

Conflict and Collaboration: Burdwan Raj and Its Relationship with the British(1757-1947)

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Abstract: This paper examines the complex relationship between the Burdwan Raj, a major zamindari (landholding estate) in Bengal, and the British East India Company and subsequent British Raj from 1757 to 1947. The paper explores the early conflicts between the British and the Burdwan Raj during the rule of Trilokchand and Tejchand; the rapid improvement of relations during the rule of Mahatabchand, Aftabchand and Bijoychand; and the growing closeness between the Burdwan Raj and the Indian National Congress during the reign of the Burdwan Raj ruler Udaychand. The paper argues that the relationship between the Burdwan Raj and the British was fundamentally governed by economic factors, specifically the estate's ability to meet revenue demands.

Keywords: Burdwan Raj, British, Conflict, Collaboration, Revenue Zamindari etc.

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Introduction

The British came to Bengal during the 17th century, when it was controlled by the Mughals. After the decline of the Mughal Empire, Bengal came under the control of the Nawabs – former officials of the Mughals –, who established their quasi- independent state there. During the rule of the Nawabs the power of the British increased rapidly and in 1757 they defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, in the Battle of Plassey which effectively ended the supremacy of the Nawabs in Bengal and made them puppets of the British East India Company. The victory in

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the Battle of Buxar (1764) against the Nawab of Bengal Mir Qasim further consolidated the British hold in Bengal and by 1793 they had complete control of Bengal.

The Burdwan Raj was a Zamindari estate from 1657 till 1955 – when the Zamindari System was abolished in India. It was established by Abu Rai, a banker and moneylender in 1657, when he was appointed as the *Kotwal*¹ and *Choudhury*² of Rekabi Bazaar and Mugholtuli of Burdwan by the Mughals. Abu Rai got this appointment as a reward for helping the Mughal army with provisions in Burdwan, when they were in dire need of it.³ Abu Rai's family was originally from Lahore, his grandfather Sangam Rai settled down in Baikanthapur near Burdwan after coming back from a pilgrimage.⁴ Abu Rai's son Babu Rai acquired the Pargana of Burdwan and three other estates. In 1689 His grandson Krishnaram Rai obtained a *firman*⁵ from Aurangzeb by which Krishnaram was made the Zamindar and Choudhury of Burdwan and some other parganas. By the time the British came to power in Bengal Burdwan Raj had become one of the most powerful zamindaris in Bengal.

This paper attempts to explore the relationship of the British government with the Burdwan Raj during the period 1757–1947. In doing so it argues that the primary factor that governed the relationship was economic. The relationship initially centered on the ability of the Burdwan Raj to supply revenues to the British East India Company. When the Raj became a defaulter due to various reasons, the relationship became strained. However this underwent a change when revenue yields stabilized, so that in the long run the Burdwan Raj became the collaborators of the British. It focuses on the reigns of Trilokchand Rai (1744-1770), Tejchand (1770-1832), Mahtabchand (1832-1879), Aftabchand (1879-1885), Bijoychand (1885-1941) and Udaychand (1941-1955).

Trilokchand and the British-Political Conflict

Not much is known about the relationship between the British and the Burdwan Raj before 1757 apart from one particular incident. In 1755, when the 7th ruler of the Burdwan Raj family Trilokchand was ruling, Ramranjan Kabiraj, an important official of Burdwan Raj took 6357 rupees loan from a British called Mr. Wood. When Ramranjan failed to pay the loan in time Wood dragged him to the Kolkata Mayo's court. The court ordered that the Burdwan Raj's assets should be seized to recoup the loan. In response Trilokchand closed down the East India

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Company's factory in Khirpai and also shut down other British business institutions in Burdwan. The British appealed to the then Nawab of Bengal, Alivardi Khan, for reopening the business institutions of Bardhaman. Alivardi sent a Parwana to Trilokchand for reopening of the British business institutions which Trilokchand had to obey.⁶

Just before the battle of Plassey the East India Company asked Trilokchand to help them with a thousand troops which he flatly refused. After the battle of Plassey Mir Jafar became the Nawab of Bengal. He mortgaged and assigned the revenues of the districts of Burdwan and Nadia to the British in January 1758. In September 1760 Mir Qasim, the then Nawab of Bengal gave the British the right to collect the revenue from Burdwan, Medinipur and Chittagong. The Raj family of Burdwan was obviously not happy with these decisions and there were several clashes between the Burdwan Raj's men and the Company's forces in Burdwan. In 1759 Hugh Watts, who was appointed by the Company for collecting the revenue in Burdwan reported these clashes to Governor Holwell. In response, the East India Company sent an army of 130 Europeans and 100 sepoys to Burdwan. However, Trilokchand managed to calm the situation by sending a letter to the Company, where he pledged his allegiance to the Company.

Trilokchand was not very regular with the payments of the revenue. The Company repeatedly asked him to pay the revenue on time but he did not listen. Angered by this Governor Vansitart wrote to Trilokchand on November 7, 1760, that he was sending forces to bring him in. This terrified Trilokchand and he sent his lawyer Rajchandra Ray to Calcutta on 16th December 1760 for settling the revenues with the Company. Meanwhile Vansitart was informed by Mir Qasim that Trilokchand had recruited about 15000 men in his army and was planning a rebellion against the Company along with the Raja of Birbhum. Alarmed at this, Vansitart sent an army under Captain Martin White, who clashed with the combined forces of the Raja of Birbhum and Burdwan, on December 29 at the pass of the river Banka between Burdwan and Sangotgola.⁷ White easily defeated the forces of Burdwan and Birbhum. However, in spite of this act of rebellion the British did not remove Trilokchand from the Zamindari and maintained cordial relationship with him.

Tejchand and the British-Conflicts over Revenue

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After Trilokchand's death in 1770, his minor son Tejchand became the ruler. Since he was a minor, the zamindari was run by his mother Bishunkumari. Soon a conflict developed between the Diwan of Burdwan Brajakishore Roy and Bishunkumari. In 1771 Bishunkumari complained to the Council that Brajakishore did not accept the suzerainty of the Raja of Burdwan and asked them to remove Brajakishore. After the enquiry the Council found the charge baseless and reinstated Brajakishore to his position. This made Bishunkumari powerless and she lost all control over the zamindari. In 1775 Bishunkumari again complained to the Council against Brajakishore and the Resident of Burdwan Graham Stewart. This time the charge was of misappropriation of the treasury funds. While Graham was let off, Brajakishore was found guilty and was dismissed from the Diwan's post and Bishunkumari took over charge of the zamindari.⁸ However, soon conflict arose between the British and Bishunkumari and Brajakishore was brought back as the Diwan in 1777.

From 1777 onwards a long series of disputes regarding the payment of revenue started between the Burdwan Raj and the British. In 1777-78 Brajakishore failed to clear the revenue arrears that were due to the Council. As a result he was dismissed again and Bishunkumari was restored to power. However in 1778-79 Bishunkumari failed to pay the revenue in time and was dismissed. In her place Tejchand was appointed but he failed to clear the revenues. In 1780-81, Raja Nabakrishna Deb (founder of the Shobhabajar Raj family) was made the 'Sezawul' of Burdwan by the Council. He ran things smoothly and paid the revenue in time during 1780-81. Happy with his work the Council extended his tenure for one more year. However this time he failed to clear the revenue in time and was dismissed. In 1783 Tejchand was given the responsibility of the zamindari on a three year lease. However he failed to pay the revenue in time during 1784. He only paid the full revenue when the British threatened to arrest his *Karkun*⁹ Jagat Narayan Mitra. In 1787 Tejchand again failed to clear the revenue because of severe floods and asked for a remission which was not granted by the Council. The Council instead asked the District Collector to collect the revenue directly from the district. From this time onwards the British also started selling Burdwan Raj's land to recover the due revenues. In 1793 The Permanent Settlement was implemented in Burdwan. After the implementation of Permanent Settlement, Tejchand divided his entire zamindari in lots and gave his chief farmers the responsibilities of these lots. These farmers were supposed to collect the revenue for Tejchand.

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However this did not change things much and Tejchand's due revenue to the British increased. To free himself from this burden Tejchand sold his zamindari rights to his mother Bishunkumari in 1794.¹⁰ Bishunkumari managed the zamindari till her death in 1798. Although she saved the zamindari from complete liquidation, the conflicts with the British regarding the payment of revenue continued and a lot of Burdwan Raj's lands were sold to recover the due revenues.

It may be mentioned that Tejchand came back to the administration in 1798 and in 1802 introduced the *Patni* system in Burdwan.¹¹ Under this system Tejchand leased out his lands to the highest bidder for the collection of revenue, the lessee was called the *Patnidar*. If the *Patnidar* failed to pay the revenue in time then the Burdwan Raj had the right to dismiss them from the leased land. In February 1806 the British came to know that 3 lakh rupees worth of revenue was due from Tejchand. Tejchand sent a letter to the Board citing his difficulty in collecting the revenue and asked for a remission. However, the Board of Revenue did not listen to his plea and ordered the sale of his lands to recoup the revenue.

In December 1806 Tejchand bought the pargana of Bishnupur in auction. However he requested the Board of Revenue for the continuation of the collection of revenue of this area by the government officials for the year 1806. The Board rejected this request. In 1813 it was found out by the British that Tejchand had fraudulently sold Bishnupur pargana to his servant Ramsebak Mallick at a price far lower than the actual market price.¹² In December 1813 the revenue board sent a government official in Bishnupur to collect the revenue directly for the British government

To keep a check on Tejchand's revenue collection the British decided to re-establish the office of the *Kanungos*¹³ in Burdwan. Tejchand was clearly not happy with this decision and informed the Board that if the office of the *Kanungos* was restored then it would be impossible for him to collect the revenue properly. However the Board did not listen to him and re-established the *kanungos*. The *kanungos* were very strict with their job and in 1818 they reported to the Collector of Burdwan that a revenue of 13 lakhs was due from Tejchand. The Board put up Burdwan Raj's land for sale to recover the revenue. Tejchand wrote to the Board that he was unable to pay the revenue because he had more than 19 lakhs worth of revenue due from the *Patnidars*. However the *Patnidars*, in a separate petition informed the Board that they had paid all their dues in time to Tejchand. The enquiry by the British did not support Tejchand's claim

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and the Collector was again asked to put up Burdwan Raj's property for sale. However, on 20th July 1819 Tejchand paid most of the dues and saved his lands from being sold. In 1827 Raja Tejchand adopted his relative Paranchand's 7 year old son Chunilal and renamed him Mahtabchand Bahadur because his only son Pratapchand¹⁴ had died in 1821. In 1832 Raja Tejchand died and Mahtabchand became the ruler. This ended the rule of Sangam Roy family in Burdwan. The rest of the rulers of this zamindari had hardly any conflict with the British administration and were known for their loyalty towards the British.

The Cordial Phase of Burdwan Raj-British Relations

In 1832 Mahtabchand became the ruler; his elevation to the throne was approved by the Viceroy Lord Bentinck. However, as he was a minor his mother Kamalkumari became his Regent. After growing up Mahtabchand took the administration in his own hands in 1844.

In July 1855... several thousand Santhals armed with bows and arrows started an open insurrection.¹⁵ It was against the zamindars, moneylenders and the oppressive colonial authority. It was led by Sidho, Kanho, Murmu brothers, Chand and Bhairav and it quickly spread to Birbhum, Bakura, Murshidabad and Burdwan, causing great trouble to the colonial authorities.¹⁶ During the rebellion Mahtabchand supplied the British government with important information regarding the Santhal rebels. He also supplied the government with troops, elephants and provisions.¹⁷ This greatly helped the government in suppressing the rebellion. Again during the Sepoy Mutiny Mahtabchand greatly helped the British. He helped the British with elephants, bullock carts and other provision and also donated 5 lakh pounds to them. He also protected the Burdwan – Birbhum and Burdwan – Katwa road, so that the Berhampur cantonment and Fort William could exchange secret information between them.¹⁸

Because of his loyalty towards the British, he was bestowed with various awards. He was the first person from Bengal to be elected as the extra member of Viceroy's Legislative Council. In 1862 he was permitted by the British to keep arms. On 1st January 1877 Queen Victoria was announced as the Empress of India in the Delhi durbar. Mahtabchand was invited as a special guest to this Durbar. In the Durbar he was permitted to keep 13 guns and was awarded with the title of His Highness.

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However, apart from loyalty towards the British there was also a side of him that valued democratic ideals. In 1864 Burdwan Municipality was established. However all the members of the Municipality were elected by the British. So in 1873, 1045 citizens of Burdwan signed a petition urging the Municipality Chairman to start municipality elections. The first signature on this petition was of that of Mahtabchand, which ultimately tilted the decision in favour of the petitioners.

After Mahtabchand's death his adopted son Aftabchand Mahtab came to the throne. He was only 19 years old at the time of his accession so the affairs of the state were effectively run by the *Diwan* of the Burdwan Raj Banbehari Kapoor.¹⁹ Banbehari continued Mahtabchand's policy of being loyal to the British. Aftabchand died after only six years of rule. He was succeeded by his wife's adopted son Bijoychand Mahtab. However, since Bijoychand was still a minor the zamindari was managed by the Court of Wards until 1902. In 1902 he took the administration in his own hands. On 1st January 1903 the British government gave him the title of Rajadhiraj at the Delhi Durbar. A grand coronation ceremony was organised at the Burdwan palace, where Lieutenant Governor Bourdillon himself bestowed on him the honour. In 1903 Bijoychand Mahtab invited Lord Curzon to Burdwan and to make this moment memorable, he constructed a gothic style gate in the name of Lord Curzon, known as Curzon gate. In November 7, 1908, Indian revolutionaries tried to assassinate Lieutenant Governor Andrew Fraser but he was saved by Bijoychand.²⁰ In return Bijoychand was given the title of K.C.I.E and Indian Order of Merit (Class iii)²¹. In 1908, he was made given the title of 'Rajadhiraj' by Lord Minto. He was a member of the Bengal Legislative Council from 1907-1908 and the member of the Imperial Legislative Council from 1909-12. He was a member of the Executive Council of Bengal from 1919-24. In 1914 he joined the Committee that investigated the Budge Budge riots and the Komagata Maru incident. He was a member of the Indian Reforms Enquiry Commission of 1924. In 1938 he was selected as a member of the Francis Floud Commission which investigated the Permanent Settlement and suggested its replacement.

However in the late 1920's due to alleged corruption and mismanagement the condition of the Burdwan Raj greatly deteriorated. So in 1929 the Court of Wards took the management of the zamindari in its own hands and made Bijoychand's son Udaychand the manager of the estate. Only in 1936 Bijoychand was given back the administrative duties.²² Although his loyalty

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towards the British Government was unquestionable, he also maintained cordial relation with the Indian nationalists.²³ When Gandhi came to Burdwan in 1925 or when Subhas Chandra Basu came to Burdwan for a speech he cordially welcomed them.

After Bijoychand Mahtab's death his elder son Udaychand Mahtab became the Raja. During Bijoychand's rule he acted as the Diwan-i-Raj for several years. Like his father he had close ties with the British. During the British Raj he was made the member and Chairman of various important committees like the Damodar Canal Enquiry Committee of 1938, Chairman of Burdwan District Flood Relief Committee (1943-44), Chairman of Calcutta War Committee (1943-46), Chairman of Damodar Flood Central Enquiry Committee (1944), Member of the Select Committee of Bengal Agricultural Income Tax Bill (1944). He was also a member of the Legislative Assembly of Bengal during 1937-52. He had close ties with the British but he also understood that the days of the British rule were numbered in India so that he maintained good relationship with the Congress. After the independence of India he contested the election on Congress ticket,²⁴ but lost against a candidate of the Communist Party of India. With the abolition of Zamindari in 1954, the rule of Burdwan Raj family finally came to an end.

Conclusion

Thus it is seen that initially the relationship between the Burdwan Raj and the British was strained. Trilokchand, who was the Zamindar of Burdwan when the Revenue of the Burdwan district was ceded to the British, did not like the British. There were continuous disagreements between the British and Trilokchand. The British twice sent armies against Trilokchand and once their armies even clashed. The situation did not improve during his son Tejchand's rule. There were frequent conflicts between Tejchand, his mother Bishunkumari, and the British regarding the payment of revenues. The British frequently sold Burdwan zamindari land to recoup the due revenue, much to the dismay of Tejchand. The British also re-established the office of *Karkun* in Burdwan for keeping a check on the economic activities of Tejchand. The relationship between the Burdwan Raj and the British government drastically improved during Tejchand's adopted son Mahatabchand's rule. Mahatabchand was a British loyalist. He helped the British in suppressing the Santhal Rebellion and the Sepoy Mutiny and in return got numerous rewards

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from the British. He was awarded the title of His Highness and was the first person from Bengal to be elected as the extra member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council. During the short reign of his successor Aftabchand, cordiality with the British was maintained. Aftabchand's successor Bijoychand Mahtab was also a British loyalist. Bijoychand built a gothic style gate in the name of Viceroy Lord Curzon and saved the life of Lieutenant Governor Andrew Fraser from the Indian revolutionaries. Although his loyalty towards the British Government was unquestionable, he also maintained cordial relations with the Indian nationalists. When Indian nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose came to Burdwan, he warmly welcomed them. His son and the last ruler of this family Udaychand Mahtab also had close ties with the British who made him the Chairman of various important Committees. However, he also maintained very good relations with the Congress because he knew that British rule would soon be over and even contested an election on Congress ticket after independence.

Notes & References

¹ Kotwal during the medieval period meant local ruler of a large town or leader of a village or chief police officer.

² A Chowdhuri was the hereditary officer of the village who helped in the collection of revenue.

³ Ekkori Chattopadhyay, Bardhaman Jelar Itihas o Lokosongskriti, Volume 1, Radical Publishers, Kolkata, 2001, p.264.

⁴ Gopikanta Konar, Bardhaman Somogro, Volume 1, Dey Book Store, Kolkata, 2000, p.163.

⁵ Firman was a royal mandate or decree.

⁶ Niradbaran Sarkar, Bardhaman Raj Itibritto, Kalyan Book Agency, Burdwan, 1999, p.83.

⁷ Chattopadhyay, op.cit, p.303.

⁸ Sarkar, op.cit, pp.112-114.

⁹ A Karkun was the record keeper of the Parganas.

¹⁰ Santosh Kumar Chakravarti, The History of the Relations of the Rajas of Burdwan and the East India Company during 1760-1832, University of Burdwan, Burdwan, 1970, pp.109-110.

¹¹ Ibid, p.124.

¹² Ibid, p.128.

¹³ A Kanungo measured lands and kept land records of the villages.

¹⁴ Pratapchand was the son of Tejchand's sixth queen Nanki Kumari. He ran the zamindari from 1813-1821 and was destined to take over after Tejchand's death. However in 1821 he died under mysterious circumstances. In 1835 a person named Alok Shah claimed that he was Pratapchand and in 1821 he faked his death. He claimed that he was the rightful heir of this throne. The case was dragged to the court.

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¹⁵ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition : A History of Modern India*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2009, p.165.

¹⁶ Chattopadhyay, op.cit, p.350.

¹⁸ Joggeswor Choudhuri , *Bardhaman : Itihas o Songoskriti*, 1st Volume, Kolkata Pustak Biponi, Kolkata, 1990, p.112.

¹⁹ Sarkar, op.cit, p.284.

²⁰ Konar, op.cit, pp.155-156.

²¹ Indian Order of Merit (IOM) was a military and civilian decoration of the British India. Created by the East India Company in 1837, it was the oldest award for gallantry of the British Empire. The order had three classes until 1912, for which medals were awarded from the bottom to the top in silver, alloy of silver and gold and gold respectively.

²² Sarkar, op.cit, pp.391-392.

²³ Chattopadhyay, op.cit, p.361.

²⁴ Ibid, pp.364-365.