PAPER 1 DSE-A-1 SEM -5: HISTORY OF BENGAL (c.1757-1905)

VII. PARTITION OF BENGAL 1905: CURZON AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE BLUEPRINT

NOTE -2

What the British had clearly underestimated was first of all the sense of unity among the Bengalis-rooted to some extent in a history marked by long periods of regional independence and greatly fostered, at least among the literate, by the cultural developments of the nineteenth century. Calcutta had become a real metropolis for the educated Bengali bhadralok. It attracted students from all districts, sent out teachers, lawyers, doctors and clerks all over the province and often beyond it, and contributed to both regional writing and regional pride through the evolution of a standard literary language, a growing number of newspapers and periodicals and a modern literature which with Rabindranath Tagore was on the threshold of world recognition. Such things-along with less worthy factors like the evident though gradually diminishing) educated Bengali lead in professions, government services, and politics over much of India due to the advantage of earlier English education--fostered a new self-confidence which came to be further stimulated by the growing Hindu revivalist mood best typified by Vivekananda. International developments also played a part British reverses in the Boer War, the unexpected Japanese victory over Russia in 1904-05 which sent a thrill of pride through Asia and was ecstatically hailed Dy the Bengal press (even children were given nicknames like Togo or Nogi, alter Japanese leaders), news of the Chinese boycott of American goods in protest against immigration laws and of the popular revolution against autocracy in Russia.

In this atmosphere of strong regional unity and growing self-confidence and pride, Curzon's provocative actions culminating in a virtually behind- the-scenes Partition decision (very little had been said about it publicly by officials between February 1904 and July 1905) was regarded above all a national insult. Inevitably it became associated, not only with political disappointments over the paltry achievements of twenty years of Modera agitation which perhaps directly allected only a limited circle, but with much more widely-felt grievances about racial discrimination and white arrogance. The diary of Gyanchandra Banerji vividly reflects all this munsiff getting Rs. 200 as against the while district judge's Rs. 2000, a distant whistle brings to him memories of racial discrimination suffered aboard steamers and trains, and he finds solace in 'signs of national reawakening the achievements of the scientist Jagadischandra Basu, and ‘the rise of Japan as a world power’.

Banerji began his journal (in October 1904) with a reference to the growing poverty of India. Though the Bengali bhadralok was seldom directly affected by famine or plague, the ravages of both in the 1890s could not but have stirred his conscience-and made faith in the 'providential' British connection increasingly difficult to maintain, particularly in face of that other. intrinsically subversive, aspect of Moderate theory: the 'drain of wealth' explanation of Indian misery. More direct economic grievances perhaps also played a part. The liberal professions were getting overcrowded (a Swadeshi pamphlet in 1905 complained that there were 80 pleaders in the single east Bengal subdivision of Madaripur) making the bhadralok often more dependent on petty zamindari or intermediate tenures which sub-division through inheritance made progressively less remunerative. And prices had suddenly started rising fast, the all-India unweighted index numbers constructed by K.L. Dutta (1890-94 100) being 106 for 1904, 116 for 1905, 129 for 1906, and 143 for 1908. The curve in fact was

steepest between 1905 and 1908-precisely the years of maximum political unrest.

The Swadeshi strongholds in the East Bengal countryside-Bakarganj, Madaripur, Vikrampur, Kishoregunj-were areas of Hindu bhadralok concentration, multiplicity of intermediate tenures and considerable spread of English education (with consequent overcrowding of professions and spread of nationalist ideology). Rising prices probably stimulated nationalism among such groups and areas, while sections of industrial labour were also prodded by inflation into strikes which represented an important-though often forgotten-aspect of the 1905 days. But economic discontent could also turn against the immediate oppressor--the (usually Hindu) rentier, moneylender or trader in East Bengal, and thus contribute to communal riots. The Swadeshi intelligentsia in Bengal added to these problems by getting increasingly involved in Hindu revivalist postures, and completely failing to develop, as we shall see, anything like a radical agrarian programme. Higher prices and problems in getting jobs made them cling more strongly to rent-incomes, however small. Gyanchandra Banerji had only a meagre ancestral holding in Vikrampur, yet his diary indignantly denounces the Tenancy Act of 1885 for having embittered agrarian relations. An extremely interesting vernacular pamphlet on Bengal's land relations Written in 1904 even developed a curious theory about the ancient Aryan origins of intermediate tenure-holders, self-defined as usual as a 'middle class. They were being squeezed out, it complained, by big zamindars (allegedly usurpers created by the Muslims and the British) on the one side, and by insolent raiyats encouraged by tenancy legislation, on the other. (Amritalal Pal, Banger Bhunmi-Rajasya o Prachin Arya Gramya Samiti, Calcutta. I904) Another pamphlet, the Open Letter to Curzon (1904), quoted Edmund Burke to equate public opinion with the views of men above menial dependence, and confidently asserted that the 'educated classes were the 'natural leaders' of the

masses. The bhadralok's distance from the peasantry thus had fairly clear class roots, rather than mere aversion to manual labour.

While the Extremist intelligentsia-whether in Bengal or in other provinces - failed to link up nationalist slogans with the immediate economic grievances of the peasantry (attempting usually a short-cut to mass contact through religious appeals which often proved disastrous in so far as the Muslims were concerned) there is some evidence also of a certain slackening of pressures from below. Famine and plague must have caused considerable exhaustion in a large part of the country, while among the survivors the fall in population may have reduced somewhat the pressure on land and therefore agrarian tensions. British remedial legislation after the rural disturbances of the 1870s and 1880s-consolidating occupancy rights in Bengal, restricting passage of land to outsider mahajans in Bombay and Punjab-also tended to pacify for some time the upper stratum of the peasantry which had been the most active element in conflicts with moneylenders or land- lords. The price-rise was closely associated with a boom in the export of agricultural raw materials, and in fact seems to have been primarily caused by it. Another factor behind the inflation was a currency expansion, itself Connected with the inflow of gold and silver due to the export surplus. While the major beneficiaries of this boom must have been British export agencies and Indian merchant intermediaries, perhaps some sections of the peasantry (the richer cultivators of jute in east Bengal for instance) also made marginal gains. The first decade of the twentieth century seems to Eve been marked by some growth in per capita national income according to Sivasubramonian's estimate, calculated on the basis of 1938-39 prices, From Rs.49.4 in 1900-01 to Rs.60.4 in 1916-17. (National Income of India 0-01 to 1946-47, Delhi University mimeograph, 1965) All this helped to keep apart the currents of national and social discontent during the Extremist phase of Indian nationalism.

NOTES, REFERRENCE AND ESSENTIAL READING

Sarkar Sumit, Modern India 1885-1947