

Independent and Setback of West Dinajpur: A Study of Communication and Transport

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It is a real fact that if we start to discuss any problem of Bengal after independence we will find the knife of Cyril Redcliff. District West Dinajpur later on the north Dinajpur and south Dinajpur were not beyond of it. The Dinajpur district was created by the colonial ruler, which had a glorious history from ancient time. In sultanate era the main centre of Bengal consisted of this place. During British period it was an important economic area. As its glorious heritage Dinajpur played an eminent role in struggle of independence. No doubt that the glory of this district was a result of its economic prosperity. As usual it was an agricultural district. Depending on agriculture some short of industries and trade were flourished in the district. But after the independence and bifurcation of the district the west Dinajpur fell into a setback and that scenario was continuing through a long time. Even nowadays the economy of north and south Dinajpur is nit in the parallel state with the other part of India. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the setback of west Dinajpur and onward in the light of communication and transport resulted by the bifurcation of the district.

The ancient land quoted in the puranas and with which the memories of the Mourya- Guptas- Pala-Sena kings Dinajpur became the part of east India company`s territory with the obtaining dewani in 1765. It is to be mentioned that though this region was the heart land of Bengal during medieval times, but there was no district named as Dinajpur. In 1786 AD Dinajpur district was created by British East India Company taking six ‘Sarkars’ – Ghoraghat, Panjra, Barbakabad, Bahuja, Jannatabad or laknouti and Tajpur. The administrative centre was Dinajpur and Mr. Jorge Hutch was appointed as collector of this newborn district. He was also the judge of dewani court situated at Tajpur.¹

In 1807 AD Hamilton Bukane was appointed as surveyor of Dinajpur by Lord Minto and from his description published on 1808 AD, we get a clear picture of the district. According to his description the triangular shaped Dinajpur district consisted the area of 5374 square miles which was in between the latitude of 24 48’ N to 26 18’ N. In west the river Nagor and Mahanonda made its boundary and in south where the river Punarhaba joined to Mahanonda and eastern boundary which divide the district from Rongpur was the river Karotoya.² In 1872 AD Mr. Willium Hunter mentioned that the district consisted with 4059.14 square miles. Here we have to remember that at the time of creating of district Malda in 1813 Ad and Bogra in 1821 AD the area of Jaggaddal, Malda, Lalbazar, Khetlal and Badalgachhi police station were separated from Dinajpur district.³

From 1821 to 1947 AD the boundary of the district remained unchanged. During this period Dinajpur district remained as an important economic centre to the colonial government. The most important cause of this prosperous economy was its well transport and communication system through roads, rivers, and letter on railways. The district was well provided with roads connected the various important centre with headquarters or with the railway lines. In 1909-10 AD the total mileage of road maintained by the district board, not containing village roads was 993.⁴ The principal roads were-

1) Murshidabad road: entering at village Khalirpur and passes through Dinajpur town and village Kantanagar, Birganj, Thakurgaon, Fakirganj and Atwri.

2) Rangpur road: from town Dinajpur through Chirirbandar and Parvatipur went to Rangpur.

- 3) Malda road: from Dinajpur town through Birol, Mahipaldighi, Banshihari went to Malda.
- 4) Bogra road: from Dinajpur through Samjhia, Chintamon, Hili railway station went to Bogra.
- 5) Purnia road: from Dinajpur through Pirganj, Hemtabad, Ranisankhail, entered into Purnia.
- 6) Kishenganj road: from five miles west of Dinajpur as branch of Purnia road run to Kishenganj.
- 7) Balurghat road: from Dinajpur crossing the river Atrai through Kumarganj, Patiram run to Balurghat and extended 16 miles to Hili railway station.
- 8) Gangarampur road was parallel with the river Punarbhaba from Dinajpur to Gangarampur.
- 9) Nilphamari road was from Thakurgaon to Nilphamari railway station.⁵ At that time there was no concrete bridge on the roads to cross the rivers. The use of ferries in rainy season to cross the vehicle with goods was general scenario.

Another important medium of transport and communication in colonial Dinajpur district was its navigable rivers and canals. The main rivers of this district were Mahananda, Tangon, Punarbhaba, Atrai, Yamuna, Karotoya etc. Mahananda originates from mountain Mahaldiram of Darjeeling and run through Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Purnia and enter into Dinajpur district at Mukundapur of Itahar police station and flows 45 kms to southward as boundary between district Dinajpur and Malda. Tangon enter into this district from Jalpaiguri and run southwardly across Pirganj, Bochaganj, Kaliaganj, Kushmundi, Banshihari police station and through Malda district joined to Mahananda. It is a fairly large and usually overflows its bank during the rains hereby inundating some areas along its bank. It was navigable by boat throughout the year.⁶ River Punarbhaba nourished by the water of Tista once and became an inland river of this district since 1897 AD due to disconnection with Tista. Latter from Bamanpukur tank it flows through Dinajpur town, Gangarampur, Tapan police station and entered into Rajshahi district and joined to Mahananda. After earthquake and disconnection with Tista in 1897 AD the course of Atrai was from Sundarpur of this district goes through Chirirbandar, Samjhia, Kumarganj, Patiram, Balurghat and Isabpur, then leaves the district. In Rajshahi it joined to Padma. Except these a considerable course of Yamuna flew across this district. Karotoya made the eastern boundary.

These rivers were navigable mainly in rainy season and before independent and bifurcation of the district these were the foremost used medium of transport and huge amount of goods were exported and imported through these rivers. The boats used were known as 'gahana nouka'. The main ports of this district were Samjhia, Kumarganj, Patiram, Balurghat, Chirirbandar etc. through these ports paddy, jute, sugar, oil seed etc. were exported to Calcutta, Dacca, and other district of Bengal. In lieu coconut, metal instrument, thread and other few were used to import in the district.⁷ Few canals like Malajal cannal [connect Atrai and Dhepa], Brahmin –Punarbhaba connecting canal, Gobindapur to Premnagar canal were also important in running goods.⁸

Before independent the rail route from Calcutta to Darjeeling-Assam was across the Dinajpur district. In 1896 AD Parvatipur station (junction) was connected to Katihar via Dinajpur town Radhikapur, Kaliaganj, Raiganj. After establishing the rail bridge on Ganges the Calcutta-Assam rail route in 1915AD interaction with Calcutta became very easier one and the result was that not only the economy but also the education, culture of this district enriched gradually.⁹ Thakurgoan subdivision also

in connection with Dinajpur by railway and this route was extended to Rsulpur in the extreme north of the district.¹⁰ Balurghat subdivision enjoyed rail service through Hili station 26 Kms. east of it.

The overall transport and communication scenario of Dinajpur district before independent was not in deplorable state in compare to other part of Bengal. Naturally in the prosperous agricultural region import-export business was flourished. Prof. Ananda Gopal Ghosh has addressed the economy of Dinajpur district saying “*chal, chini, chat, gur; chare niye Dinajpur*”.¹¹ That means few industries were there based on agriculture. Good state of communication and prosperous economy caused the progressed in education and culture. But after independence and bifurcation of the district the scenario distorted tremendously and due to manmade caused the district specially Indian West Dinajpur became a remote district and economically deplorable in state.

In 1947 on 15th August in lieu of independent India divided into two dominion and eastern part of Bengal fell into Pakistan’s side named as East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The international boundary across Bengal was chalked out by a commission headed by Cyril Redcliff. Radcliff commission’s recommendation divided Dinajpur district and two third of the district from northern and eastern portion has given to Pakistan named as Dinajpur and remaining one third as West Dinajpur became a district of west Bengal. Among the 30 police station consisting only 10 has formed the west Dinajpur district. These were – Balurghat, Kumarganj, Gangarampur, Tapan, Kushmundi, Bansihari, Kaliaganj, Hemtabad, Raiganj and Itahar.¹² First four were in Balurghat subdivision and latter six were in Raiganj subdivision. On 7th may 1948 AD Hili police station was created under Balurghat subdivision. Balurghat was declared as district administrative centre.¹³

This new born district was in full of problems. It’s first and foremost problem was detachment with northern portion that means Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri which was a problem of Bengal also. Another is before independent transport and communication of present day’s west Dinajpur was to eastward direction because of its chief administrative centre and main source of communication. But after independence West Dinajpur’s eastern and southern boundary transform into borderline of Pakistan. Generally the communication and transport direction turned to west. But roadway to west was not in satisfactory state. We can reveal the condition mentioning that the only tarmac road of this new born district was Balurghat to Hili.¹⁴ Only Radhikapur to Raiganj metergauge 46 kilometers rail line in the district run to Katihar in Behar through Barsai junction. The navigable river could be the medium of transport but international Radcliff line cut them from upper portion and lower also. Naturally these became impossible to use as so.

The problems were solved partially in 1956 AD by the recommendation of state reorganization commission. By its’ recommendation a portion of 732.88 square mile of purnia district consisting Chopra, Islampur, Goalpokhor, and Karandighi police station joined to west Dinajpur.¹⁵ Islampur was declared as third subdivision of the district consisting of these four police stations. It gave a corridor to connect with Darjeeling – Jalpaiguri and 55 kilometers of railway line with Aluabari and Dalkhola station. By getting islampur subdivision 55 kilometers portion of national highway no 31 included to this district.¹⁶ One thing to mention that inclusion of islampur subdivision gave some relaxation to northern portion of the district but the southern portion was still in dark. It will be clear if we throw light on the communication of Balurghat, the administrative centre of the district with Calcutta.

Before 1947 AD tour from Balurghat to Calcutta conducted through Hili station. Tarmac road and available bus caused easier to reach Hili from Balurghat. From Hili to Calcutta by Assam mail was a journey of five hours and fare was Rs-8 per head. After independence till 1952 AD the border was open and one could go from Hili to Darsana, then crossing the border from Barnpur one could go Calcutta giving new fare. But in 1952 AD the starting of passport system caused the death of former facilities. The traveling to Calcutta by train from Hili came to an end. No road was made to Malda till then, so only remaining route to Calcutta was via Kaliaganj- Katihar- Manihrihat and crossing the Ganges by ferry was to take the Assam link express from Sakrigalihat one could reach Calcutta. The journey of five hours became of twenty five hours as the result of bifurcation.¹⁷ No doubt the fare was increased several times. Naturally the southern part of west Dinajpur became a remote area of Bengal from its capital Calcutta.

By road Calcutta was not connected to the administrative head quarter of district. From Balurghat to Raiganj road was '*Kacha*', Buniadpur- Malda road was not constructed then. Balurghat –Tapan-Kardaha, Abidpur- Gangarampur- Kardaha, Raiganj- Patirajhat, Kumarganj-Patiram roads were in the state usable in dry season only. There was no bridge across the rivers. So transport by road of new born West Dinajpur district was in inverted condition. This not only reduced the production of agriculture, but also affected the industries and business based on agriculture. An instance may reveal the changed state from the description of William Hunter in 1876 AD we came to know that Hili was an important trading center. Hili-Balurghat- Ghoraghat-region was rich in rich production and huge quantity of surplus rice was exported through the port Hili. In 1872 AD and 1873 AD volume of exported rice from this region were respectively 844428 mounds (40 kilogram) and 784423 mounds and a big portion of it was through Hili. After extension of northern Bengal state railway in 1873-74 AD this quantity was increased.¹⁸ But after independence the lower flows of the rivers and Hili station were sent to Pakistan. No doubt this caused a tremendous economic setback to the region of West Dinajpur district.

Situation changed steadily during 1951-61 AD by first and second five year plans. During this time few important roads were made such as Raiganj to Dalkhola (48 kilometer) road, part of national highway no 34 which joined to NH 31 at Dalkhola. State road from Balurghat to Buniadpur (55 kilometer) and Buniadpur to Raiganj (55 kilometer) were connected. Roads under district board made during this period were Kumarganj- Patiram (14 kms.), Balurghat- Naskarhat (21 kms), Fatepur- Churamon (31 kilometers), Kushmundi- Mahipaldighi (11 kms.), Gajol- Banshihari (13 kms.), Bindol- Maharajhat (11 kms.), and Fatepur- banshihari (17 kms.). Few *kaccha* village roads were constructed by development department. These were Gangarampur – Tapan, Tapan –Kardaha, Gangarampur- Abidpur, Tapan- Laskarhat, Kunarhat- Durgapur etc. Through these roads were *kaccha* but eligible for vehicle during dry season.¹⁹

During 1951-61 AD the scenario of roadmap was developed but development of railway remains in the stage of 1947 AD. Inclusion of Islampur subdivision gave the opportunity to increase business by using Dalkhola and Aluabari station. Radhikapur and Raiganj station served the northern portion of the district. Administrative center Balurghat remains rail less throughout the century. State government established an aerodrome at Mahinagar, near Balurghat. It was used to export jute fiber mainly. But in 60's the chapter of airway came to close.

Next three decades that means till the division of west Dinajpur the scenario of transport and communication was not altered extensively. Except few link roads two important roads one Itahar to Raiganj (52 kms.) and another Balurghat to Gajol via Tapan were constructed. Since 1969 AD road

transport became faster due to construction of Farakka Bridge by both road and rail direct communication to Calcutta became easier. Though west Dinajpur district was mainly road based the northern portion got opportunity to use rail transport through Aluabari, Dalkhola, and few nearest stations. As no rail route was made newly, the head quarter of the district, Balurghat remains rail less even till the last year of the millennium. The result is clear in the economic scenario of the district.

The industrial scenario of west Dinajpur was in a shabby state. Few industries though in medium scale established at the northern part of the district. A paper mill, a spinning mill, a flower mill, a barn mill, an electric pole factory and a plastic factory were established at Raiganj. A jute carpet factory and a silk factory established at Kaliaganj.²⁰ Chopra and Islampur police station are the exporter of jute and tea, industries also developed in these areas. No doubt these are the result of getting scope of national highway and rail transport. On the other hand in southern part of the district medium scale industrial units were only a card board factory at Harirampur and a stone breaking factory at Gangarampur were established and were based on local needs.²¹ So it is clear that this part of the district was industrially poor and no doubt due to the lack of rail transport.

In respect of small scale industry west Dinajpur no doubt was in deplorable condition. Except coochbehar this was the poorest district in west Bengal in number of small scale industry.²² The main industries were handloom, oil mill, rice mill, wheat mill, bidi making etc. The distribution of these industrial units also reveals that the northern portion got priority for the cause of rail transport. Out of 267 handloom units around the district 144 were at Raiganj police station.²³ Establishment of oil mill units also Kaliaganj centric-32 at Kaliaganj, 8 at Raiganj, whereas only 3 units at Balurghat and 4 at Tapan police station. The wheat mill also were distributed at same manner- 75 at Kaliaganj, 60 at Raiganj, but only 40 at Balurghat and 5 at Tapan area.²⁴ For compulsion of reducing the caring cost the rice mills are distributed to southern part of the district. So it may be imagined that the prosperous southern part of west Dinajpur badly affected due to bifurcation of former Dinajpur.

Administrative setback within the district was that the communication from Balurghat to chopra, the northern point of district was very difficult and longtime program. Naturally the people of Islampur subdivision suffered lots for their official works. This communication gap specially the rail communication caused another bifurcation of the district in 1992AD. The Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur –two districts came into existence but except the establishment of few concrete bridges transport system remain in parallel state. Dakshin Dinajpur has got rail communication from Balurghat to Ekhlakhi in 2005AD. This has given few opportunities but wagon remained in thinking. So the economic scenario of Dakshin Dinajpur is still in a poor condition.

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