

Exploring the Socio-Cultural and Political Conditions in Colonial Barisal

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Abstract

The political and social landscape of Barisal during the late British colonial period underwent significant transformations, marked by the decline of the zamindari system and the rise of the peasant class, particularly under the leadership of Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Haque. The growing influence of the Muslim peasantry led to increased communal tensions, as Hindu zamindars and upper-caste Hindus, fearing the loss of their socio-political power, advocated for the inclusion of Barisal in a proposed Hindu Rashtra. However, this demand was met with resistance not only from the Muslim majority but also from lower-caste Hindus, who felt a closer socio-economic alignment with Muslims. Despite these efforts, the Radcliffe Line, which delineated the partition of Bengal in 1947, did not accommodate these demands, leading to the incorporation of Barisal into East Pakistan. The resulting communal conflict, driven by class consciousness and the disintegration of Hindu-Muslim unity, led to the migration of the Hindu elite to West Bengal. This migration marked the end of their influence in Barisal, signaling a shift from a collective independence movement to a fractured society divided along religious and class lines.

After Emperor Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Mughal Subadari regime in Bengal swiftly transformed into a hereditary Nawabi rule. The weakness of the central government in Delhi allowed the Nawabs to operate with considerable autonomy, leading to intense palace conspiracies aimed at seizing power, particularly in Murshidabad. These conspiracies, fueled by the English merchants' commercial interests, culminated in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, where Nawab Sirajuddaula was defeated, and the East India Company, led by Robert Clive, emerged victorious. This victory marked the beginning of British dominance in Bengal, further solidified by their triumph in the Battle of Buxar in 1764, which brought the entire region, including Bakla-Bakergonj (modern-day Barisal), under Company control. This period of neo-colonialism ushered in significant changes across various aspects

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of society, including education, religion, and politics, with Barisal becoming a focal point of British administrative experiments.

Modernity in Barisal was notably introduced through the Brahmo Samaj movement and the adoption of Western education in the late nineteenth century, particularly marked by the conversions and ideological shifts of prominent figures like the Lakutia zamindar Rakhal Roy Chowdhury and Biharilal Ray.¹ Prior to this, the history of Bakerganj was predominantly characterized by popular resistance against oppressive rulers and financial exploitation. Following the Battle of Plassey, Nawab Mir Zafar, allied with the British, defeated Nawab Sirajuddaula's supporter Agabaker Khan and awarded the zamindari of Umaidpur pargana to Rajavallabh. However, the local peasantry resisted Rajavallabh's authority, leading him to employ mercenary Portuguese soldiers to enforce his rule, initiating a period of severe persecution in the region.²

Before the British East India Company assumed civil authority in 1765, the region witnessed several power struggles, including the drowning of Nawab Mir Jafar by his son-in-law Nawab Mir Kashim in 1763. The subsequent division of Rajavallabh's zamindari among his sons only fueled further unrest.³ By 1764, rebellious farmers in Bakerganj had killed several English merchants, marking one of the earliest organized resistances against British rule in Bengal.⁴ The Company's dissatisfaction with the Mughal administrative system prompted the restructuring of the region's governance, with an emphasis on revenue generation.⁵ This led to widespread famine, marking the first time Bakla's wealthy populace experienced such extreme hardship. In response to the ensuing chaos, the British government undertook further administrative measures, including the establishment of a civil court in Bakerganj in 1781 and the eventual relocation of the district headquarters to Barisal in 1801.

He assumed his duties on December 8, 1817 CE. Although many historians of Bakerganj have asserted that the district was established in 1772 CE, our observations suggest that the experiment of establishing Bakerganj district began in 1772. Initially, judicial proceedings were conducted in Nalchiti, before the judicial office was transferred to Bakerganj and eventually to Barisal in 1797 and 1801, respectively. During this period, other administrative functions of the district were overseen by the Collector of Dhaka District. In 1817, the first independent collectorate of Bakerganj was established, and Mr. Hunter was appointed as the first collector.⁶ Therefore, it can be said that Bakerganj fully emerged as a district in 1817 CE.

1. ঢাকা প্রকাশ, ৩০ জুন, ১৮৬৬

2. সাইফুল আহসান বুলবুল, *বরিশালের ইতিবৃত্ত*, গতিধারা, ২০০৯, পৃ. ৪৪

3. মহসিন হোসাইন, *পলাশীর যুদ্ধ-বিশ্বাস ঘাতকের মৃত্যুকাহিনী*, ইসলামী ফাউন্ডেশন বাংলাদেশ, ২০০৮, পৃ. ৪৫

4. এইচ. বেভারেজ, *দি ডিস্ট্রিক্ট অব বাকেরগঞ্জ*, অনুবাদ-সিকদার আবুল বাশার, গতিধারা, ২০০৮, পৃ. ২৭৩-২৭৪

5. প্রফেসর সিরাজুল ইসলাম, *বাংলার ইতিহাসে ঔপনিবেশিক শাসন কাঠামো*, চয়নিকা, ২০০২, পৃ. ৫৪

6. H. Beverage, *The District of Bakerganj*, London, 1876, pp. 267, 397, 408

A significant aspect of this period is the prominence of Girde Port as the administrative headquarters, which gradually came to be known as Barisal. There is no record of the name 'Barisal' prior to this period. For reasons unknown, Girde Port came to be known as Barisal without much fanfare. Simultaneously, Bakerganj district began to be referred to as Barisal district, both popularly and in official documents.

Permanent Settlement and Barisal

The Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793 amid administrative shifts under Company rule. However, the Permanent Settlement brought little benefit to the public life of Barisal; instead, it led to a catastrophic socio-economic decline. During the years between the Company's civil gain in 1765 CE and the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in 1793 CE, there was a marked change in the British government's revenue collection and trade policies, compared to the previous social system in Bakerganj. Foreign trade was devastated, domestic capital and production ground to a halt, and the use of force to collect revenue became common.⁷ The Company leased the parganas of Bakerganj to zamindars and talukdars, but if they failed to pay the high rent rates fixed by the Company, their zamindaris were auctioned off. Landless peasants began to flee, many parganas reverted to Company ownership, and agricultural output fell drastically.

Before the Permanent Settlement, land was owned by the productive peasantry, with zamindars serving as agents for government rent collection.⁸ The anti-public policies of the Company, however, led to famine, further eroding public confidence in government policies. The situation became direr when the Company prioritized revenue collection, enacting laws such as the Permanent Settlement amidst the social chaos caused by famine.

The zamindars of Bakla were unfamiliar with the rules of Suryasta law under the Permanent Settlement. The inhabitants of this region had a reputation for paying tribute punctually. As Abul Fazal noted, the people here were particularly loyal to the royal rule, paying rent in installments within eight months.⁹ However, as revenue demands increased and production systems declined in famine-stricken areas, landlords faced severe financial crises. Unable to pay the Company's rent on time, many zamindaris were auctioned off. As a result, many ancient zamindaris and talukdars, such as Bakla, Chandradwip, Selimabad, and Idilpur, disappeared.¹⁰ Chandradwip Pargana, for instance, was sold at auction in 1799 CE and subsequently divided into 73 separate zamindaris or taluks.¹¹ This process was

7. Rerza Khan's *Propositions Bengal Public Consultations*, 24 March, 1769

8. বদরুদ্দীন উমর, *চিরস্থায়ী বন্দোবস্তে বাংলাদেশের কৃষক*, মাওলা ব্রাদার্স, ২০০৮, পৃ. ১১

9. আবুল ফজল, আইন-ই-আকবরী ও আকবরের জীবনী, অনুবাদ-পাঁচকড়ি বন্দোপাধ্যায়, দিব্য প্রকাশ, ২০০৮, পৃ. ৯৩

10. রোহিনী কুমার সেন, *বাকলা*, আনন্দ ধারা, ২০০৪, পৃ. ২২৫

11. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, ভাস্কর প্রকাশনী, ২০০৮, পৃ. ৩৩৫

repeated across the region, leading to the creation of numerous small zamindaris from larger ones. The owners of these new zamindaris were often city traders, including Europeans, locals, and Indians from outside Barisal.

As a result of these land sales, land in Barisal became the personal property of the buyers, a significant departure from the Mughal feudal system,¹² where land was owned by the government and peasants could occupy it from generation to generation by paying rent.¹³ Under Company rule, however, both old landlords and cultivators became landless, losing their hereditary rights to the land.

One of the most detrimental effects of the Permanent Settlement in Bakerganj was the absence of new zamindars in their estates. These absentee landlords created approximately 19 types of middlemen in Barisal to manage the zamindaris and collect revenue, leading to a highly fragmented land management system.¹⁴ The district gazetteer aptly described Bakerganj's land system as 'the most complex in the world'.¹⁵ Consequently, zamindari, which was once a symbol of aristocracy, became a business, and the process of revenue collection in the hands of zamindari investors turned into extreme exploitation.

It is well-documented that the residents of Bakerganj were not exempt from the tax known as *abwab*, which was officially prohibited by the government even as late as the 19th century. Despite this ban, approximately two million rupees in *abwab* taxes were irregularly collected annually in the name of a zamindar of Kalsakathi, Vishweshwar Roy Chowdhury.¹⁶ The imposition of these illicit and burdensome taxes left the farmers of Bakerganj impoverished, igniting a deep-seated resentment within the peasant community. As a result, the farmers of Bakerganj engaged in multiple uprisings against Company rule, beginning with the occupation of Umedpur Pargana by Rajvallav Buzurg.

Among these uprisings, notable revolts include the Peasant Revolt of 1787 led by Balki Shah in Pirojpur, as well as uprisings in Sharikal, Malangi, Faraji, Idilpur, North Shahbazpur, Buzurg Umedpur, and Karapur, led by figures such as Talukdar Ainuddin Shikdar and Hayat Mahmud. Other significant revolts include the Jail Revolt, the Singhali Peasant Revolt, the Kalomegha-Tushkhali Revolt, the Mehendiganj Peasant Revolt led by Ashuakand, and the Indigo Farmer Revolt in Jhalkathi.¹⁷ Additionally, acts of violent resistance, such as the assassination of British officials through covert attacks, began to surface across various regions. However, with the exception of the Indigo Resistance Movement, none of these

12. Karl Marx, *An Article on India*, London, 1853, p. 73

13. প্রফেসর সিরাজুল ইসলাম, *বাংলার ইতিহাসে উপনিবেশিক শাসন কাঠামো*, পৃ. ১১৮

14. দেবেশ রায়, *বরিশালের যোগেন মণ্ডল*, দে'জ পাবলিশিং, ২০১০, পৃ. ২১

15. J. C. Jack, *The Bakerganj District*, Calcutta, 1918, p. 98

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-82

17. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৪১৩-৪২৩

rebellions achieved lasting success. They were ruthlessly suppressed with the assistance of the British administration and their allied Hindu landlords.

The absence of a revolutionary spirit, which was essential for sustaining a broad-based movement, meant that despite the immense sacrifices and determination of the rebels, their efforts failed to bring about significant political or social change. It is important to note that these rebellions were largely localized, with no coordinated effort to unify the various uprisings. This lack of cohesion suggests that these revolts were born out of desperation, rather than a calculated strategy. The absence of country-wide consciousness, as well as the necessary intellectual, educational, and moral considerations, ultimately led to the failure of the peasant movements in Bakerganj.¹⁸

Our research indicates that all organized rebellions in Bakerganj occurred prior to 1857. Following the Sepoy Mutiny, no significant anti-government insurrections took place in the region. A close examination of the leadership of these revolts reveals that they were primarily led by individuals from various classes and professions within the Muslim community. Some uprisings were even supported by Muslim zamindars of Bakerganj. However, after the Permanent Settlement, opportunities for Muslims to become zamindars were significantly reduced.¹⁹ During British rule, there were few Muslim merchants, mutsuddis, or traders. Even prior to this period, most of the parganas in Bakerganj, except for two, were controlled by Hindus.²⁰

The opposition to British rule in Bakerganj, often supported by Muslim zamindars or the raiyats under their leadership, can be traced back to the aftermath of the Battle of Plassey. Historical records indicate that many Hindu zamindars of Bakla sided with Rajballav, who opposed the Nawab, during the battle. In contrast, the defeated soldiers of Plassey were predominantly Muslim, which further fueled the resistance to British authority in the region.

The zamindars, particularly those from the Nalchira, Kasba, and Chakhar regions, provided refuge to the rebels.²¹ Thus, it can be argued that the seeds of communalism in Bakerganj were planted in the aftermath of the Battle of Plassey. Another likely reason for the anti-British sentiments among Muslim landlords was the fact that the majority of productive cultivators and laborers in the region were Muslim converts.

During the period from 1757 to 1857 CE, Bakerganj's once-thriving commercial reputation and local production were effectively destroyed. Prior to and shortly after the establishment of Company rule, Bakerganj was known for the large-scale

18. আহমদ শরীফ, *বাঙালীর চিন্তা চেতনার বিবর্তন ধারা*, আগামী প্রকাশনী, ২০১১, পৃ. ১১৪

19. গোলাম মুরশিদ, *হাজার বছরে বাঙালি সংস্কৃতি*, অবসর, ২০০৬, পৃ. ৯০

20. খোসাল চন্দ্র রায়, *বাকরগঞ্জের ইতিহাস*, আনন্দ ধারা, ২০০৪, পৃ. ৩০৯

21. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ২৭০

production of various goods, including salt, sugar, paper, cloth, yarn, jute products, lime, and brick-surki, all produced using traditional methods. However, under Company rule, no new industries were established, and the existing domestic production processes were systematically dismantled, replaced by an influx of English-manufactured goods.

One of the most egregious examples of this economic sabotage was the Company's imposition of legal restrictions on local salt production to create a market for salt imported from Liverpool, England.²² The British also discouraged local weaving, with directives like, 'Stop weaving cloth, give us the raw material, and we will weave your cloth'.²³ In addition, the tax system was grossly inconsistent, with British goods entering the market with only a 2% duty, while domestically produced goods were taxed at rates as high as 20-30%.²⁴ These policies and the unequal taxation system destroyed the local production economy, transforming Bakerganj, once known for its surplus trade, into an import-dependent region by the end of the 19th century. This shift led to widespread unemployment among workers from the now-defunct industries, exacerbating the economic hardships faced by the region. The dual pressures of heavy taxation on the landless peasants and the unemployment of factory workers plunged Bakerganj's social life into disarray. While English policies played a significant role in this decline, our observations suggest that the hereditary dependence on paternal stipends among the peasant-laborer class also contributed to their impoverishment. Over time, it became evident that the lower social classes in Bakerganj remained engaged in the same hereditary occupations for generations, viewing these jobs as a guaranteed source of income, even if it meant not mastering other trades. Before identifying as Hindus or Muslims, the people of Bakerganj were first Bengalis, deeply rooted in their local culture.²⁵ However, their adherence to traditional occupations, coupled with the influence of European mechanized production and the commercial policies of the Company, and the land dependence of the newly empowered Hindu zamindars, worsened the financial condition of the productive class. This decline led to an increase in social disorders, such as theft, dacoity, and litigation, destabilizing the social fabric of Bakerganj during the Company era.

In this deteriorating economic context, two distinct classes emerged within society: (1) the gentry's class, and (2) the cultivating or laboring class. The term "gentry" at that time referred primarily to unemployed, wealthy, or parasitic Hindus who were sustained by their zamindari holdings.²⁶ On the other hand, it is observed that

22. *Ibid.*, p. 528

23. *Speech of Mr. Tlemey, House of Commons in 1813*

24. বিষ্ণু বসু, অশোক মিত্র (সম্পাদনা), *ইংরেজ শাসনে বাজ্যেয়াণ্ড বই*, এশিয়া পাবলিশিং কোম্পানি, ১৯৯৭, পৃ. ৫১৮

25. এইচ. বেভারেজ, *দি ডিস্ট্রিক্ট অব বাকেরগঞ্জ*, পৃ. ১৮৭

26. গোলাম মুরশিদ, *হাজার বছরে বাঙালি সংস্কৃতি*, পৃ. ৯৬

Bakerganj 90 percent of Muslims are farmers. Also among the Muslims there were professional people like weavers, fishermen, Bede, Malangi etc.²⁷ Therefore it can be said that most of the farming or laboring class were Muslims. Many of these laborers fled from farming because of moneylender debts, rents, and fear of torture. As a result, many arable lands become wastelands. Source of land-based income British rulers gave land to the Rakhines from Arakan in present-day Myanmar to cultivate these barren lands in Bakerganj.²⁸ In general, the British government's metaphor of 'Bangla grain var' has been used by the company government to keep Barisal's land productive in the absence of local people.

After the battle of Palashi in 1757 AD, we did not observe any change in the social life of Barisal until the sepoy rebellion organized in 1857 AD. Rather, there was no noticeable difference between the lifestyle of the period and the medieval social life (education, culture, hereditary profession etc.). Rather, at this time, land-related complications, the struggle for casual survival of low-skilled people, the self-interested actions of landowners to get richer through production without hard work, company owners ignoring the public interest to gain more profit, and other social futility entered the society of Barisal. As a result, social stability is destroyed. It can be said that anti-social activities like lawsuits, riots, thefts and robberies left the social life far behind. Due to the caste discrimination of Hindus and unstable socio-economic conditions, many of Barisal's residents converted to Islam and the Muslim population almost doubled the total population. Apart from that, two doctrines called Kartabhaja and Satyaguru emerged from among the lowest professional Hindu community. Some of them have converted to Christianity and sought salvation. One of them is the Kartabhaja community. Kangali Mohant, a leader of the low-caste Hindu Kartabhaja community of Barisal, converted to Christianity.²⁹ While some converted to Christianity as time demanded, many reverted to self-religion.³⁰ Incentives to convert or spread Christianity in the process of social unrest are less noticeable. The anti-public interest outlook of the Christian monarchy probably did not encourage the common people to accept royal patronage by adopting the royal religion.

Education and Culture

During the century of Company rule, there was a radical change in the society of Barisal. "Education-Language-Literature-Culture In one word, the gentry class in Bengali culture gave birth to a mass awakening in the second half of the nineteenth century, which is called the Renaissance of Bengal in the language of history."³¹

27. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ১৩৬

28. মুক্তফা মজিদ, *পটুয়াখালীর রাখাইন উপজাতি*, বাংলা একাডেমি, ১৯৯২, পৃ. ৩০

29. সাইফুল আহসান বুলবুল, *বরিশালের ইতিবৃত্ত*, গতিধারা, ২০০৯, পৃ. ১১৬

30. এইচ. বেভারেজ, *দি ডিস্ট্রিক্ট অব বাকেরগঞ্জ*, পৃ. ২২৪

31. গোলাম মুরশিদ, *হাজার বছরে বাঙালি সংস্কৃতি*, পৃ. ৯৮

This wave of renaissance also flooded Barisal. In the light of the educational policy adopted by the British government initially, the elite class of Barisal and their loyal class took effective steps to spread western education in the public society of Barisal. We see that the Hindu zamindars profited from the land trade Merged with the Company government, the successors of the zamindars, often referred to as the gentry class, played a significant role in spreading Western education in Barisal. Hindu zamindars established several schools, including the Barisal Zilla School, Brajmohan School and College, Rajendra School and College, Kirtipasha P.K. High School, and Basanda School.³² These institutions were instrumental in advancing education in the region. Additionally, Khan Bahadur Hemayetuddin emerged as a key figure in promoting education among the Muslim population by establishing Muslim hostels, B.I. Hostel, and Anjuman Hemayetuddin.³³ The lower-caste Hindus were also proactive during this period, with Bhogai Halder establishing an English school in Agiljhara for the educational advancement of lower-caste Hindus.³⁴ Notably, there were no known caste or community barriers in the patronage of the educational system in Barisal at that time.

Long before the establishment of Dhaka University, Barisal had already reduced its dependence on Calcutta for higher education. Barisal BM College achieved such remarkable results in BA and Honors programs in the late nineteenth century that Barisal became known as the ‘Oxford of Bengal’ for its educational excellence. During this period, Barisal experienced significant development across various fields, including education, literature, culture, and politics. It could be argued that Barisal was second only to Calcutta in India in these respects.³⁵ The social success and intellectual flourishing in Barisal were significantly influenced by the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist movement introduced by Raja Rammohan Roy. In Barisal, the zamindar Rakhal Ray Chowdhury of Swastrik Lakutia played a key role in promoting the Brahmo Samaj, which was further strengthened by many Western-educated Hindu elites and professionals, including Ashwini Kumar. The liberal spirit of the Brahmo Samaj also played a crucial role in advancing women’s education. Before the birth of Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (b. 1880), a school for girls was established in Barisal in 1873, and by 1885, approximately seven thousand girls were studying in government-aided schools.³⁶ Even at this time, girls were beginning to emerge as professionals.

Barisal’s success in the field of education naturally extended to literature. The previously neglected Bengali language began to gain prominence during this period,

32. J. C. Jack, *The Bakerganj District*, pp. 115-117

33. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৬৯৩

34. *Ibid.*, p. 693

35. বদিউর রহমান, *বাংলার চারণ মুকুন্দ দাস*, প্যাপিরাস, ২০১০, পৃ. ৯৯

36. খোসাল চন্দ্র রায়, *বাকরগঞ্জের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ১৪০

with literary works, including translations, circulating widely in the local vernacular.³⁷ From the emergence of Bengali literature, Barisal distinguished itself in the literary arena. Figures such as Ayan Ali Shikdar, Naranarayan, Ch-Yicharan Sen, Jibanananda Das, Mukund Das, Abdus Chobahan, Maulvi Fazlur Rahman, Pratap Chandra, poet Mozambel Haque, and Abu Zafar Obaidullah made significant contributions to various genres of Bengali literature, including stories, novels, poems, songs, and drama. Even the women of Barisal, in an era dominated by literary giants like Vidyasagar and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, made notable achievements in literature, with Kusum Kumari being a prominent example.

Kamini Roy, Kusum Kumari Das, and Devi made significant contributions to the Bengali literary arena during the era of Rabindra literature. Among them, writers like Ayan Ali and Mukunda Das, who were from East Bengal (Dhaka and Barisal), also made their mark. However, most of the other noted writers were published from Calcutta, the cultural hub of Bengal at the time.

One clear observation is that the majority of those who achieved success in the literary arena were members of the landed gentry and were educated in Western traditions. Notably, most of the literary figures, with the exception of the Muslim literati, were closely associated with the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist movement within Hindu society. Prominent figures like Rakhal Roy Chowdhury, his wife Soudamini, Sarbananda Das (father of Kusum Kumari Das), Ch-Yicharan Sen, Kamini Roy, Durgamohan Das, Girishchandra Sen, Ashwini Kumar Dutta, and even Mukunda Das were all linked to the Brahmo society.³⁸

The influence of Ashwini Kumar Dutta in the development of education and culture in Barisal has been widely acknowledged. Many writers have emphasized his role, considering him the central figure in Barisal's modern renaissance across socio-political and educational fields. Dutta has been described as the icon of modern Barisal, leading the region to prominence in India, second only to Calcutta in various aspects of education, culture, politics, and society.³⁹ This cultural and social awakening in Barisal was largely attributed to the solitary efforts of the Brahmo Samaj, with Rakhal Roy Chowdhury, the zamindar of Lakutia, being a staunch supporter and key figure within the movement.

Rakhal Roy Chowdhury's commitment to the Brahmo Samaj was profound. He diverged from traditional Hindu societal norms, introducing progressive changes within his own household, much like Vidyasagar. Dhaka Prakash, a notable publication of the time, highlighted Roy Chowdhury's efforts to grant equal

37. ড. মোহাম্মদ আব্দুল আউয়াল, *বাংলার সাহিত্যের ইতিহাস*, গতিধারা, ২০০২, পৃ. ১১৩-১১৭

38. বদিউর রহমান, *বাংলার চারণ মুকুন্দ দাস*, পৃ. ৯৭

39. *Ibid.*, p. 99

freedom to his wife and daughter, reflecting his modern and liberal outlook.⁴⁰ In 1866, the Brahmo Samaj established a girls' school in Barisal, with Sarabananda Das's daughter, Shehlata Das, serving as the head teacher. Ashwini Kumar Dutta, who joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1882, furthered the social reforms initiated by earlier leaders like Rakhal Roy Chowdhury.

It is evident that Ashwini Kumar Dutta played a crucial role in nurturing the seeds of social reform sown by Lakutia zamindar Rakhal Rai Chowdhury and other Brahmins. Their collective efforts were instrumental in overcoming the prevalent social prejudices of Barisal, paving the way for the formation of a more progressive and just society.

Political and Social Awakening

The political and social awakening in Barisal, especially during the British colonial period, reflects a significant transformation from isolated rebellions to organized political movements. While the early revolts against the British government, occurring during the first hundred years of Company rule, were primarily responses to specific grievances rather than coordinated political movements, the period following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 marked a shift in political consciousness.

Initially, the uprisings in Barisal, such as those led by Balki Shah, were more about resisting the immediate injustices imposed by the British and their local collaborators rather than aiming for broader political freedom. These movements were often isolated incidents, lacking a unified, widespread effort among the people of Bakerganj. However, the scenario began to change as Barisal's social fabric evolved under the influence of Western education and the reformist ideas propagated by the Brahmo Samaj.

The introduction of Western education played a crucial role in awakening a sense of political and social awareness among the people of Barisal. This enlightenment, led by figures within the Brahmo Samaj, not only fostered cultural and literary pursuits but also instilled a growing sense of patriotism. As a result, the socially independent and affluent sections of society, including lawyers and landlords, began to organize themselves politically. The formation of the Barisal People's Association in 1873 was a significant step in this direction. This organization aimed to consolidate public opinion in Barisal, and its influence grew as branches were established in various parts of the district. The Barisal People's Association played a crucial role in mobilizing political demands and eventually aligned with the broader national political movement when it joined the Indian National Congress in 1886.

Interestingly, Barisal's political engagement was not limited to Hindu elites. In 1893, Khan Bahadur Hemayet Uddin established 'Anjuman-e-Hemayet Islam', an

40. ঢাকা প্রকাশ, ৫ আগস্ট ১৮৬৬ খ্রি.

organization aimed at advancing the social and political status of the Muslim community in Barisal.⁴¹ This initiative highlights the inclusive nature of Barisal's political awakening, which sought to uplift all sections of society without fostering communal intolerance.

By the early 20th century, Barisal had become a hub of political activism, rivaling Calcutta in its contributions to the anti-British and independence movements. The comments of Mr. Marl, who noted that "the Barisal problem has robbed him of sleep", underscore the region's significant role in the broader national struggle for independence.⁴² The political awakening in Barisal, therefore, was a testament to the region's evolving identity, shaped by education, cultural development, and a deepening commitment to the cause of freedom.

The political and social landscape of Barisal during the British colonial period was characterized by a unique unity between Hindus and Muslims, driven by a shared sense of patriotism rather than communal consciousness. Unlike other parts of Bengal, where Hindu-Muslim antagonism became pronounced, particularly during the debate over the Partition of Bengal in 1905, Barisal's Muslims did not support the partition.⁴³ This opposition to the partition was not rooted in communal differences but rather in a collective desire to maintain the integrity of Bengal and resist British colonial policies.

Khan Bahadur Hemayet Uddin, a prominent Muslim leader in Barisal, played a key role in this unity by supporting the movement to prevent the partition of Bengal through his organization, Anjuman Hemayet Islam. This organization, along with the broader Muslim community in Barisal, aligned with Hindu leaders to participate in the Swadeshi movement, which aimed to boycott foreign goods and promote indigenous products. The Swadeshi movement in Barisal, notably initiated by Babu Kaliprasanna in 1902, predated the Partition of Bengal and was driven by a deep love for the country.⁴⁴ The movement gained momentum after the partition decision, with both Hindus and Muslims in Barisal united in their efforts to resist British policies. Barisal's approach to the Swadeshi movement was distinct from the broader strategies employed by the Indian National Congress. Ashwini Kumar Dutta, a key figure in Barisal, formed the Swadesh Bandhav Samiti, which included both Hindu and Muslim leaders such as Khan Bahadur Hemayet Uddin, Syed Motahar Hossain, and Haji Waheed Raja Chowdhury. This organization played a significant role in advancing the Swadeshi cause in Barisal, so much so that Barisal was recognized as a major center of resistance in the Indian Parliament.⁴⁵

41. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৫৭১

42. হীরালাল দাশগুপ্ত, *স্বাধীনতা সংগ্রামে বরিশাল*, সাহিত্য সংসদ, কলকাতা, ১৯৯৭, পৃ. ১১৪

43. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৫৭১

44. কালীপ্রসন্ন সেন, *কর্মযোগী কালীপ্রসন্ন*, বরিশাল, ১৯২৮, পৃ. ৭৪-৭৬

45. হীরালাল দাশগুপ্ত, *স্বাধীনতা সংগ্রামে বরিশাল*, পৃ. ৪১

The political awareness and patriotism of Barisal's people were instrumental in awakening broader national consciousness in India. Mahatma Gandhi even remarked on Barisal's vigilance, noting that while the rest of India was 'immersed in deep sleep', Barisal was 'always awake'.⁴⁶ This spirit of unity and resistance continued with the emergence of the Barisal Party in 1908, a revolutionary group led by Satish Chandra Mukhopadhyay (Swami Pragyananda Saraswati), which later gained the support of Bagha Jatin, a prominent revolutionary leader.

Throughout this period, the political movements in Barisal were primarily driven by the upper and educated classes, including landowners, and were focused on the broader goal of Indian independence. There was no significant reflection of regional or communal interests in these movements, nor was there notable involvement of Barisal's leaders in the agenda of the Muslim League. The unity and collective action of Hindus and Muslims in Barisal during this time underscore the region's unique approach to the struggle for independence, marked by a shared commitment to the national cause rather than divisive communal politics.

The socio-economic conditions of peasants in Barisal during the British colonial period were harsh, with the behavior of zamindars and the Company administration exacerbating their hardships. Peasants faced severe challenges, especially regarding land ownership. If a farmer failed to pay rent on time, they were often forced to mortgage their land to moneylenders. These moneylenders, in turn, would sell the land at auctions, leaving the peasants landless. This cycle of debt and dispossession was a significant issue, leading to widespread poverty among the peasantry.⁴⁷

Despite the awakening in Barisal in terms of education, culture, and politics after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, there was a noticeable lack of concern among local leaders and national political parties for the rights and welfare of the peasants. Up until 1930, leaders from the Congress and the Muslim League were primarily focused on gaining entry into local councils, boards, and union boards, showing little interest in addressing the grievances of the peasantry and the Namashudras (a lower caste group).⁴⁸ During the early 20th century, there was no significant organization or leadership dedicated to advocating for the peasants' rights.

The situation began to change with the emergence of leaders like Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Haque, Hashem Ali, Majed Kazi, and Banikantha Sen in 1915, who formed the Krishak-Praja Party. This party was established with the primary aim of liberating the peasants from the exploitation of the zamindars. The Krishak-Praja Party initiated the first Praja movement in Bakerganj district and within two decades, it became the most powerful political force in Barisal. In the 1937

46. মহাত্মা গান্ধী, ২১ শে এপ্রিল, বরিশাল টাউন হলে প্রদত্ত বক্তৃতা

47. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৬১১

48. দেবেশ রায়, *বরিশালের যোগেন মণ্ডল*, দে'জ পাবলিশিং, ২০১০, পৃ. ২১

elections, the party won nine Muslim constituencies in Bakerganj with overwhelming support, signaling a significant shift in the political landscape.⁴⁹ This victory was a blow to the zamindars, who were key supporters of the British government.

The conflict in Barisal was not purely based on religious differences but was deeply rooted in class consciousness and the struggle for socio-economic rights. The zamindars often exploited both the Namashudra and poor Muslim populations. As the government began to take over lands along the Bhannar riverbanks in 1920, these groups were used by the zamindars to claim these lands, leading to conflicts. However, these conflicts were more about class struggle than communal discord.⁵⁰ The emergence of communal consciousness in Barisal, which had been largely absent at the beginning of the 20th century, began to surface in the decades that followed, eventually leading to communal tensions and violent riots. This shift was influenced by various movements, including the application of Gandhi's Satyagraha movement in the Patuakhali area of Bakerganj, led by Satindranath Sen. The movement, which initially focused on non-violent resistance, contributed to the rise of communal distrust and conflict in the region.

The Satyagraha movement, particularly its application in Barisal, significantly strained Hindu-Muslim relations in the region. This deterioration in relations was so pronounced that the revolutionaries of Barisal openly opposed the movement, dismissing it as a communal conflict rather than a political or Congress-driven act.⁵¹ The rituals and practices associated with Satyagraha became intolerable to both communities, sparking mutual animosity. The most tragic outcome of this tension was the Kulkathi Massacre, where 19 Muslims were killed by Gurkha soldiers under British command. Although government intervention and local leaders' efforts temporarily quelled the communal conflict, the underlying tensions persisted.⁵²

This weakening of communal unity in Barisal also led to the fragmentation of the broader independence movement. Multiple parties, such as the Communist Party, Peasant-Praja Party, Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and Forward Bloc, began to emerge, reflecting the splintering of political and social alliances. Even within the Congress, leaders in Barisal found themselves divided.

A key factor in this division was the lack of a farmers' organization within the Congress, which alienated the majority of the peasantry in Barisal, who made up about 85% of the population. As a result, the Peasant-Praja Party, which championed the interests of farmers through agendas like the Prajasattva Act,

49. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৬১৫-৬১৬

50. দেবেশ রায়, *বরিশালের যোগেন মণ্ডল*, দে'জ পাবলিশিং, ২০১০, পৃ. ২১

51. হীরালাল দাশগুপ্ত, *স্বাধীনতা সংগ্রামে বরিশাল*, পৃ. ২২৭

52. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৬২৬

Exchequer Act, Debt Arbitration Board, and Flood Commission, gained widespread support. This support translated into significant electoral victories in 1937, where the Peasant-Praja Party candidates won Muslim-majority constituencies in Bakerganj, defeating even prominent figures like zamindar Khwaja Nazimuddin of Patuakhali.⁵³

These election results highlighted that the peasant population of Barisal prioritized their socio-economic well-being over religious or communal affiliations. The success of the Peasant-Praja Party struck a blow to the zamindar class, leading to strained relations between Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Haque and the Congress and Muslim League leaders, many of whom were landlords or closely associated with the zamindars. The Congress, in particular, displayed a negative attitude towards Fazlul Haque, preventing him from joining the Congress coalition cabinet and ultimately forcing him to align with the Muslim League.⁵⁴

During this period, as the demand for Pakistan began to overshadow the agrarian issues, many members of the Peasant-Praja Party shifted their allegiance to the Muslim League. This shift was exacerbated by the perception of the Congress as increasingly aligned with the Hindu Mahasabha, particularly in the context of the Bengal partition debate, further deepening communal divides in Barisal.⁵⁵

The late stages of British colonial rule in Barisal saw a significant shift in the political landscape, primarily driven by the rise of the peasant class and the corresponding decline of the zamindari system. This transition was marked by increasing communal tensions, particularly between the Hindu and Muslim communities.

As the prospect of Indian independence and the partition of Bengal loomed, the Hindu elite in Barisal, particularly the zamindars, began to push for the inclusion of Barisal in a proposed Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation).⁵⁶ This demand was driven by a desire to retain some degree of political power in the face of the rising influence of the Muslim peasantry, who were increasingly rallying around leaders like Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Haque. The Barisal branch of the Hindu Mahasabha even submitted multiple petitions to this effect, with the local Congress closely involved in these efforts. However, these demands were met with resistance not only from the Muslim majority but also from lower-caste Hindus, who felt more aligned with the Muslims due to their shared socio-economic status.

The prominent Shudra leader of Barisal, Yogen Mandal, highlighted this divide by stating that lower-caste Hindus could not support the upper-caste Hindu demands

53. জয়া চক্রবর্তী, *বাঙলা ভাগ হলো*, অনুবাদ: আবুজাফর, ইউনিভার্সিটি প্রেস লিমিটেড, ২০০৩, পৃ. ৯৫

54. সিরাজ উদ্দীন আহমেদ, *বরিশাল বিভাগের ইতিহাস*, পৃ. ৬১৬

55. জয়া চক্রবর্তী, *বাঙলা ভাগ হলো*, পৃ. ২৮৮

56. *বরিশাল জেলার হিন্দু মহাসভার স্মারক পত্র*, ১৭ মে ১৯৪৭, শ্যামাপ্রসাদ মুখার্জী পেপার্স ২-৪, কিস্তি, ফাইল নং-৮২, ১৯৪৭

and were more likely to side with Muslims, given their class similarities.⁵⁷ This sentiment underscored the deepening rift between the upper-caste Hindus and the broader Hindu community, weakening the overall Hindu political position in Barisal.

Ultimately, the demands for a Hindu Rashtra, including Barisal, were not realized. The partition of Bengal, as implemented by the Radcliffe Line, did not accommodate these demands, largely because they were seen as unreasonable given the Muslim majority in the region. As a result, the Hindu zamindars and the gentry, who had once played a crucial role in Barisal's modernization and in leading the local independence movement, found themselves politically and socially marginalized.

Unable to reconcile with the loss of their lands and the decline of their socio-political power, many of these upper-caste Hindus migrated to West Bengal following the partition in 1947. This mass exodus marked the end of their influence in Barisal, as the region became part of East Pakistan. The communal conflict that emerged from these tensions ultimately overshadowed the earlier collective independence movement in Barisal, leading to a fractured society divided along religious and class lines.

57. দেবেশ রায়, *বরিশালের যোগেন মণ্ডল*, কভারপেজ