kulpi, Gourkishore Ghosh from Baruipur, Manimohan Mondal from Dakshin Barasat, Chunilal Naskar from Dulalpur and many others are to be listed ¹⁷. With every conflict and teardrops the resolution of the patriots grew strong as steel. Different songs and hymns spreading the view of revolutionary ideas spread like wildfire in the villages and was muttered by everyone.

'Mahatma Gandhi howe najarbandi/ Swarajer dichhe fandi.

Suniye Bharatbasi kandiye dibanishi/aain amanya dusi dichhe jele dhukae.

Dhar charka, kat suta – kapor kor moner moto.'

Songs like this rang through the villages. A spontaneous and distinct picture of the movement was visualized in the district of south 24 Parganas. Youths embracing the National Flag and enchanting 'Bande Mataram' could be seen everywhere. A classic remembrance of the popular Bengali proverb, 'Guru mele lakhe lakhe, sishya mele ek', was depicted in the district, which was really first class in producing some really dedicated disciples of patriotism, though high quality leaders were not yielded.

The movement of 1942 had neither any leaders nor any guiding organizations. The common mass reacted and acted according to their will and necessity. Raising slogans, like "Quit India' and 'Hindu Muslim Ek Haw', the people organized gatherings in front of different government buildings. Strikes were called throughout the district. Schools, mills and Government offices were the foremost areas of demonstrations, and mass protests. In return the police charged with sticks and bullets. Ultimately the common mass lost their patience and succumbed to violence. The arenas of imperialistic

administration became the first targets and police stations, post offices, court and other administrative buildings were attacked and brought down. Telegraphic wires were cut ¹⁸. Different small towns and villages in the interiors of the district were brought under the hold of the rebel leaders. In The adjacent district of Midnapore, in the town of Tamluk a parallel administration was set up. The students, youngsters, mill-workers and farmers were the backbone of the movement.

Analysing the history of the Freedom movement in the district of south 24 Parganas, the contribution of different areas are to be studied. Among the patriots who played a significant role in organizing and assembling the students of Borul region for patriotic movements, Suresh Ghosh, Sudhin Haldar, Akshoy Kayal, Palash Pramanik, Tarapada Bhandari deserves special mention. The picture of dedication of Charuchandra Bhandari, who was the prime person in 'Khadi Mandir' and was coined 'Gandhi' of Diamond harbor region flashes in the mind when cultivating the history ¹⁹. He didn't believe in any questions and answers but only on the prime goal of sacrificing oneself in the service of nation. It was under his direct supervision, that the indigenous weaving with 'Charkha' was started in the district. Prior to the 1942 agitation, it was under his supervision that branch offices were set up in Hatuganj, Madhusudhanpur, Rajnagar, Dighir par and Jadavpur regions. During the August protest, this great patriot was brought in to captivity by the British police from his 'Khadi Mandir' and later he was jailed. Along with him other notable leaders who were also brought to captivity were Rajendralal Mondal, Madhusudhan Pramanik, Bipinbihari Ganguly, Haripada Jana, Surendranath Singha and many other common people. Kishorimohan, a student of Harijan Vidyalaya of Madhusudhanpur was arrested along with forty other patriots from 'Sakti Press' in Kolkata. The renowned patriot, Bipinbehari Ganguly, while planning for the 1942 movement was arrested and later on jailed. Lila Ray of Forward Block, along with his brother Sunil Ray initiated the freedom struggle in different regions of Rajpur and Harinavi but latter on was arrested and jailed. 'Chaluwari Govind Ashram' in Falta was a secret abode of patriotic activities. The site was visited by many prominent female patriots like Bimal Prativa Devi, Kamala Devi etc. and noted nationalists like Kartar Singh and the editor of the magazine 'Matribhumi', Dr. Pratap Guharoy. Innumerable other patriots who were jailed during the season included Prabodh Garhiwal, Kalipada Mondal of Sibaniipur, Sachin Banerjee and Sachindranath Mitra of Jaynagar ²⁰. The contribution of Basu family of Kodalia, Maity family of Kakdwip and the Naskar family of Magrahat deserves special mention.

Situations were so intense that the British were forced to deploy British army in areas as remote as Sagardwip.

The pre-independence struggle was primarily bi-fold. On one side was the armed revolution of the middle class people and on the other was the struggle by the illiterate farmers against the zamindars and moneylenders. 2878 patriots were arrested in south 24 Parganas during the movement, 358 were convicted and 114 strikes were organized. In a total of 222 rallies, police struck with sticks 68 times injuring 173 fellow men. 131 people embraced martyrdom during the 44 times firing was ordered. Tear gas was deployed 11 times. The notable leader Satkari Bandopadhyay succumbed to death from extreme torture in Deuli jail in 1937. Bijoy Dutta was realized from jail in 1938 in a pathetic condition. The patriot Pannalal Chakraborty also died in 1939²¹.

The wretched and pitiful condition of the then Bengal was successfully portrayed in various novels and plays like the 'Jagari', Dhurai Charit Manas' by Satinath Bhaduri, 'Ganadevta, Dhatridevta by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, 'Upanibesh' by Narayan Gangopadhyay and 'Nabanna' by Bijon Bhattacharyya. It is also through the writings of Rabindranath Tagore that the plight of the countrymen at that time could be visualized²².

After the 1942 agitation and before the independence, the Tebhaga Movement also moved the mass²³. Alongside in 1943 the catastrophic natural disasters and the infamous famine troubled the people. The Daniel policy of the British also thrust the Indians more towards the famine²⁴.

CONCLUSION

The foremost significance of the 1942 movement was that it clearly exhibited the strength with which the wave of nationalistic movement struck the remote and interior villages of the country. The supremacy of the common folk in struggle and sacrifice could be fathomed during the struggle. The message that India couldn't be ruled with opposition from the common mass was even audible in far England. The severity of the movements only unleashed the torturing capability and hatred of the British. It was as if the Indians had started a rivalry for sacrifice in the independence of motherland. Apparently though the 1942 agitation didn't succeed due to the severe oppression from the British administration, but the revolution had long term implications. In spite of the fact that most the patriotic leaders were under captivity, but the common folk were inspired with the anthem of 'QUIT INDIA'. So it is rightfully said that the 1942 agitation marks the change of an era in Indian freedom struggle.

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