

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE MUSLIMS OF BENGAL (C.E. 1757-1830)

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Before British occupation, the Muslim society of Bengal consisted broadly of two classes : the upper class formed a small group who held sway over the country as rulers, administrators, *zamindars*, free-land holders and learned stipendiaries. Besides, a small band of Shi'ite merchants also formed a significant group in the trade and commerce of Bengal. The position of these group of people may be gleaned from contemporary sources, makes it clear that the power and prosperity of the Muslim upper class was dependent on government patronage, which they received as the ruling class.

The vast majority of the Muslims of Bengal who formed the lower strata of the society, however, consisted of husbandmen, weavers, lay-labourers and petty service holders of the Civil Government. Besides, a good many of them were also employed as soldiers and policemen and as domestic servants and retainers of the nobles. This multitude are often described by the historians as 'helpless masses' or 'people of God' who usually looked to the upper class for protection, guidance and leadership.

In that peculiar social setup, it was, therefore, natural that in almost every sphere of life leadership would flow from the upper to the lower classes. According to an English writer, "pride and love for the humble devotion of their dependents and terror and shame on their curses – ever filled the hearts of the nobles" and these powerful emotions of the soul disposed them "to cherish and protect the flock of brethren committed to their charge". Hence, the relationship between the classes can be characterised as somewhat patriarchal or filial.

After the Battle of Plassey, a great change took place in the government organisation as well as the economic system of Bengal, which at first, slowly and later, at an accelerated pace, sapped the position and prestige of the Muslim upper class. The social history of the Muslims of Bengal during the later half of the eighteenth century depicts nothing more conspicuously than the painful process of the Muslim upper class, who were mainly a shiah official cadre, standing above and apart from the Sunni Muslim masses.

In C.E. 1782, Sayyid Ghulam Hussain Tabatabai, the great historian deploras the inhospitable policy of the British government towards the upper class and traditional aristocracy. In a police report dated in C.E. 1799, the Magistrate of the Dacca-Jalalpur refers to the prosperity of the Muslim upper class as a thing of the past. The sorrowful

story of the impoverishment and eventual disappearance of the Muslim noble families has been narrated with considerable precision by Syed Ameer Ali in an article published in the *Nineteenth Century* (New York) in 1882. In his *Notes, Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (London, 1883), James Wise praises the remnants of the Muslim better classes as being of liberal ideas, pious disposition, respectful to all religions, and as deeply read in Arabic and Persian classics. He further describes them as considerate and charitable to the poor and especially helpful to the students. Being conscious of their family prestige, they scorned "to tell a lie or perform a mean action". "It is melancholy", Wise observes in C.E. 1883, "to contemplate the present state of the better classes of Muhammadans; for, with many excellent traits of the character they have no energy or ambition left." In the first place, they would not read European literature themselves or send their sons to the English and modern Bengali literature (as developed in the nineteenth century) remained equally foreign to them. Secondly, instead of adapting themselves to the changes of time, they kept on lamenting that the Muslim supremacy was gone.

Before the Battle of Plassey the Muslim upper class, being the ruling group, had almost monopolised the government services in both military and civil departments. In the process of governmental re-organisation, at first the Muslim troops were disbanded, which affected not only a significant number of Muslim officers but also tens of thousands of ordinary soldiers. Secondly, Hastings's policy of Anglicisation of revenue administration, threw many Muslim officers out of their jobs. Thirdly, the land revenue policy of the Government from C.E. 1772 onwards and the proceedings of the resumption of rent-free tenures (from C.E. 1798 to 1850) ruined the Muslim landed gentry. Fourthly, the abolition of the rural police in C.E. 1793, deprived thousands of Muslim policemen from their hereditary mode of employment. Thus, in the process of establishment of British rule, the Muslim upper classes with their dependents, were not only eliminated from public service but also largely deprived of the sources of their livelihood.

The lower classes of the Muslims were affected by the British ascendancy in many other ways. In the first place, during the eighteenth century the main sources of income of the people were agriculture and weaving. It has been aptly said that the two most important occupations of Bengalis were "so happily blended together that the same hand at one season governs the plough, at another guides the shuttle in executing those exquisite textures which are everywhere admired but can nowhere be equaled." The agricultural economy of Bengal being more or less a subsistence economy, much of the prosperity of the country was dependent on the weaving industry. The destruction of the weaving interest of Bengal by the importation of Manchester goods from the last quarter of the eighteenth century, rendered tens of thousands of people destitute. As a result, people were driven, by and large, to fall back on the productivity of the soil alone for earning their livelihood, and the retrogressive effect which it produced on the rural economy was disastrous.

Secondly, when the new political set up was established, the Hindu *baniyans* of Calcutta who had been serving the English merchants since long as managers and brokers (commonly known as *gomashtahs*), found themselves in a favoured position. In the salt monopoly of the East India Company and in the inland trade of the country, these *gomashtahs* played a role which not only destroyed the indigenous traders but also brought immense hardship on the masses of the people.

During the later half of the eighteenth century the whole country was overrun by the *gomashtahs* of Englishmen, who monopolized markets, compelled people to purchase their goods at a high price under duress of flogging and confinement, purchased local products at low prices, arbitrated disputes like the (Judges of the Court or Cutchery), forced the primary producers to accept advance money or *dadni* and to enter into contract with them to the utter disadvantage of the latter, and perpetrated many other oppressions which according to a special police report of C.E. 1762 (reproduced in H. Beveridge's *History of Bakerganj*, p. 303), were "more than can be related". The same report further adds that in this manner, the Bazar of Bakerganj, which was formerly a place of great trade, was "brought to nothing" by the daily oppressions of the *gomashtahs* of English gentlemen.

In C.E. 1786, one Kalicharan, the *gomashtah* of Mr. Luke was accused of laying Tippera in ruins. Later on, when the same *gomashtah* was appointed *Diwan* or manager of revenues at Chittagong, he was accused of extorting a sum of Rs. 30,000 from the zaminders in a little over one year. When the case was referred to Lord Cornwallis, the Collector of Chittagong, Mr. Bird, assured the people that he would be replaced by his own *gomashtah*, Nittananda. But the matter ended by the intervention of Joynarayan Gosail, a powerful *gomashtah* of Calcutta in favour of Kalicharan. Therefore, Mr. Bird investigated the case, met some of the petitioners, and reported that the accusations were entirely unfounded. Hence, Kalicharan continued in his post (cf. MS. *Government Document* in the possession of the present writer). The above evidence, which can be enormously multiplied, shows the intensity of depredation carried on by the Hindu *gomashtahs* in Rural Bengal under the protection of their English masters. Thus, an English officer observed, "the only class of people, which the English and their laws protect, are their own native agents and the devouring which these very agents have generated and fastened on the rural population in swarms, eat into the very heart of Indian existence".

Thirdly Hasting's policy of lease-farming revenues to the highest bidders (C.E. 1772-1793) and Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement (C.E. 1793) had far-reaching effects on the land economy of Bengal. For, on the one hand, the lease-farming system stipulated cash security which the old *zaminders* were unable to pay and the policy of leasing the *zaminders* to the highest bidders attracted a class of speculators from among the *baniyans* (brokers of trade), *gomashtahs* (agents and managers of trading concerns), *mahajans* (money lenders) and bankers, all Hindus, who had ready money to undertake such enterprises. ON the other hand, it is estimated that one-third to one-half of the *zaminderis* belonging to the old gentry was sold by the rich parvenus of Calcutta. Moreover, the general tendency of the Permanent Settlement was to recognize the Hindu *Naibs* and *Shiqdars* (i.e., managers and tax-collectors of the *zamindari* estates, who were in the employ of the old Muslim and Hindu *zamindars*), as landlords. An English document published in C.E. 1844, in the Calcutta Review, shows that out of a dozen of zaminders, to whom almost one whole district was parcelled out, only two belonged to the old gentry and the rest were descendants of menials of the old gentry and the rest were descendants of menials of the old gentry and adventures of the lowest extraction.

The revenue policy of the British, thus effected a change, not only in the tenure of zamindari but, in the process of that change, the old landed gentry was also replaced by a commercial class of Hindus and by the managers and tax-collectors of the old

gentry. This effected a corresponding change in the landlord-peasant relationship. For, in spite of many faults, the old landed gentry had developed a filial affection for the masses through long and hereditary association. Hence, their mutual relationship was guided by a large measure of magnanimity. The new class of zaminders were, on the other hand, a class of businessmen and adventurers, who invested their capital or grasped landed property solely for reaping rich benefit out of it. In C.E. 1842, the head of the Bengal police reported that the *zamindars* did not care for anything beyond extorting all they could from their tenants by any means. He further adds that the Hindu *zamindars* of Faridpur appeared to have done everything which could degrade the Muslim peasants, their religion and even their females. An English officer characterised this change in the *Calcutta Review* of 1844, as a “loathsome revolution” which elevated a class of “miscreant adventurers” to the position of land-lords whose oppressive hands “penetrate into and devour the most secret fibres, not of political but of social and domestic existence” and to whom the old spirit of patriarchal and feudal tenderness “which protected the masses from destruction, is not known.”

Fourthly, under the Muslim rule, the zamindars were required to keep vigilance on the anti-social elements of the rural society and were bound to produce the “robbers” and “plundered goods” in the event of any robbery being committed within their respective areas. In C.E. 1792, this rule was found to have been made *nugatory* by the new Regulations of the East India Company and as a consequence, the rule was abolished. Taking advantage of this new policy of the Government, the modern *zamindars* are said to have harboured colonies of roving banditti. An English document published in C.E. 1944, in the *Calcutta Review*, accuses them of employing banditti as a fixed source of income, which is also corroborated by the *zamindars* protected the robbers and criminals and shared their plunder (see *Pakistan Historical Society Journal*, vol. VII, Part I, 1959, p. 24 ff.). The *zamindars* were no longer responsible to detect the robbers or bring them to book. The documents referred to above show that the land-lords themselves gave them shelter for economic gains. The English Judges and Magistrates (surrounded by a host of native law-officers, plice and clerks, who were often bribed by the *zamindars*) were helpless to rights and wrongs; rather, by the cunning manipulation of the *zamindars*, they proved instrumental to add to the power and influence of the latter. No wonder, therefore, that the socio-economic conditions of Rural Bengal during the first half of the nineteenth century recalled to an English officer the Robespierian regime of the Revolutionary France, who says: ¹

“It will be found that the landlords in every district of Bengal have established a reign of terror not very remotely analogous to that of the Robespierian era of the France Revolution. Its foundations are the same, viz., an unlimited command on false witnesses and a tribunal from which is practically banished every check which can distinguish a court from a butcher’s shamble”.

Fifthly, evidence at our disposal shows that the *raiyyats* were adversely affected in many ways by the Permanent Settlement, which not only handed the lands over to the new class of *zamindars* in perpetuity but also gave them the power of fixing up the rent. This permitted reeking. Moreover, the *zamindars* usually farmed out their estates to such contractors or *patnidars* who offered them the largest profit *vis-à-vis* the government dues. The *patnidars* again farmed them to *sub-patnidars* on the same conditions “till farm within farm became the order of the day, each resembling a

screw over a screw, the last coming down to the tenants with the pressure of them all". Besides, a document recently recovered by the present writer from the Magistracy of Faridpur shows that not less than 23 items of "illegal cesses" were realised by the Hindu *zamindars* from the peasantry down to C.E. 1872. About C.E. 1830, Buchanon found out that exaction by confinement or blows was most common and the grant of false receipt by taking advantage of the illiteracy of the *raiyyat* was commonly resorted to by the agents of the *zamindars and patnidars*.²

Sixthly, from C.E. 1795 onwards, the Englishmen were increasingly attracted by the indigo industry of Rural Bengal; and prompted by the rush of enormous capital investment from Calcutta, indigo became the most important export product of Bengal during the early decades of the nineteenth century. About C.E. 1811, the indigo districts of Bengal, namely Dacca, Faridpur, Jessore, Rajshahi, Nadiya and Murshidabad, became dotted with indigo factories owed by Englishmen. A casual observer is liable to misjudge the effect of the large-scale introduction of indigo-industry in rural areas. He may think that it opened up many new opportunities to local people; it offered a good deal of employment to the villagers; it enriched the coffers of the village shopkeepers and of the producers of foodstuff; and above all, the presence of so many educated persons in the rural society as managers, sub-managers and clerks, was likely to shed the light of civilization and it could be a channel, not only for raising the standard of living in Rural Bengal but also for moral and intellectual upliftment of the mass of the people. A close examination, however, reveals that the results were otherwise.

The Indigo Inquiry Commission of C.E. 1854–1860, found that indigo was obtained on a system ruinous to the peasantry. The Judge of Bakerganj reported, "however valuable indigo may be as an article of commerce, it would be better for the sake of the *raiyyat* (i.e., tenants) if there was not a stick of indigo in the land." The Judge of Nadiya wrote "my idea, however, is that it is no longer enough to measure the advantages of European capital and energy by the value of our exports of indigo; the effect of the system upon the people should also be considered".³ For, taking advantage of their superior position and monopolistic jurisdiction over the adjoining villages of indigo factories, the European planters compelled the *raiyyats* to sow indigo in the latter's own lands for a seasonal remuneration of about Rs. 2.5 as rent-*cum*-wage labour per bigha. The land was chosen by the planters and the tenants were made to sow under duress even when the latter were unable or unwilling to do so. The above rate of remuneration introduced about C.E. 1795, was kept more than half a century in course of which the price of paddy had risen at least 7 times, to which extent a *raiyyat* was a loser for the cultivation of indigo instead of paddy. In the beginning, the mode of indigo cultivation was simple : the seed was given free of cost by the planter, the *raiyyat* sowed it in his land, cut the plant when ready for sickle and collected them in standard bundles, then on presenting the bundles to the factory, he received his due. In eighteen-twenties the mode radically changed; for, the practice of receiving advance-money or *dadni* became almost universal. In their eagerness to receive timely delivery of indigo plants, the planters forced the *raiyyats* to take advance. Hence, the new mode stood as follows: the *raiyyat* received the seed as before and an advance of Rs. 2 per *bigha* (i.e., 1/3 acre) and received the rest of the amount, i.e., 0.5 rupee per *bigha*, on delivery. Even so, the Judge of Nadiya stated in C.E. 1856, that the *raiyyat* did not retain more than one-half or one-third of the advances ostensibly made of them after satisfying the extortionate policy of the underlings of

the planters, i.e., the *gomashthahs*, *amins* and *tagadirs*, through whom the money was paid. Besides, on account of the gross under-payment, the peasantry was driven into a chronic indebtedness to the planters. The advances were, therefore, paid partly in cash and partly in writing off the unliquidated balances of the past years. The Judge of Nadiya saw one case in which the raiyat received 0.5 rupee in cash and 6.5 rupees were adjusted against old balances for the cultivation of 3.5 *bighas* of land. Judge C. Steer says, “every honest planter will admit that no Ryot will take advance unless he is in the last extremity”, and none ever gets out of “the Planter’s book” who is “once” in it. For, “both planters and Mahajans (money-lenders) act in the same way – both take advantage of the Ryot’s necessities and both derive a usurious profit from their dealings.” Moreover, as the debt-roll was taken over from father to son in case of the former’s death or absconding, ‘The chronic state of indebtedness’ of the raiyats became a source of ‘hereditary irritation against the Planters’.

Thus, as the policy of revenue farming and the Permanent Settlement attracted the parvenus of Calcutta, so also the indigo industry attracted the English capitalists for enormous capital investment, which brought about almost a complete transformation of the rural economy, and in the process of this transformation the old landed gentry, who were protectors and patrons of the people, were overthrown by a commercial class of men, Hindu and European, whose minds were saturated by the desire for easy gain and who, being adventurers of this field, were unmindful to the old filial tenderness in their dealings with the teeming multitude. The old gentry being eliminated, the lower classes stood deprived of leadership and protection and groaned helplessly under the oppressive and extortionate policy of the *gomashthahs*, modern Hindu *Zamindars* and European indigo planters. The intense and widespread discontent which, thus, accumulated among the mass of the people naturally created a tense situation in Rural Bengal during the early decades of the nineteenth century, which found outlet in occasional affrays and agitation against the above three classes of oppressors.⁴

References

1. Calcutta Review, vol. I, 1844, p. 193 ff.
2. Cf. M. Martin : The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India. London, 1888, vol. II, p. 909.
3. Cf. Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal, No. XXXIII, part I, Papers Related to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal, Calcutta, 1860 p. 81 ff.
4. It may be noted that the effects of the Permanent Settlement and Indigo Industry on rural Bengal have been carefully examined in my thesis, “A History of the Fara’idi Movement in Bengal” submitted recently to the Dacca University, on which the above observations are based. Considerable help also taken from the Ph. D. thesis of Dr. A. R. Mallick of the Rajshahi University entitled “Development of the Muslim of Bengal and Bihar with special reference to their education” (unpublished), with the kind permission of the author.

[Both the referred works were since published the former from Karachi and the Latter from Dacca].

SOURCE: Obtained directly from the author