

Contribution of Zamindars in the Socio-Cultural and Educational Life of Uttar Dinajpur

Sukumar Barai

Associate Professor of History, Dr. Meghnath Saha College, Itahar

***Abstract:** It's a regional study of the area of Uttar Dinajpur of North Bengal of West Bengal. The study aims to highlight the positive activities of the Zamindars. In this paper, I have selected some Zamindari Estates for my study, those who have a creative role in the spread of socio-cultural and educational activities. They engaged to promote the cultural branches such as education, festivals, music, art, physical culture, etc. they extended all sorts of assistances for the socio-cultural development of the area Uttar Dinajpur. There was a dichotomy in their efforts but that was natural. They had been mostly silent in removing the superstitions of that time. General people were far from the effect of their welfare activities. They moved within their limitation and remained faithful to their ideological and class character. Despite these shortcomings, it should be mentioned that being the Zamindars they had done more in that period which left a positive mark on the socio-cultural and educational life of Uttar Dinajpur.*

Keywords: Zamindar, Estate, Culture, Uttar Dinajpur, Churaman, Marina, Raiganj, Islampur

Generally it is accepted that the word Zamindar came into existence in the Mughal period and after that its use began to continue. Needless to say, the word, "Zamindar" is a Persian word. This word originated during Mughal Period. Before the Mughal Period we did not find the existence of the word Zamindar in the Indian languages. It's linguistic origin as may trace in the following manner. Zamindar, its English meaning is like to – Zamin = Land Dar = Keeper. It means land keeper. Bhuswami or Bhupati or Landlord terminologies were added during the subsequent phases. In fact landlord is in one respect owner of the land.¹ In the Mughal period this Zamindars class took special roles on various issues of the nation and if needed they got together with the farmers in the revolt against the emperor. Afterwards the new Zamindar class that came into existence in the period of the East India Company worked not only in the social and cultural fields but took part in the freedom struggle also.

In this context I have decided to take my discussion on the contribution of the Zamindars of Uttar Dinajpur in spread of Socio-Cultural activities from 1793 to 1953. In 1793 a new type of land lordship system was introduced by the then Governor General Lord Cornwallis. This System of Land Revenue became an institution. And this long-lived well established institution abolished in 1953.² In this time the Zamindars performed many destructive or oppressive activities in on respect but they contributed enough in the social- cultural fields in the other respect.³ The oppressive character of these Zamindars has been narrated by the contemporary and later writers, novelists' man of letters, dramatists etc. In their writings, novels literatures, dramas this one sided description makes history partial.

Perhaps they have done this work matching the mentality of the then readers. The work of history is to portray the truth. The fact that the Zamindars served wholeheartedly in many social and cultural constructive activities going beyond their general character of the exploitation. But it does not get enough light perspective of historical research.⁴ This is totally neglected in the field of North Bengal as well as the Southern part of North Bengal. This undiscussed aspect of

the Zamindars is the main subject of my study. This kind of welfare approach of the Zamindars was also found and continued even in the Zamindars of Uttar Dinajpur. West Dinajpur District was formed in 1947 and It was divided into two separate districts, Uttar & Dakshin Dinajpur. This happened in 1992 owing to districts restructure program. ⁵ Mainly I would like to confine my discussion on Uttar Dinajpur. But if needed the descriptions of the Zamindars of Dakshin Dinajpur and Dinajpur of Bangladesh may sometime come because many activities of those Zamindars were found in the area of Uttar Dinajpur.

Here I use both traditional and modern sources in order to discuss the matter. In spite of their favour for colonial rule the Zamindars of Uttar Dinajpur worked in many fields for social and cultural consciousness. By the way mention must be made that during the time of discussion i.e. 1793 to 1953 there was no district named Uttar Dinajpur. The portion that I am trying to discuss about is recently known as Uttar Dinajpur. That is why I have used the name Uttar Dinajpur for that portion in my discussion. I shall discuss about some selected Zamindars of this Uttar Dinajpur District. Mainly I shall discuss about Churaman Zamindari of Itahar, Marnai Zamindari, Bahin Zamindari of Raiganj Sub Division and Zamindari of Ramganj of Islampur Sub Division of the District of Uttar Dinajpur.

Churaman Zamindari:

This Churaman Zamindari Estate now is in the district of Uttar Dinajpur, W.B. India came into existence in the 1st half or the 19th century. Ghanashyam Chowdhury was the first Zamindar of Churaman Estate. He was the servant of Bengal's Nawab Aliwardi. The later Zaminders of this family took the title "Roychowdhury". The Zaminders of this estate got a remarkable position by performing many developmental and cultural activities. The wave of these developmental activities touched every aspect of the society, education-culture, religious places, streets, treatment, and physical culture etc.⁶

The Zamindars of this estate gave away lands for religious purposes. They kept the tradition to patronize the activities of *drama & yatras*. They formed *Churman Dramatic Society*. The Zaminders of Churaman engaged themselves in promoting education, we found in F.W. Strong's Dinajpur District gazetteer in 1911 that "*This is an excellent dispensary maintained by the estate at Churaman and also a boys Middle English School and a model girl school*". We get much information from report on the survey and settlement of the Churaman Estate in Dinajpur.

Sports and physical exercise is an integral part of social and cultural field. The Zamindars of Churaman were also extremely enthusiastic on this matter. They made a beautiful playground for recreation. Raja Krishna Chandra Roy Chowdhury and Raja Bhupal Chandra Roy Chowdhury took a very important role for the upliftment of cultural activities in the area. The Zamindars of this dynasty gave away lands for religious purposes. They gave lands for the temple of Raipur Kalyan Gosai and Astal Temple of Khoksa, They started Durgapuja at Dhulhar. They set up a temple of Shiva at Churaman. The Zamindar organized Krishna puja, Lakshmi puja Singhabahini and Chandi puja etc. It must be mentioned that most of the statue of the traditional temples have been stolen. The Zamindars of Churaman not only worshipped the Hindu gods and goddesses but also respected the Pir- Fakirs. It is believed that named *Kauwa Pir* a God of cultivation is being worshipped. Communal harmony was present at the adjoining locality in the period of Churaman Zamindari. It is known that monetary help for Punjab's Golden Temple was sent from this Zamindari. Many traditional and historical

monuments and elements made in the time of this Zamindari are at the threshold of ruin for lack of the conservation.⁷

Zamindars of Churaman kept the tradition to patronize the activities of drama. *Churaman dramatic society (Churaman Natya Samaj)* was formed with the encouragement and enthusiasm of the Churaman Zamindars for the tenant's/ryot's entertainment. Once upon a time this dramatic society gained fame and respect for performing various dramas in various places with success. They are arranged not only dramas but also *yatras* for entertainment. In this context one incident of Churaman's Zamindar may be mentioned. Once the Zamindar of *Bagchara* arranged a *yatra program* near Kalagram in the district of Malda. There he announced that those villagers who have shawls could enter into the program. The Zamindar of Churaman also went to see the *yatra*. But the Zamindar started to return not entering as he had no shawl with him. Then the Zaminda of Bagchara went to him and brought him back to the *yatra*. But he came back only when he got the promise from that Zamindar that all should be permitted to see the program without shawls.⁸ Many praised the *yatra loving* Zamindars of Churaman for this incident. In that program he booked the *yatra* troop for three days and announced that no one would have to bring shawl for seeing the *yatra* in Churaman. From this incident we can say that the Zamindars of Churaman were very generous and liberal mind of man and they were very fond of *yatra*.

The Zamindars of Churaman engaged themselves in promoting education. They left the marks of love for education by establishing many educational institutions for spreading education. Churaman High School was established by the active initiatives of Churaman Zamindars in 1868. The Zamindars managed and bore the expenditures of this school. Then Marnai, Itahar Gulandar - these villages were very developing area. Countless students from these areas went to read in that school made by Churaman Zamindars as there were no Madhyamik School in that areas. When the Zamindars established this school, it was Marnai School where the students could read up to class VI. Afterwards it became a junior and then it was raised into a Madhyamik School. This school was named Pralhad Chandra Vidyalaya' when it got the government approval. This Prallad Chandra Sarkar was a lover of education. Now this school has become a Higher Secondary School. Many successful students of this institution have become well famous and established themselves in higher positions. A girls' school was also established by the initiatives of the Zamindar in Churaman. Afterwards it closed for lack of initiatives.⁹

Besides making schools, temples, the Zamindars of Churaman established hospitals for the treatment of the ryots of the area of their Zamindari. The Zamindar made hospital was in the place where now the *Police Fari* of West Bengal Government stands. Countless people of this area got the opportunity of treatment here. Poor ryots gained free treatment here. Now a primary health centre of the Department of West Bengal Government exists beside the old hospital. Local people opine that the Government afterwards has formed a Primary Health Centre there as the Zamindars had established a hospital in that time.¹⁰ Praising the works of Churaman Zamindars F W Strong's Dinajpur District Gazetter describes " *This is an excellent dispensary maintained by the estate at Churaman and also a Boys Middle English School and model girls School.*"¹¹ Besides many informations of various aspects of Churaman's Zamindari can be found in Report on the Survey and Settlement f the Churama Estate in Dinajpur, Calcutta, 1891.

Sports and physical exercise is an integral part of social and cultural field. The Zamindars of Churaman were also extremely enthusiastic on this matter. The Zamindars made a beautiful playground for recreation. This ground was at the main entrance of the house of the Zamindars. In that time football competition was arranged in this field. Countless football lover people of

the adjoining areas gathered there to watch the competition. But the final competition took place between Churaman and Gulandar every year.¹² From this we can realise that the Zamindars of Churaman were conscious of sports and they realised the importance of physical exercise or physical culture.

Though there were peasants' revolutions against the Zamindars of Bengal many times yet this kind of incident against the Churaman Zamindari can never be known. Though the wave of *Tebhaga Movement* moved Dinajpur, Balurghat and Kaliyaganj, it never touched this Zamindari area because of the Zamindar's welfare activities towards ryots. These Zamindars left remarkable and creditable marks in the social and cultural fields. The tenants or ryots of this place spend their lives with pleasure. No name of female Zamindar is found from this Zamindari. From three to four lacs of taxes were collected every year in this Zamindari. Under the Dinajpur Raj Estate there were no 85 and no 86 *Touji* existed in Churaman Zamindari with fifty *Pike Borkandaj*. There were many elephants and horses. The proof of that still now exists by the memoir of local people. Zamindars of Churaman were expert in hunting. The hunting of tiger and crocodile are still now heard by the aged people. Once the destructive flood of the Mahananda River took one part of the Zamindari to Durgapur. The remaining part stayed there at Churaman.¹³ Churaman Zamindars gave living rooms at various places to those who worked at the Zamindari. From these we can understand that Zamindars of Churaman were enthusiastic ryots lovers. Still now there are enough remnants of this family which are as a result of the wave of time, at the mouth of ruin. These monuments will not remain as the marks of memory for this Zamindari in future but the works done by these Zamindars in the contemporary time will remain ever in the hearts of the relating people of the area.

Bhupalpur Zamindari:

Another part of Churaman Zamindari is Bhupalpur Zamindari. One part of this Zamindari went to Durgapur when the destructive flood of Mahananda affected this Zamindari partially. *Durgapur Rajbari* area is known as Bhupalpur taking the name from Bhupal Chandra Raychoudhury who was the son of Churaman's Zamindar Krishna Chandra Choudhury. The outgoing part of Churaman Zamindari started this Zamindari system in *Durgapur Rajbari* owing to the destructive flood of the Mahananda. Bhupal Chandra Raychoudhury the Zamindar of this family was a lover the ryots and at the same time he was ever enthusiastic. He kept up the welfare mood of that Zamindari. The fame of this Zamindar family still now heard from the people of the area on account of many welfare activities. A Swaminath Temple was built near Bhupalpur's Hasua owing to the determination of Bhupal Chandra Raychoudhury's mother Durgamoyee Raychoudhury and his late mother-in-law Padmabati on 25th Boishak, 1321 BS. A Shiva Temple exists just beside it. Here Swaminath's Fair occurs every year for the ryots recreation.¹⁴ This Swaminath temple was built by Zamindar Bhupal Chandra Raychoudhury. All people from all religions and castes gathered in this fair arranged by the initiative of the Zamindars. The fame of this fair is spread in the relating areas for it appears as the stage of union for different communities. Besides having various kinds of shops, one must be mentioned that this fair becomes memorable place for the entertainment of local and outside visitors as it provides with circus, puppet dance and most remarkably drama and *yatras* give extreme enjoyment to all. The artists of *Baul* served *Baul* songs to their hearts content. The Zamindars patronised drama, *yatra* and *baul* songs. Durgapuja was arranged in great grandeur with the initiatives and supervision of these Zamindars. The poor were served as god *Naranarayan* on Saptami, Ashtami and Nabami. People of villages one by one were served on day after day. The weekly market (bazar) of Durgapur on Saturday and the market of Patiraj on Sunday were started with active initiative of these Zamindars in that Zamindari period. These two markets played a special role in the

economy of Uttar Dinajpur village area.¹⁵ Here a School was established by the active initiatives of the Zamindars in 1955. The name of that school was Bhupal Chandra Vidyapith. This School is one of the few good higher secondary schools in this region. It was built by Sri Shivaprasad Roy Choudhury, the last Zamindar of this place. He realised that there was a dearth of good schools in the nearby villages, and so he set up this school and named it after his father Bhupalchandra Roy Choudhury. A good library was there in the Rajbari of Bhupalpur.

Marnai Zamindari:

Maharaja of Dinajpur gave Mahendra Narayan PalChoudhury Land authority for Marnai Zamindari on Permanent Settlement in the second half of 19th century. Marnai village stands on the bank of the river Sui which in the Rajkot Mouza at Itahar Police Station in the District of Uttar Dinajpur.¹⁶ This Marnai Zamindari lasted for a short time. But these pious Marnai Zamindars made permanent places in the people's hearts through various welfare activities. Zamindar Shashibhushan palchoudhury established temple of Pramatheshwar Mohadev Jiu in 1325 BS. On this occasion he made an expensive and ornamental temple, this proves that Marnai Zamindars had attention for arts.¹⁷

Zamindar Upendra Narayan Palchoudhury was only one son of Mahendranarayan Palchoudhury. Marnai F E School was established by his initiative in 1899 AD. He appointed Upendra Kishar Nandi, the resident of Marnai, the Headmaster of this School. Upendra Memorial Library was set up with his contribution. This School and Library became a remarkable place for spreading education among the people of Marnai and adjacent areas. The next Zamindar was Shashibhushan Palchoudhury. He helped with money in building Gour Nitai Temple of Katowa. Some ponds were dug for the ryots' use in his period of time. These ponds served many purposes like bathing and sometimes for drinking water in that time. He himself took the managing responsibility of Marnai High School in order to spread education in that area. Afterwards local education lover Sharat Chandra de contributed ten thousands silver coins in cash to this school. Now the name of this school is Marnai Sharat Chandra High School. This school of more than hundred twenty years old has been playing an important role in the field of education among the students of the adjoining localities after its establishments of 1899 AD.

Shashibhushan Palchoudhury had two sons- Bishwanath Palchoudhury and Girindranath Palchoudhury. Bishwanath Palchoudhury obtained LMF degree from Bankura Medical College. Besides the supervision of Zamindari he treated the ryots for many diseases. Sri Sri Ramkrishna Sevasadan was established by his initiative. Afterwards this Sevasadan became the Primary Health Centre approved by the Health Department of the Government of West Bengal. ¹⁸

Raiganj Zamindari:

Raiganj is the district town of Uttar Dinajpur. Girigosai Zamindar Family resided in Raiganj. Later the title of this Zamindar family turned to Goswami. During the time of the Mughal Emperor Akbar land prosperities were given as pir pal and Devatwari or Brhmatwari to the Muslim Pir-Fakir and Hindu Sanyasi – Brahman respectively. Dinajpur Raj Estate was the property of Radhakantaji's property. Here Maharaja was the Sebait of God. There were huge Devatwa land of properties in many where at Raiganj . The first Landed Gentry of Raiganj Girigosai family Raghunandan Girigosai was a Sanyasi of Giri Sect of the Shangkaracarya's Dashnami Sect. Sanyasis of Giri Sect were mainly fighters. They fought for their country. Many peasants of Dinajpur took part in the peasants uprising under the leadership of young Raghunandan Girigosai . Raghunandan Girigosai was sent to Raiganj. He got shelter in a Math on the east side of the bank of river Kulik. He got some Brhmatwari lands. He workshipped there

and helped the poor by doing many works. He introduced *Langarkhana* for the needy people of the area. Thus a new type of Zamindari introduced in Raiganj. Jatindra Mohan Goswami was the main Zamindar of this family. He was born in 1896 AD. He frequented the Thakurbari with the influence of his class-mate Saumendranath Tagor when he read in Calcutta School. At this he became attracted to songs, dramas etc. He was both a good looking person and a strong actor. He was expert in playing piano and flute and also in songs. He could play hockey and football very well. He was determined in making Antaja Community expert in songs and acting. The library of Pandit Gopal Chandra Mandal was established with the patronization of these Gosai Zamindars. There was the contribution of Jatindramohan Goswami behind the establishment of Minor School and Girls' School of Raiganj. This Girls' School was started in the year of 1933 AD by the active co-operation of the Zamindars of the Gosai family. Later the temporary shelter place for the freedom fighters. Jatindramohan's two sons Kalyan Kumar Goswami and Nirrmal Kumar Goswami were social worker and cultural minded persons.¹⁹

Bahin Zamindari:

Bahin was a Gram Panchayat under the Raiganj Panchayat Samiti of the district of Uttar Dinajpur. It exists near the border of Bihar, 8 K.M. Westward from Raiganj. Bahin Zamindari was founded with the special initiative of Ishwar Chandra RayChoudhury. Elder son Khitish Raychoudhury was a qualified man. Second son Harendranath Raychoudhury served free Homeopathic medicine and treatment to the poor patients. A library namely *Bidhumukhi* was set up by his initiative.²⁰ Now it is known *Bandemataram* library. A Theatre Hall named *Bhubaneshwari* was in the Zamindar House. Harendra Raychoudhury was its founder. Famous actor Ahindra Choudhury acted here. The Zamindars patronized literature. Litterateur Narayan Gangapadhayay came to the house of Bahin Zamindari. *Bighar Ishwardol Khela* was arranged with the initiative of Bahin Zamindars. Zamindar Uday Chandra Raychoudhury helped with money in building Adibasi and Hindu Hostels for Harischandrapur's A S D M High School. Zamindars of Bahin took a pivotal role to start the Markets (Bazars) of Gulandar and Harirampur.²¹ There is a Rajbari named Bahin Rajbari which is an antique building. It had an artistic backdrop. But, the original history behind the creation is hardly known due to the lack of preservation of documents. It was probably made as a business centre on the bank of river *Nagor* to encourage business between Bihar and the undivided Bengal from early British period.

Islampur Zamindari:

Yusuf Choudhury was a famous Zamindar of Islampur which was under the Sub-Division of Islampur in the District of Uttar Dinajpur. Urus Fair is arranged every year on the occasion of the death anniversary of Hazrat Syed Fajli Rabbi in Yusufganj with the initiative of his posteriors.²² This fair started in 1925. The Zamindars of Islampur were engaged in various welfare activities. The name of Yusufganj came from the name of Yusuf.²³

Goagram Zamindari:

Famous Zamindar Raja P C Lal resided in the town Purnea in Bihar. His Zamindari spread in Karandighi, Chakulia, Goalpukur and Islampur. P C Lal arranged to hand over some lands to wealthy Giasuddin Sarkar of Goagram. Giasuddin made of Zamindar house and *masjid* in Goagram by increasing the income of his Zamindari. A *masjid* was built at Goagram in 1840 AD by the initiative of Giasuddin's father Mollabox. The *masjid* has the marks of wonderful artistic works. There the Id and the Maharam were celebrated with grounder. Goagram estate was divided into two parts for internal quarrel. Chhipi Estate came out. The owner of this Estate was Kalimuddin Sarkar. Jama Masjid was set up in 1911 AD. By his initiative Kishanganj library

was set up. Chapuya Bridge over the river of Sudhani was built by his initiative. He was involved in the establishment and development of various Madrashes and Makhtabs.²⁴

Ramganj Zamindari:

Ramganj is situated beside NH No-31 starting from Islampur to Siliguri. Rambhajan Bhagat got the Zamindari of Ramganj from Raja P. C. Lal of Purnea and Nawab Ato Hossain of Khagra. The architecture of Ramganj's Zamindar house is well-known. There were countless Muslim ryots in his Zamindari. They had good relation with the Hindus. They joined each other's festivals. Later the British opened there a hospital and Mission School getting the advice from Ramganj's Zamindars. Then a basic Training School was established in Ramganj. Zamindar Shibsaran Bhagat established a temple of Shiva at Ramganj in 1952 AD.²⁵

Dinajpur Zamindari:

The contribution of Dinajpur's Moharajas for Raiganj can never be refused. Dinajpur's Maharaja Girijanath Ray contributed ten *bighas* of land and some money with view of making a high standard school in Raiganj. It is heard that the amount of this money is rupees ten thousands. The work for one floor building of Raiganj Coronation High School started in 1911 AD with the land and money given by the Maharaja Girijanath Ray. A free dispensary was also established in the adjoining school premises with the help of his money. It is known that he helped in making the building of Raiganj Post Office. Raiganj Institute was founded in the land contributed by Girijanath's son Maharaja Jagadishnath Ray. Surendramohan Sikdar, the Nayab of the Zamindar of this area, accepted land contributed by the Maharaja with view of forming a cultural centre in Raiganj. But there was a condition that newly built hall would have to be named after Snehalata Devi, the wife of Maharaja Jagadishnath and the adjoining field of the hall would have to be named Snehalata Park. Afterwards Raiganj Cultural Centre was set taking the name Raiganj Institute in 1939. An enriched library is there in the Institute. This Institute often organises various types of cultural function and dramas. There is a playground nearby the Institute named Town Club Maidan also made by the active co-operation of the Zamindars of Dinajpur Raj Estate. Football, Tennis etc were played here.

At this time Raiganj's Maharaja Jagadishnath High School has been bearing the marks of memory of Maharaja Jagadishnath Ray who was the last Zamindar of Dinajpur Raj Estate.²⁶ Many more contribution of Dinajpur's Zamindars are still now in Uttar Dinajpur.

Ultimately it may be said that in one hand Uttar Dinajpur's Zamindars made their economic base strong by exploiting the ryots and on other hand, they left their marks in the socio-cultural and educational upliftment with the help of the economic prosperity. Sometime some Zamindars played a role in the freedom struggle. They have made their own area's socio-cultural atmosphere prosperous by performing various activities like school establishment, library establishment, field making, fair arrangement, Market arrangement, patronising drama, yatra, puppet drama, making and expanding roads, pond digging etc. The role of Zamindars of Uttar Dinajpur cannot be refused viewing the flow in the river of Bengal's art and culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today's advancement in the socio-cultural field of Uttar Dinajpur was started by this Zamindar Class. But the activities performed by these Zamindars had various limitations. Here there was the context that they had to save their class interest.

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