

From Manbhum to Purulia: Remembering the Changing Role of the Leadership and Adivasi Identity in South-West Bengal

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Abstract: *Present Purulia of West Bengal was an integral part of former Manbhum district of Bihar Province till 1956. The district came into existence in 1833 to fulfil the colonial administrative purposes and from 1838 Purulia became its headquarter and hub of various socio-cultural, economic and political activities. Basically, 1920 onwards Bengali middle class leadership aroused as the sole organiser and spokesperson of national movements in the district until India achieved her independence. But that was beginning of a new movement for Bengali language from 1948 and resulted the division of Manbhum into two separate districts for two states namely Purulia and Dhanbad in 1956. In this paper I argue that identity of South-West frontier Bengal changed time to time with the changing leadership and boundaries. Ultimately, the most impressive part of the history of this region was the establishment of Bengali domination along with the Adivasi cultural identity.*

Keywords: Manbhum, Purulia, Leadership, Adivasis, Changing Identity

Studying the Regional History always a matter of elevation in understanding to the total history because the fragments has the power to make a full image of the past events. In this regard South-West frontier part of Bengal is a non-fertile land from irrigation point view but fertile region for historical explorations as this land was little known to the outsiders at least before the British colonial rule. After penetration and interference of colonial policies to the region various ups and downs began to happen time to time. This was resulted political disturbances throughout the region popularly known as Chuar Rebellion, which ultimately forced the colonial Company's government in creating the Jungal Mahal(1805) and Manbhum districts(1833)to maintain the law and order situations of the area and more importantly to smooth collection of land-revenue. Therefore, administrative measures had been taken for implementing and justifying their policies and the area brought under the colonial control. Initially, Manbhum had its headquarters at Manbazar but later on administrative centre of the district shifted to Purulia in 1838.¹Thereafter, Purulia came into existence for the first time as a place with immense administrative possibility. 1852 A.D onwards the northern part of the region came to known as Govindapur and later which became Dhanbad Subdivision.² Hence, present Purulia district was an integral part of previous Manbhum district in South-West Bengal. The geo-political location of the district gave unique characteristics, which creates many conspicuous binary such as buffer zone of two cultures namely Aryan and Adivasis, confluence of two dominating languages, Bengali and Hindi. Besides these the land was known for homeland of various Adivasi communities and their linguistic-cultural phenomena. Truly speaking, the Adivasis marked their existence with various activities in the history of Manbhum from 1767 with the beginning of colonial intervention, for instances Chuar Rebellion (1767-1799) was popular local peoples uprising.³In 1832 Ganga Narayan Hungama or Rebellion had Adivasi background and in 1855-56 impact of Santal Rebellion was spread all over the district⁴. This area was a part of Bengal Presidency but as a result of annulment of Bengal Partition in 1911, to weaken the Bengal's dominating political power the British government created a separate Bihar province including Orissa and Chotanagpur division with Manbhum district in 1912.⁵Thereafter, Manbhum was remained an inseparable part of Bihar Province up to 1956, when Manbhum was divided into two districts namely Purulia and Dhanbad. On first November, 1956 Purulia became a part of West Bengal state with new identity of Bengali dominated district. This

present paper argues that with the changing of geo-polity of the region, its identity and other contours also changed simultaneously and time to time. It is considered that the most important phase of South-West Bengal from 1948 to 1956 when Language movement had taken place against the Bihar state policy and plight for merging with West Bengal, where Bengali middle class leadership played pivotal role and other ethnic-linguistic voices submerged under the Bengali identity.

Geo-polity of Manbhum District:

Once the south-west Bengal was constituted by Manbhum, Medinipur, Bankura, including some parts of Birbhum and Bardhaman, which was popularly known as Jungle Mahal. This was a virgin tract because it did not come under the direct jurisdiction of so called mainstream political power. There were reasons behind this virgin isolation such as arid uneven land, mountainous ranges, impassable roads encircled by dense forests and unhealthy weather.⁶After getting Diwani Rights from Mughal Emperor Shah Alam-II the British East India Company's government started to exercise its power over this study area. As a consequence the local landlords and Adivasi-Bhumij people rouse in protest against the alien power. The local landlords and people did not capitulate before company's Government by surrendering their independence.⁷Therefore, the local leaders with their counterpart started to fight against the Company's arm corps from 1767 onwards, however the rebellion came to an end through ruthless suppression and inhuman measures under the leadership of Mr. Fergusson. Although this series of struggles of the local peoples under their own leadership had Adivasi background and a stronghold over the region, thus gave a great impetus to the colonial government. In this context Company's government decided to establish a new district, namely Jungle Mahals under the supervision of one Magistrate through the Regulation-XVIII of 1805 with its headquarters at Bankura and Henry Strachey was its first Magistrate.⁸This was first step towards the reshape of the region with the main colonial objectives to maintain peace and smooth extraction of land revenue. However, this settlement proved successful because there were no recorded disturbances till 1832, when Ganganarayan Singh and his followers roused with traditional arms against the Company's rule. Gradually their activity took turn as the rebellion and was spread all over the region within very short of time, known as Ganga Narayan Hungama in contemporary official records. Ultimately the rebellion was suppressed by the British troops but its impact remained indelible as the administrative measures had taken again and Manbhum as a new district came into existence through the Regulation-XIII of 1833. According to Herbert Coupland that this was an administrative action.⁹Initially Manbazar was its headquarters but duly shifted to Purulia in 1838 for its location at the centre of the District. In 1845 Singbhum district was created and Dhalbhum was added to it. The major change was taken place in 1854, when Act XX was passed and with this act the district came under the civil administration in place of military one for the first time. Then the district placed under the commissioner of Chotanagpur division. Thereafter, Manbhum gradually reduced in size time to time in the name administrative betterment. It is estimated that from 1833 to 1879 the geographical size reduced to its half.¹⁰

During the Bengal Partition in 1905 the district was not highlighted but after its annulment in 1911, eventually next year the history of Manbhum came under the influence of the British divide and rule policy because Manbhum was brought under a new created province 'Bihar.' Eventually it was an opportunity to the emerging Bihari educated people because this separation gave them a space and scope for their development out of Bengalis domination. Historically speaking, Kolkata or Bengal was the basis of colonial rule in India and Bengalis were in advance stage as they were first recipients of all colonial benefits throughout the Bengal presidency and beyond.

The Land, People and Culture:

Geographically this district was located in the Eastern most part of the Chotanagpur plateau, therefore, uneven landscape, dense forestry was common feature and gave the region an indomitable identity. This district was surrounded by neighbouring other districts like-Hazaribagh, Santal-Parganas and Bardhaman in North Bankura and Medinipur in the Eastern part, Medinipur, Singbhum in the South and Ranchi, Hazaribagh in the Western side. This was an bristly land with multiple small highlands situated between 20*43' and 24*4' North latitude, other hand 45*49' and 86*54' East longitude. The total area of the district was 4147 sq. mile with immense verities of natural resources.¹¹Such as its northern part known as Dhanbad region was full of minerals and led the industrialization under the colonial as well as post-colonial period. Other part of the district under Purulia Subdivision was covered by forestry and called as woodland. Being an inseparable part of Chotanagpur plateau its landscape remained infertility in nature from the irrigational point of view, but riverside and other plain areas had the scope of agricultural productions during the rainy seasons. According to the form of landscape there were small highlands locally known as dungri and distribution of the population was similarly scattered. There was immense variation of its landscape and thus its population because people mostly settled there, where livelihood was easier. Therefore its north and north-eastern part was more congested than other areas.¹²The district was also known for its ethnical, linguistic, cultural diversity and homeland of so called marginalised communities. For instances, Santal, Bhumij, Karmali, Munda, Ho, Parhaiy,Shabar, Birhor, Kharia, Bedia or Bedeetc were Adivasis, other backward communities like- Mahato, Bagdi, Mali, Sahis, Domhad constituted the largest population of the district.¹³Besides these the other communities like- Brahman, Muslims, Marwari, Bania etc. made their residence in the course of time though their population was less in proportionate to the total population of the district. The District had reputation for Adivasi Cultural heritage from early period of time and the area belong to the Bajrabhumi ancient name of the region.¹⁴Different Adivasi groups carried out their different ethnic linkages through the ages, like Austric-Mundari, Dravid. On the basis of the Adivasi tradition various folk-cultural image had been developed by the people of the land. Karam, Baha, Sohrai, Tusu, Bhadu, Jhumur,Chhau,Nachni, Natua etc. popular folk-cultures originated from the land of assimilation of different ethnicity , cultures and languages. Although it was found that some writers showed the study area as overwhelmingly dominated by the Bengali language and culture and they extracted colonial Scholars. Such as H. Beverley's report on the Census of Bengal, 1872, commented that the district of Manbhoom contains large portion of Bengalis, and is much more civilized than the rest of Chotanagpur.¹⁵ However, the land never came under full dominance of any linguistic and ethnical hegemony at least up to mid of 19th century. Due to close vicinity to Bengal the language of Manbhoom became mixed in nature with Adivasi languages and formed separate style, which was termed by linguistic expert Sukumar Sen as 'Jharkhandi' sub-language.¹⁶However, the language of this land popularly known as 'Manbhuiya'. Besides this among the Adivasi languages Santali had prominence role in the area under study for period of time and during colonial era many recommendable works had been done in this regard.¹⁷

Emergence of New Leadership:

Bengal Presidency (Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) was the basis of colonial rule in India and simultaneously its benefits accepted by the Bengali-speaking people first. Similarly, with the introduction of full-fledged administrative setup in Manbhoom district, the educated middle class people from other part of Bengal settled in the region and Purulia as the headquarters of the district became a hub of political, economic and social activities. Gradually, these people subsided the voices of the aboriginals and established their political and cultural hegemony. This trend can be clearly understood through the political activities of the region during 20th century under the All India

Congress ideology. In this case M.K. Gandhi played an important role for lightening up the political consciousness of Indian masses. Manbhum also came under his influence during non-cooperation movement. This was the beginning of emergence of new Bengali people's leadership, those who settled in the district to fulfil their professional demands and in search of colonial livelihood. This view was supported by confidential Bihar government report of 1932: 'Manbhum has been notorious for years past on account of its disloyal activities. Its proximity to Bengal, its Bengali population, the influx of larger number of Eastern Bengalees, who have settled here either as lawyers or as Congress workers, the illiteracy and ignorance of the masses, who are easily excitable and were notorious for their criminal tendencies, supplied all the elements for fomenting disaffection among its people.'¹⁸Evidently the nationalist leadership of the area were outsiders for instances- Sarat Chandra Sen, his son Jimutbahan Sen, Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta, Atul Chandra Ghosh and other prominent leaders settled in Manbhum and made their own homeland through political and Socio-cultural contributions. It was this leadership mostly influenced by Gandhian thoughts and thrown themselves for organizing the mass struggle against the colonial government. In this context, they formed Manbhum District Congress Committee(MDCC) in January, 1921 in Purulia to launch the Non-Cooperation Movement throughout the district. In presence of Dr. Rajendra Prasad the committee was started its journey as Nilkantha Chatterjee became its founding president and Gobinda Chandra Bhattacharya its secretary.¹⁹Besides the Congressi politics the land became fertile for other political activities also. Formation of Congress party gave a great impetus to the upcoming national movements in the district. In the midst of this wave Bihar Provincial government realised that mix-cultural Manbhum would carry the separatist element. From that concern the state governmental policy after independence became more intolerable and started to inject the Hindi language in every spheres of the district. There were various steps had been taken in this regard like-establishment of Hindi medium schools, discontinued the salary of the Bengali medium teachers, appointment of Hindi teachers in the schools, only Hindi permitted for administrative works throughout the district.

Struggle for Bengali Language:

In response to Hindization policy of the Bihar government and non-government agencies Bengali-speaking leaders took their own course of action. There was fraction of opinion among the nationalist leaders of the district due to linguistic emotional issue. Ultimately this turmoil situations gave rise of a new organization namely Lok Sevak Sangh on 13th June, 1948 with Atul Chandra Ghosh President and Bibhutibhusan Dasgupta its secretary respectively and founding members were Satyakinkar Mahato, Bhajahari Mahato, Labanyaprabha Ghosh, Jagabandhu Bhattacharya, Bhimchandra Mahato, Arunchandra Ghosh. Initially they started constructive social works and gradually gained popularity among most of the people of the district. They launched various programmes and exclusively propagated their demand throughout the district. Leadership under Lok sevak Sangh believed that Manbhum district was a Bengali dominated and therefore, it was their genuine right to become part of West Bengal again which was long years ago in history of south-west Bengal. However, the constant intimacy of leaders with the local villagers irrespective their caste, creed, ethnicity and other identity and their voice did not come out as their own. The leaders of language movement took every possible steps to popularise the Bengali language and merge with West Bengal. Such as entering into the electorate politics to press the demand and justify their claim in the state assembly and even in Indian parliament. Meanwhile, under growing pressure of language movements the Central government of India agreed to appoint a State Reorganization Commission(SRC) in December, 1953 to settle the disputes.²⁰The leaders of Manbhum took a masterstroke programme namely the Tusu Satyagraha because this folk-culture had immense popularity among the local people. As Dr. Suhrid Kumar Bhoumik explained as follow-

“Perhaps ‘tusu’ is a non-Aryan word coming from Austro-Asiatic Kol origin, to mean flower, bunch of flowers, bud etc. In Santali ‘bahatusu’ means a bunch of flowers. ‘tusu’ means simply bud, a leaf of bud a symbol of youth and beauty.”²¹

Hence, it was used for attract the people and brought them under their fold and it proved successive one. Ultimately, a bill was passed as Bihar and West Bengal (Transfer of Territories) Act, 1956 on the basis of SRC recommendations and Manbhum was divided into two separate districts. Thus, Purulia(with sixteenth Police stations) and Dhanbad came into existence in place of former one. This was the final of long historical legacy of changing and rearrangement the geo-political boundary of south-west frontier Bengal. Though, from the point of view of Bengali leadership it was a partial achievement because they once claimed whole united Manbhum.

There is little doubt that the history of Manbhum or South-West frontier Bengal had a unique identity of struggle. It was that identity which compelled the colonial government to change its boundary in the name of administration for many occasions. However, with the course of time the leadership of the region also changed severally. If we really try to understand the spirit of the soil then we have to look into the people’s socio-cultural background and their long performed activities. This land witnessed a long tradition of the Adivasis, those who successfully maintained their own saga of independent living and also played a leading role against the outsider domination. However, major change had been occurred during the first half of 20th century, when the modern educated Bengalis arouse in leadership and spread their influence over a large section of Adivasi population. Consequently this was resulted the successful inclusion of a large part of Manbhum to West Bengal in the name of Purulia District on 1st November, 1956. It is to be said that though language movement established the Bengali influence but at the same time it showed no aggressiveness. Therefore, the people of the study area have been lived in harmony and flourished their own socio-cultural traits in later course of time.

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