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Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee: Perception and Activities of an Indian Revolutionary

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Abstract

The revolutionary movement of Bengal and Bihar, which subsequently spread to the United Provinces and Punjab was essentially a middle-class movement.¹ Dr. Shanker Ghose also holds that the Indian revolutionary movement was confined to the bourgeoisie classes.² Like many structural generalizations, these gentle assertions require some qualification in the study of a profoundly ambiguous and contradictory pattern of an important aspect of the anti-imperialist movement in India. We must not forget that Prof. D. P. Mukherji in his work, 'Modern Indian Culture: A Sociological study'³ also refers to an Indian 'middle-middle class' in Colonial Sociology.

Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, as Prof. Bipan Chandra describes was a major new leader of the revolutionary terrorist politics in India.⁴ This paper tries to highlight his social roots which will have an additional advantage of bringing the historians into the closer touch with the problems, motivation and ideology of rural elites in Bengal during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The following questions arise in this context: First did the intelligentsia in Bengal during the period under review diligently cultivate the self-image of a middle class (*Madhyabittashreni*) below the zamindars and above the peasantry? Second, was Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee a mere 'floating individual'? Third, was he something like a caste-based Bengali *Bhadralok* or *Baboo* (English educated middle class or upper class elite)?

Jogesh Chandra's biographer Sanjay Ray holds that we get an insight into the rural environment and surroundings of the revolutionary leader in his formative years which had a profound impact on his subsequent political ideology. It becomes evident from his perceptive study that Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's roots were in rural India.⁵ Born in the year 1895 at the village of Gaodia near Bikrampur in the district of Dacca (Bangladesh) Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee writes about the nostalgic of his 'village surroundings' in the autobiography, in Search of Freedom, 'in 1967. He writes, 'Home is sweet to all but to me it is only a dream now I shall again see the place where I was born and spent my childhood which my friends and relatives, villagers and all others with whom I enjoyed. My grandmother, mother and many others lived and breathed their last in our village.⁶ Giving a vivid description of his village surrounding, Chatterjee, in his autobiography observes, "Each house of our village was a symbol of the and openness of village culture⁷ He mentions that people lived in self-contained village and they were sensitive and exposed to the bounties and hazards of nature The social and intellectual awareness in the district village of Bikrampur Chatterjee recalls, was not so often found in many parts of India of those days Jogesh Chandra

imbibed the spirit of freedom from his village surroundings.⁸ At a very young age, he was thrilled by the heroic exploits in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which he heard from his grandmother. However, the man who influenced him most when he was young was the cousin of his father, who was a *Naib* in a *Zamindari* estate. He does not mention his name. It was from him that Jogesh Chandra first heard of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. Great persons like Dr. Jagdish Chandra Bose, Dr. Aghornath Chakraborty, Chittaranjan Das and Dipankar Atish which was an important centre of learning.

As the schools of Bikrampur were centres of seditious activities, his childhood was spent in the atmosphere of Swadeshi movement. There were frequent raids on the houses of teachers and students who participated in the Swadeshi movement. Despite the indifferent attitude of the British government towards the development of education in remote villages, there were a number of primary and middle schools and also National Schools in the district of Bikrampur which according to Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, had a unique culture of its own. Though the children in the village were more interested in childish pranks, games and Puja festivals, and disliked the school-going children no child coming from could avoid the school. Chatterjee recollects that his childhood students were all clad in *Khaddar* when a Swadeshi meeting was held in 1905, which was presided by the grey-haired headmaster of the neighbouring village school, and the children song, "Bow to the course cloth as our poverty-stricken mother India cannot afford anything better.....". Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee says, "The meeting was beginning of my quest for the freedom of my country." Jogesh Chandra writes in his autobiography that the speeches on *Swadeshi* and *Boycott* left a 'lasting impression' in his childish mind. He recalls that his father, Shri Bipin Behari Chatterjee, a businessman at Daulatkhan district of Barisal, did not send Manchester clothes during the Puja festival but in did not distress Jogesh Chandra as thought the *Swadeshi* movement was indeed a liberation movement. He thought science Mother India was in chains; he had no right to enjoy the Puja festival.

According to Sanjay Ray, there was a branch of Anushilan Samiti even in the remote village of Gaodia and the youth of the envinced keen interest in revolutionary activities. The essays and the articles on the anti-imperialist movement published in 'Hitavadi' and 'Bangabasi' made profound impact on the youth of Gaodia. Young Jogesh read this article from cover to cover and he asked his friends to sacrifice their life in the service of their Motherland.⁹ He also read the article on Mujaffarpur Bomb Conspiracy Case. The writings of Aurobindo and martyrdom of Khudiram Bose, Prafulla Chaki, Kanailal Dutta and Satyendra Nath Bose made a profound impact on Jogesh Chatterjee in his formative years.¹⁰

Jogesh Chandra writes in his autobiography that after staying in Gaodia for nearly two years as a student of the Middle English School, he proceeded to Daulatkhan along with his father in 1907. The soil of Daulatkhan was rich. It was a bigger place than Gaodia and was a business centre. The Muslims in Daulatkhan, though in majority, were not interested in taking active involvement in the *Swadeshi* movement. He found the place very dull. In 1909, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee left Daulatkhan from Comilla for further education. He was left by his father under the guardianship of his uncle, Bishweshwar Chatterjee who was a member of the *Anushilan Samiti* and a pleader in the Comilla court. Comilla was not a village but a town and the house of Bishweshwar Chatterjee was something like a free students' hostel. It was here when Jogesh Chandra came in close contact with Biren Chatterjee, one of the prominent leaders of *Anushilan Samiti*.

We come to know about the activities of *Anushilan Samiti* in rural areas from the Home-political Deposit, August 1909, File No. 21 preserved in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, This file mentions that the member the *Anushilan Samiti* were urged to prepare detailed 'village notes' regarding the natural features such as roads, ghats fields, climate, houses in the village, a list of good persons (their enthusiasm, enterprise and capacity of work) and the bad characters in every village and also about rural problems (inconvenience, impediments and obstacles).¹¹

Sanjay Roy, in his work, 'Biplabi Jogesh Chatterjee' says that it was in Comilla where Jogesh Chatterjee became a member of the *Anushilan Samiti*. The mental horizon of young Jogesh Chandra widened after his arrival from Comilla. It was here when Jogesh Chatterjee was initiated into revolutionary cult by Biren Chatterjee. Mr. Biren Chatterjee replied that the revolutionaries must instill courage among the masses and provide leadership in the anti-imperialist movement without which mass mobilization in India would not be possible. Though Jogesh Chatterjee plunged himself deeper into the urban politics and the revolutionary movement, he never forget his rural roots.¹² Jogesh Chandra popularized the revolutionary cult among the students and developed the village units. Chatterjee was associated with the leaders of Comilla *Anushilan Samiti*, of the Tripura district he assisted Purna Chakraborty in strengthening the Comilla, Brahmanbaria and Chandpur centres of the *Anushilan Samiti*.¹³

We find a detailed account of the Comilla Organization of the *Anushilan Samiti* in Jogesh Chandra's detailed autobiography. The *District Organizer* of Comilla Organisation supervised the rural constructive activities of the districts of Chittagong Division (Tripura, Chittagong and Noakhali districts). A remarkable feature was that strict discipline was maintained in the organisation by the *District Organiser*. As far as the revolutionary activities were concerned, the *District Organiser*, alone, had no authority to organise political dacoity or murder in any of the above-mentioned districts. Their motto was to serve the Motherland in various ways. Jogesh Chandra maintains that its members were genuine '*Karmayogins*' Primarily their object was political as they launched the movement for the liberation against the Raj. But it is not true that they were indifferent to socio-economic problems like rural welfare.¹⁴

According to Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, initially the *Anushilan Samiti* had no Muslim member, and they were imbued with the ideas of exponents of Hindu Revivalism and Nationalism.¹⁵ He tells us that *Anushilan Samiti*'s branch in Comilla had two centres in the village of Belonia and Udaipur. One of the main objects of the *Anushilanites* was to arouse political consciousness in rural Bengal. He adds that there were some very earnest members and rural activists in the different villages of Comilla and Chittagong divisions.¹⁶ Jogesh Chandra also refers to some rural elites who came to the rescue of the *Anushilan Samiti* in dire distress on several occasions. Furthermore, the sympathizers of the *samiti* and their family members suffered terribly due to police atrocities.

In the context Jogesh Chandra cites the example of well-know Sarkar family of village Korpai. All three brothers of the Sarkar family, who were 'rural elites' had to abscond for some time due to their political activities. Their big house and property were seized by the police. Even women and children of the Sarkar family were tortured and driven out from their residence. Yet, the members of the Sarkar family refused to bow before the authorities¹⁷.

The revolutionary magazines and pamphlets, like the *Sandhya* and *Jugantar* were circulated in the village of Comilla district. The significance of Swadeshi and Boycott movement became clear to even illiterate villagers only due to the good work done by the rural activists of the *Anushilan Samiti*. Thus it is evident that the revolutionary rural elites did believe in mass mobilization in rural

Bengal. The members of the *Anushilan Samiti* were fairly active in the village of Gaodia. But there could not be any open political movement even in the name of rural welfare programmes. Their activities were watched closely by the police. Any new-comer, entering the village of Gaodia was looked upon with suspicion by the officials. In 1911, the *Anushilan* committed a 'political dacoity' in Gaodia. This incident has been vividly described by Pratul Ganguly, one of the leading revolutionary leaders of Bengal, in articles published in the *Prabasi* (a Bengali monthly, between 1912 and 1916).¹⁸

It has to be noted that all the *Anushilanites* who were associated with the Comilla Organisation were not rural elites. Bipin Behari Day; a close associate of Jogesh Chandra Chatterji belonged to a poor family in a remote village. Bipin Behari's father was working as a labourer on daily wages in a village near Kashipur in East Bengal. Jogesh Chandra's intimate and rural activists, such as Basanta, Shashi, Kaliprasanna Bagala and Tarini, belonged to middle class' in the same village near Kashipur. Quite significantly, rural elites and rural poor in rural Bengal made combined efforts to liberate the motherland, and undertake rural welfare programme.

It may be recalled that Jogesh Chandra was arrested in Calcutta in 1916 for seditious activities. He was taken to the Presidency Jail, Calcutta and the Rajshahi Central Jail.¹⁹ He was released on September 1, 1920. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Jogesh Chandra resumed his political activities in Comilla under the Congress umbrella. He had attended the Nagpur Session of the Congress and the Bengal Provincial Political Conference at Barisal. It was on his request that Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das addressed public meetings in the villages of Comilla Division for mass mobilization. Jogesh Chandra's uncle, Bishweshwar Chatterjee, who was rural elite, tried his utmost to create favourable atmosphere for the *Anushilanites* in the Daudkandi thana in Comilla.²⁰ Jogesh Chandra and his friends made Kalikachha, a famous village in the district of Tripura, their headquarters. Ullaskar Dutta the revolutionary leader, hailed from this village. A maternal uncle of Jogesh Chandra's friend, Pulin Gupta, was a rural elite. Pulin Gupta offered his brick-built house at Kalikachha to the *Anushilanites* for their activities. For some time, Jogesh Chandra and his friends came under the spell of Gandhian idiom of politics. The Khilafat Movement enabled the *Anushilanites* to obtain support of the Muslim community in mass mobilization activities in village. A Maulavi of Kalikachha, who has been educated in Deoband (U.P.) became a close associate Jogesh Chandra.

Jogesh Chandra received substantial assistance from Haladhar Babu, a distinguished lawyer of Comilla, writes Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, "our object was to gear up public opinion for non-cooperation. Every morning, we used to go to a village."²¹ They organised public meeting in the village afternoon, they formed village *panchayats*, and they urged villagers to become four-anna members of the Congress. They made contacts with rural elites and sought their assistance in the movement. Furthermore, the *Anushilanites* tried their best to make the villagers conscious of their rights and duties. It is a sober truth, that in 1920s, secret societies worked tirelessly in rural Bengal for the Congress propaganda work.

Lalmohan Saha, was a prominent rural elite of the village Uroail. He made profound impact on the youth movement in 1920s He was a personal friend of Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee. Under the guidance and supervision of Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, public meetings were held regularly at Kalikachha during the Non Cooperation movement.²²

After the withdrawal of the Non Cooperation Movement, Jogesh Chandra tried to analyse the 'Socio-historical causes' of the failure of Gandhian imperfect mass mobilization particularly in rural

Bengal. Jogesh Chandra held that the main reason was that self-contained village in rural India were indifferent to nationalist politics. He rightly pointed out that all villages were not like the village of Gaodia, Uroail and Kalikachha the villagers were mostly illiterate and fatalists. They lived in dire distress and utter poverty. But they prefer to remain silent and inactive. They believed that their miseries were God-ordained. Jogesh Chandra refers to the writings of R.C. Dutt and William Digby, who maintained that the Indian peasantry suffered silently, though they did not have a bellyful meal even once in a day. Besides, due to lack of communication facilities, most of the villagers lived in the narrow confines of the village, the world forgetting and by the world forget. Jogesh Chandra admits that the *Anushilanites* drew inspiration from the writings of Swami Vivekananda, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal and Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, who were ideologues of hindu revivalism and nationalism.²³ Naturally, the Muslims in rural India, due to their illiteracy did not evince adequate interest in the *Swadeshi*. But there was a marked change in the 1920s. The response of the Muslim community was favourable and articulate, but it was not adequate. Jogesh Chandra refers to one Maijha Mia, who vehemently criticized the *Anushilanites* of the *Swadeshi* era. In 1920s, However, the same Maijha Mia described the *Anushilanites* as ‘national heroes’ When they were released from Jails, Maijha Mia organised welcome functions for which he was warned by the police. On the whole, the Muslim elite evinced greater interest in urban politics than mass mobilization in rural areas. There, were of course, notable exceptions like Ashrafuddin Chaudhury and Nawab Faruqi, who were members of the *Khilafat Committee* in Comilla.²⁴

The attitude of rural elites becomes obvious from the following statement of Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, “...Though I come from a village, I never studied the life of villages thoroughly”²⁵. The extreme poverty in Rural India under the British rule rankled in the hearts of the Indian revolutionaries. Jogesh Chandra tells us that most of the villagers in rural Bengal were not properly fed, dressed and sheltered. Most of the families in villages could afford only earthen utensils. It is significant to note that they could not afford to become even ‘from anna’ member of the Indian National Congress.²⁵ Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee maintains that the *Swadeshi* Movement and Non-Cooperation Movement proved to be ineffective mass mobilization in rural areas, and this was natural if we keep in view the miserable life of poor villagers. Jogesh Chandra never forgot the lesson from his practical experiences as a rural activist.²⁷

In 1923, Jogesh Chandra was deputed by Dacca *Anushilan Samiti* to Banaras.²⁸ In U.P., Sachindra Nath Sanyal, Sachin Bakshi, Chandra Shekhar Azad, Bhagawati Charan Vora, Jaidev Kapoor, Sukhdev and others became his revolutionary comrades. Jogesh Chandra made Banaras, Kanpur and Lucknow his organizational centers. In his political ideology, we observe two separate strands of revolutionary ideology which developed since the first decade of the twentieth century. One group focused its attention primarily on urban politics. The other group supported Gandhian constructive program in rural areas, though it did not have complete faith in Gandhian idiom of politics. Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee belonged to this group. He never questioned the basic tenets of revolutionary ideology, though his role was constructive, and to great extent, Gandhi as a rural activist.²⁹ Jogesh Chandra spent about twenty-four years in different jails, and he was no hunger-strike for two and a half years (the longest been 142 days at a stretch!)³⁰ He figured prominently in conspiracy and sabotage cases in U.P., including the famous *Banaras Conspiracy Case* and the *Kakori Conspiracy Case*. He was one of the prominent founder members of the *Hindustan Republican Association*, which tried to organize armed revolution in India to overthrow the colonial rule. Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee formed the *Revolutionary Socialist Party of India* 1940, and during the Quit India Movement, at the instance of Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, he plunged in sabotage activities

throughout Northern India, and even tried to contact Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Azad Hindu Fauj.³¹

The perception of 'Indian situation' and stormy career of Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee make it abundantly clear that many India revolutionaries had rural background, and most of them were member of rural elite class. But it has to be noted that their approach to the nationalist politics was not elitist. Their sympathy for the exploited and down-trodden in rural India was spontaneous and genuine. Eminent historians of the Cambridge School such as Gallagher, Broomfield, Washbrook, Johnson, Anil Seal, Judith Brown and Bailey have been remarkably fruitful in items of new data and class analysis. But their tendency to play down the role of patriotic motivation and ideology and their knockings at trapdoor of historiography, sometimes, appear to be mechanistic and 'over-general'.³² The 'Cambridge approach' becomes more evident in the interpretation of the above-mentioned historians in terms of regional elites. Broomfield's brilliant work shows this elite conflict in a plural society of rural Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is a point to ponder over the statement of Prof. Sumit Sarkar that the very use of the term 'elite' in the context of India is dubious, if not irrelevant. He asserts that in Colonial India, only the 'whites' were truly exclusively elite.³³ It is true that Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee belonged to a family '*Bhadralok Bengalis*.' But it is also equally true that gradually and eventually he went far beyond his original 'rural-elite' confines of Rural Bengal. His autobiography is not merely the saga of a revolutionary's search for freedom but a quest for his own identity in nationalist politics and colonial sociology.

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