

Contribution of Local Zamindars and Business Class to the Development of Urbanization in Murshidabad District in Colonial Period

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Abstract:

This research article tries to show the contribution of new zaminder class and businessmen who lived in various towns of Murshidabad district to urban development. The new class of zaminders who come to into existence due to the Permanent Settlement of 1793 were mainly absentee landlords, who stayed in the towns and contributed financially to the development of civic amenities in the towns. Similarly businessmen who resided in the towns of Murshidabad district also contributed significantly to the development of civic amenities in the towns. No specific work has been done on this aspect of urbanization in this district. This particular research article tries to fill up that gap.

Keyword: Murshidabad district, Local zaminders, Local business class, Colonial period, urban development, Municipality.

Murshidabad is a very prosperous place in eastern India. Murshidabad district has witnessed many historical events during ancient, medieval and modern period of Indian history. Murshidabad city of this district was once the administrative centre and capital of Bengal *Suba* of the Mughal Empire. Geographically, Murshidabad district is currently located in the north-east corner of southern West Bengal between 23°43'30"North latitude to 24°50'20"North latitude and 87°49'17"East longitude to 88°46' East longitudes. The current area of the district is 5324 square kilometres. The present boundary of Murshidabad district was established in 1879.¹The Bhagirathi River running north-south through the middle of the district divides Murshidabad district into two almost equal parts. The land on the western side of the Bhagirathi is known as *Rarh* and the eastern i.e. left bank area is known as *Bagri*. There are considerable differences in the geography, climate, and even the people's religion, culture and lifestyle of these two regions. That is, Murshidabad is one region from the administrative point of view but two completely separate regions from the geographical and cultural point of view. The western i.e. *Rarh* region is an integral part of the neighbouring Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura districts of *Rarh* region of West Bengal, on the other hand the eastern i.e. *Bagri* region is an integral part of Nadia, Jessore etc. regions located to the east of Bhagirathi.²

Although the existence of municipal local government in the social life of India has been observed since ancient times, the concept of local government came mainly after establishment of British rule. Local self government as a representative body and political institution was introduced by the British in India. The English word 'Municipality' comes from the French word 'Municipality' and the Latin word

'municipalise'. Another view is that the English word 'Municipality' comes from the Latin 'Social Contract municipium', which, from the ancient Roman Empire, means 'responsibility'.³

Even before British rule established in India, they developed municipal system in India. The 'Municipal Corporation' was first introduced in Madras in 1668 AD. After a long 39 years in 1726, the Madras Corporation was reorganized as three royal charters, and the Calcutta and Bombay Municipal Corporations were also established. Incidentally, all these three corporations were in Presidency towns, but actually the journey of municipal governance started with the Charter Act of 1773. The Charter Act of 1793 empowered the Governor-General to appoint one Justice of Peace for each township. Along with performing judicial functions, these judges are also responsible for providing civic services. These Justices of Peace were responsible for overseeing the construction of roads, drainage, etc. After the passage of the Indian Council Act in 1861, the provinces were given the responsibility of forming corporations and other local bodies as local administrative bodies. Calcutta corporation was formed in 1863, Bombay in 1865, Madras Corporation in 1867. In 1842, the first Municipal Act was passed in India, which was applicable only in Bengal. The colonial rulers passed the Town Improvement Act in 1850, which called for the formation of town committees. The work of this town committee was the construction of roads, water supply, cleanliness, lighting, maintenance etc. of the town. In 1863, the Royal Army Sanitation Commission was formed. Its main objective was to improve the cities where the British troops were stationed. On the recommendation of this commission, 'The District Municipal Improvement Act' was drafted in 1864. The Act was originally written for larger municipalities. Then in 1868, the 'District Town Act' was enacted for the development of small municipalities in India. Through this act, the representatives not elected by the people are given the opportunity to participate in the municipal administration. At this stage, municipalities grew in India, up to 1870, 65 new municipalities were developed in Bengal alone.⁴ In this way, some municipalities were established in different parts of India as well as in Murshidabad district through government legislation during the colonial period. In Murshidabad district, Berhampore, Kandi, Murshidabad (Jiaganj-Azimganj), Jangipur Municipalities, were established. In the development of these places there was important contribution of local new zamindars, and trading families.

The transfer of zamindari from old zamindars to new types of zamindars continued after 1806 as a result of the Permanent Settlement. The new zamindar class were different from old zamindars of the earlier Mughal period. The new zamindars were mainly absentee zamindars who lived in towns instead of villages. Their *naibes* and *gomostas* collected land revenue on their behalf in the villages. As these zamindars mainly lived in towns so they invested money in development of civic facilities in the towns. During this period Marwari and other non-Bengali business magnate families of Jiaganj-Azimganj such as Sahar Dudharia, Dugar, Singh, Naulakha, Nehalia etc. were seen paying huge sums of money to buy zamindari. But what is more economically significant is that even after most of these families bought the zamindari, their family business and money lending business continued as usual. In this phase indigo traders (*Nilkar sahibs*) also started buying zamindari. During this period the number of zamindars increased in Murshidabad. In 1849-50 the number of zamindaris in the district was 2656, in 1870-71 it increased to 2853.⁵ This large number of traders, zamindars and a large class of people associated with their various types of work moved to the municipal area due to better living conditions and facilities. The importance of urban areas naturally increased when more people started living there.

The business community was essential to the town's social and economic life in colonial Murshidabad (mid-18th to early 20th century). Under both the Mughal and British governments, these businesspeople,

who came from a variety of backgrounds, worked in trade, finance, handicrafts, and intermediate services. These were frequently traders from Rajasthan and western India who were Marwari or Bania. They served as agents of Indian and British traders as well as moneylenders and financiers. A few well-known *Sahukars* rose to prominence by forming coalitions with British traders. The majority of indigenous entrepreneurs served as go-betweens for colonial forces and producers. They took part in social and religious gatherings in the area, supporting local culture, constructed schools, mosques, dharamshalas, and temples.

On 1st July 1876, Berhampore Municipality was established with the municipal area which was determined on 1st April 1869. The number of non-official members of the municipality was fourteen and government nominated members were five totalling nineteen. The district magistrate was the president of that municipality. The gradual removal of soldiers from the cantonment area, which began after the Sepoy Mutiny, was not yet complete; many "white soldiers" still remained in the cantonment area. Therefore, the British government of the day, by a decree, did not leave the municipal management under complete private control. The District Magistrate was a responsible position, and the District Magistrate took over the management of the entire municipality in his own hands. After the withdrawal of all troops from the "cantonment" area in 1881, the government entrusted the responsibility of this municipality to fourteen elected and five government nominated representatives. In 1884 under the provisions of the Bengal Municipal Act, 1876, Babu Baikunthanath Sen, president of the District Advocates' Council and lawyer become the president of this municipality. At that time, the municipality was divided into six wards, namely, Gorabazar, Cantonment, Behrampore, Khagrah, saidabad and Cossimbazar, and there were number of representatives like- Gorabazar-3, Cantonment- 1, Berhampore-4, Khagrah-3, Saidabad-2, Cossimbazar-1, total number: 14. Among those who were named as the first nominees in the municipality were the District Civil Surgeon, Executive Engineer, Berhampore College Principal and two Joint Magistrates (both white).⁶

By 1894, discussions in the British official circles about the water supply project in Berhampore town started. The project took about two years to execute. In the end, Maharani Swarnamoyee of Cossimbazar bore its expenses. A water tank was established in Berhampore through the donation of Maharani Swarnamoyee to provide drinking water to the townspeople. In 1894, water workes was constructed at a cost of two lakh rupees, and the system is still in operation today. The British initially did not take a very positive view of the water supply in Berhampore. Archival records do not show Berhampore as a city of growing character and importance like Burdwan. Rather, the negative image has been highlighted more. So, the water supply project did not get enough importance. While submitting the water supply project report, the archival document says about Berhampore town that it is enough to provide water supply to 2500 people, because, seeing empty houses and shops, it cannot be called a growing city.⁷ Later, the municipality built a large 9" diameter tube well at a cost of Rs. 50,000 in 1952-56 and took a loan from the State Government to set up another similar large tube well. Through the use of electric power, the city's water supply system has expanded to some extent, but compared to the requirement, it was very small. Plans to establish two large tube wells in the southern part of the towns and in the eastern part were not implemented long ago.⁸

Since the establishment of the municipality, the municipality has tried to protect the health of the citizens as far as possible. It appointed a health officer, sanitary snspector and vaccinator. Maharaja Rao Yogendra Narayan Roy of Lalgola in Murshidabad district established a hospital in Berhampore and allowed some members of the municipality to be its advisors and the municipality helped manage the

hospital through the advisory sub-committee and managed the medical services in the municipal area. Later the state government took over the responsibility of running this hospital.⁹

Raja Harinath of Cosimbazar Raj family took the initiative to found a English school at Saidabad. However due to his untimely death, his son Krishnanath inaugurated the school in 1846. It was then known as Hardinge School. Contribution of Cossimbazar Raj zamindar family in the spread of education in Berhampore was significant. Rani Swarnamoyee took the initiative to established Berhampore College. In 1927 Mr. Bish, the "Director of Public Instruction" of undivided Bengal, took up a proposal to introduce primary education in municipal areas. At that time Maharaj Kumar Sreesh Chandra Nandi was the president of this municipality. The plan prepared by Mr. Bish, said that if a municipality introduced a free primary education system by introducing an education tax, the provincial government would account for a "grant" equal to the education cess collected by the municipality. Mr. Bish's model was adopted by three municipalities of then undivided Bengal namely - Chittagong, Barisal and Berhampore. With the help of Cossimbazar Raj family and other charitable landlords, the municipality collected land in different wards of Berhampore municipal area and built five primary schools (unpaid) in Cossimbazar, Saidabad, Khagra, Berhampore and Gorabazar wards. At that time, the amount of tax collected in the education sector of the municipality was 4500 rupees.¹⁰ The government used to give the same amount as "grant". In this way, the initiative of the government and local people in the municipal area helped to spread primary education.

The term 'Lakshmi' was tagged with a particular community in North India - the Marwaris. Jiaganj on the east side of Bhagirathi in Lalbagh subdivision of Murshidabad district and Azimganj on the west side are the original and main centres of Marwari settlement in Bengal. From the point of view of history, not only Murshidabad, but the influence and role of this community in the economy and politics of *Suba Bangla* as well as India was important. In 1704, when Murshid-Quli-Khan moved the capital of Bengal *Suba* to Murshidabad, he brought his special friend and Dhaka 'gadian' Manik Chand and fellow Jain Marwaris with him to Murshidabad. In 1704, Manik Chand built a 'kothi' at Mahimapur, a little north of present-day Lalbagh, and started the settlement of Marwaris in Murshidabad.¹¹

It is said that Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's grandson Azim-us-San stayed in Azimganj and Azimganj got its name from him, and Jiaganj from the name of a monk named 'Jia'. The Jiaganj-Azimganj Municipality was established in April 1896, although the official notification was published in 1895. Earlier this area was included in Murshidabad municipality. Murshidabad municipality was established in 1869, Jiaganj-Azimganj was a ward of this Murshidabad Municipality. This Jiaganj-Azimganj twin towns were from the very beginning the residence of wealthy businessmen and wealthy zamindars. Nahar, Nowlaksha, Dudhoria, Dugar etc. Zamindars were the residents of Jiaganj. J.H.T. Walsh wrote in his book *History of Murshidabad District* that many Jain families of Azimganj lived on the banks of or near Bhagirathi river. Although their main residence was Azimganj which had big palace like houses and was main trade centre. A lot of goods came by river or by rail. Rice, sugar, silk, jute, various kinds of cloth were exported outside. At this time, there was a lot of import-export through Azimganj-Nalhati. If one wanted to go by ferry from Kolkata to Patna, one would go through Jiaganj-Nalhati. So, the importance of Jiaganj-Azimganj by water and land route was immense.

In Jiaganj-Azimganj at that time very rich wealthy zamindars and rich people lived and their influence and prestige were considerable even in Murshidabad, the capital of *Bengal Suba* at that time. Examples were Monilal Nahar, Sitab Chand Nahar, Gopal Chand Nowlaksha, Nagat Singh, Raja Vijay Singh Dughoria, Surendra Narayan Singh, and others. Even after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the shifting

of capital to Calcutta in 1772, the power and influence of the zamindars and the wealthy here was considerable. They wanted to build a new municipality to maintain their influence and prestige. At this time the British rulers also started thinking about giving autonomy in local government to Indians. Four municipalities were established in Murshidabad district by Bengal Municipal Act-V in 1869 and 1876. Initially, Jiaganj-Azimganj was included in Murshidabad Municipality, in 1896 it was separated from Murshidabad Municipality and a new municipality was established in Mansurganj Mohalla. In 1918 it was shifted to the present town hall. Some of the important people who had financial help in building the town hall at this place were Vijay Singh Dudhuria, Raibudh Singh Dudhuria, Rani Saheba of Azimganj, Chunnikumari Bibi, Pattavi Bibi and Surendra Narayan Singh of Nehalia. Although Jiaganj is similarly associated with this municipality, most of the municipal members were from Azimganj in the initial phase of establishment. According to the 1891 census, the area of this municipality was 11.70 km. At that time the municipality had four wards, and the number of commissioners was ten. There were three from Azimganj, three from Baluchar (former name of Jiaganj), two in Manunna Raja Ward and two in Bhattapara. During the period from 1906 to 1922, the second chairman of the municipality was Vijay Singh Dudhuria, the third chairman was Surendra Narayan Singh. From 1922 – 1968 this municipality was run by the Nehalia family.¹² These local elite families played an important role in the overall development of this municipality town.

In Jiaganj-Azimganj town, the businessmen and zamindar families like Dudharia, Nahar, Singi, Nowlakha, Dugar and Rai Bahadur have made a special contribution to the spread of education through philanthropy. According to official reports, an indigenous school at Baluchar was sanctioned by the government in 1856, with a government grant of Rs 13.¹³ The school was patronized by Tarini Sankar Bhatt and Radha Raman Sarkar. In the same year, an indigenous school was established in Azimganj, the patrons of the school were Dharamchand and Radharaman Roy. Several primary and secondary schools were established in this urban area by government and private initiatives before and after independence.

An indigenous school was founded in Azimganj in 1856, and Dharam Chand and Radharaman Roy were instrumental in its founding. There were sixty pupils enrolled in the school. Like primary education, secondary education flourished, with wealthy families in the area playing a significant role. Founded in 1902 by Vijay Singh Dudhuria, the Edouard Coronation School was renamed Raja Vijay Singh Vidyamandir (Students: 451 and Teacher: 17) in 1949.¹⁴ Rai Bahadur took the initiative to found the Hindu Girls' School in 1908; subsequently, the school was renamed Premkumari Balika Vidyalaya (Rai Bahadur Singh High School, with 183 students and 10 teachers). There are two schools in the Jiaganj-Azimganj municipal area, according to the 1951 census. Later, for higher education, Jiaganj's zamindar, Shripat Singh Dugar, founded Shripat Singh College in 1949 in his own name and Rani Dhanyakumari College of Commerce in 1962 in his wife's name.¹⁵

During the colonial rule, the Kandi Municipality established in 1869 was important among the few municipalities that were established in Murshidabad district in the first phase. Kandi is generally an agricultural economy dominated area. Even though Kandi is a municipality, the rural environment is evident in its economy and lifestyle. The elite families of Salar, Pachthupi, Jemu-Kandi belonging to the ancient Kandi sub-division began to organize themselves in the area adjacent to the present-day Kandi town for their various amenities of civic life.¹⁶ All these aristocratic families were members of municipality established by the British government for their own purposes and taking important roles in municipal administration. Initially, the sub-district administrator performed the duties of the head of the municipality, but it is relevant to note that previously, every municipality and district board, local board,

were completely under the control of numerous landlords, including Berhampore Municipality. They had no 'bad name' in running municipalities, local boards or district boards, and the institutions were constantly enriched by their donations and patronage.¹⁷

In concluding this essay it may be said that zamindars and businessmen residing in the towns of Murshidabad district contributed to the development of these towns in various ways. They understood that English education was necessary for their children and so they took the lead in establishing English schools and colleges in the towns they resided. Apart from education health is a priority. One aspect of health is provision of safe drinking water. The Rani of Cossimbazar took the initiative to provide safe drinking water to the people of Berhampore town where as Rao Jogindranarayan dug wells in various places in his zamindari to provide drinking water to the residents of his zamindari. This earned him the title of Jalpare. He also played an important role in the establishment of Berhampore Hospital. Similarly the business community of Jiaganj-Azimganj and Kandi Raj family did similar works of development of education, health and other civic amenities. Their contribution has, however escaped the attention of historians and scholars. This essay will give a new prospective to future researchers on the history of urbanization in Murshidabad district.

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