

Lives Under the Shadow of Conflict
Late Colonial Surveillance and Aspects of Second World
War in Bengal

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BY

Aritra Gangopadhyay

Registration Number: A00HI1100417

Under the Supervision of Prof. Suchetana Chattopadhyay

Department of History

Jadavpur University

Kolkata-700032

India

2023

Certified that the Thesis Entitled

Lives under the Shadow of Conflict: Late Colonial Surveillance and Aspects of Second World War in Bengal submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of **Prof. Suchetana Chattopadhyay** and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

Countersigned by the Supervisor

Candidate

(Prof. Suchetana Chattopadhyay)
Department of History,
Jadavpur University,
Kolkata
Dated:

(Aritra Gangopadhyay)
Dated:

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Abbreviations

AAI	Aliens Advisory Committee
AISF	All India Students Federation
AIYL	All India Youth League
ARP	Air Raid Protection
BLP	Bengal Labour Party
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
BPSF	Bengal Provincial Students Federation
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPI	Communist Party of India
FB	Forward Bloc
HSRA	Hindustan Socialist Republican Association
IB	Intelligence Bureau
IIL	Indian Independence League
INA	Indian National Army
KPM	Kolkata Police Museum
NAI	National Archives of India
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
RAF	Royal Air Force
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
SB	Special Branch
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives

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Introduction

This study serves as a montage of marginal lives, nondescript networks and long-forgotten collectives in late-colonial Bengal with regional as well as transcontinental dimensions. In the backdrop of the social upheaval accompanying Second World War, disparate characters, their deeds as well as misdeeds will be explored to assess the impact of tumultuous years at a microscopic level. With a focus on the monitoring and policing of subjects whose obedience seemed doubtful to the embattled rulers, the thesis will map the blood-soaked footprints of a moribund regime increasingly relying on outright repression and surveillance to counter real or imagined threats. Probing hitherto uncharted terrains of social existence at a particularly critical juncture of Bengal will be the subject of this research. In the process, intersections between race, class and gender relationships through the lens of late-colonial surveillance at a time of heightened crisis of the empire will be explored.

With the outbreak of Second World War, the colonial regime had found itself in a precarious situation. Profound anti-colonial consciousness had touched almost every level of the subjugated society. In the political field Indian National Congress had lost its monopoly over mass movements, as socialists and communists made their presence felt through peasant movements and working class agitations. 1939 was a momentous year for India. Internal strife in INC had reached its zenith. In January firebrand nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose humbled Gandhi's nominee Sitaramayya in a close fight to capture the post of INC President for two consecutive terms. However he was forced to resign within months due to the non-cooperation from Congress top brass and was subsequently removed from INC in August. Subhas Chandra Bose formed Forward Bloc with an aim to wage militant anti-colonial struggle as opposed to the allegedly conciliatory approach taken by Congress leadership. In following

years the rupture between Subhas and INC leadership would grow continually as he organised Indian National Army and made abortive attempts to dismantle the colonial edifice with the help of the Imperial Japanese Army. Apart from the internal strife, alienation from toiling masses i.e. workers and peasantry were also plaguing Congress ministries in provinces.¹ On the other hand, the colonial regime perceived the declaration of the war in September 1939 as an opportunity to rescind limited reforms introduced in the inter-war period by conferring overwhelming coercive power on the central government. Viceroy Linlithgow 'unilaterally associated India' with Britain's war effort. In their bid to win back the popular support Congress ministries used the pretext to tender their resignation in October 1939.² To curtail the semblance of civil liberties a series of emergency laws were promulgated including the Defence of India Act. As the colonial bureaucracy strived to reclaim 'the ground lost to the Congress from 1937 or earlier' through outright repression, the rupture between the British Raj and Indian subjects was more visible than ever.³

With active support from the government, in the initial years of the war Bengal witnessed a marked increase in the entrepreneurial investment in jute, iron and steel, and mining industries.⁴ Japan's entry into Second World War in 1941 and its lightning advance up to the Eastern frontier, made Britain aware of the vulnerabilities faced by its prize colonial possession, India. Calcutta and its industrial suburbs, the hotbed of anti-colonial movements, now became central to the war effort in the Eastern Frontier. Although the government propaganda tried to mobilise the support for the Allied war effort, the fear of Japanese air-raids, rumours of an imminent attack on Bengal, spiralling prices, and stagnating wages made the war increasingly unpopular

¹ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India : 1885-1947*, (New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd., 2004), p. 375.

² *Ibid.* p.375.

³ *Ibid.* p.376.

⁴ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine: Bengal 1939-45*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009), p.80.

among the inhabitants of Bengal. To thwart the Japanese incursion a large number of foreign troops were deployed in different corners of Bengal. Their friction with the local populace coupled with the involvement of a section of soldiers in criminal activities of different shades magnified the anti-British hatred. As the safety and security of industries deemed 'essential' for the war effort were prioritised by the colonial state, the British authorities chose to strike a fine balance between the policy of outright repression and providing some measure of relief through 'war bonus' and 'Priority Classes Scheme' which ensured supply of food items to the workers at a subsidised rate. However Bengal peasantry and masses employed in informal sectors i.e. rickshaw-pullers, book-binders, laundrymen, cobblers were exposed to the vagaries of uncertain times. From the second half of 1941, as the hostilities with Japan spread to India's eastern frontier, rice import from Burma was stopped. In the meantime, the food situation in Gangetic delta deteriorated as the state initiated the policy of 'denial'. Stored paddies were confiscated and country boats were destroyed by the colonial government. The food crisis aggravated and turned into a full-blown famine which swept over the Bengal countryside in 1943-44 and 'affected an estimated 1.5 million to 3 million people'.⁵ Famine stricken people flocked to Calcutta, only to die a slow and painful death on its streets.

The magnitude of Second World War demanded intensification of resource extraction at a much higher level. Economist Utsa Patnaik had articulated that apart from the military strategy of 'denial', wartime economic policies were also responsible for the Famine of 1943-44. The colonial regime ensured that the bulk of 160 million pounds, 'extra resources' were extracted from the 'population of Bengal'. Primarily because Allied army-men were 'located in and operated mainly from the province'.⁶ The large-scale army deployment and the expansion of

⁵ Sanjukta Ghosh, 'Famine, Food and the Politics of Survival in Calcutta: 1943-1950', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), p 204.

⁶ Utsa Patnaik, 'Mr. Keynes and the Forgotten Holocaust in Bengal, 1943-44: Or, the Macroeconomics of Extreme Demand Compression', (Studies in People's History, Vol. 4, Issue 2, 2017) pp.197-198.

industries producing war materials paved the way for the sudden increase of demand for food, clothing and other necessities. Coupled with war induced uncertainties prices of essential items rose sharply. The price of rice quadrupled within a span of 18 months.⁷ Bengal also witnessed a thriving system of speculation and black-market. The economic situation deteriorated further with the end of the war. As hostilities stopped, trade and commerce returned to the pre-war days. With decreasing military demands, industrial production had to be scaled-down. As a result, a significant section of Bengalis previously inducted into industries and corporate ventures now faced an uncertain future and unemployment.⁸ The rapidly deteriorating law and order situation received a lethal touch when departing military personnel began to sell their weapons, which ultimately found their ways into the hands of political activists and criminal gangs.⁹ The rising unemployment, economic stagnation, raging anti-imperial fervour, and increasing communal tension set the stage for successive waves of anti-colonial outbursts and communal riots after the conclusion of the war.¹⁰ This was the socio-political climate which sculpted the characters of obscure individuals, collectives and networks on whose lives and trajectories my dissertation is based.

Throughout the war years the embattled regime anticipated large scale mass movements as well as sabotages aiming to hamper the war effort. In the bid to sustain itself, the Raj demanded utmost loyalty from its subjects and depended on emergency powers promulgated by the Defence of India Act to crush its real or imaginary threats. Apart from anti-imperialist activists, the imperial doctrine of surveillance identified toiling masses, refugees fleeing from the enemy occupation, vagabonds as well as individuals with Axis sympathies as potential threats. They

⁷ Ibid. p.202.

⁸ Nirban Basu, *The Political Parties and The Labour Politics 1937-47: With Special Reference to Bengal*, (Calcutta, Minerva Associates, 1992),p.13.

⁹WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.).

¹⁰ Suranjan Das, 'The Politics of Agitation : Calcutta 1912-1947', in Sukanta Chaudhuri edited, *Calcutta the Living City, Vol. 2, The Present and Future* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 23-26.

were kept under the close watch of its expansive intelligence network and often had to suffer arduous imprisonment to satisfy the colonial paranoia.

Wartime emergency measures registered renewed effort by colonial authorities to curb dissenting voices among the working class. Existing labour laws were relaxed¹¹ to make the retrenchment of workers easier. Labour organisers and trade unionists were put behind bars. Working hours were increased while wages remained stagnant.¹² For the British imperialists at wartime, exercising absolute control over the mind and the body of the working class was the need of the hour. Special directives were issued to the factory owners which were deemed essential for the war economy. They were to convey even minor unsavoury incidents to the police. Widespread fear of 'fifth columnists' and 'trouble makers' led the police to initiate detailed probes against even insignificant technical glitches in plants and factories.¹³ The colonial state's cautious approach became explicitly manifest when communists faced an uphill task in 1942 to convince the bureaucracy about their intentions behind the shift in political position regarding Second World War.¹⁴ After Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the communists renounced their earlier opposition to the war and began supporting the Allied war effort. For the colonial police, their reputation as 'trouble-makers' outweighed their adherence to the Allied cause. During this period, victimisation of workers became rampant. Inadvertent mistakes which hampered industrial production were dealt with repressive measures, leading to dismissal from work and imprisonment.

While the wartime exigencies, reinforced by suspicion of capital towards labour, put the working class under the police radar, a section of educated Bengalis was branded as

¹¹ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine*, p.86.

¹² *Ibid*, p.80.

¹³ KPM SB 00907/05

¹⁴ Nirban Basu, p.61.

‘undesirables’ and suffered in the hands of the colonial justice system for their political activism in Bengal and beyond. The anti-colonialism of the period was more profound in the social sense and overflowing Bengal jails proved that incarcerating every activist was virtually impossible. The British Raj created an all-encompassing surveillance mechanism which was aimed at anticipating mass upheavals. Armed with the experience of containing the wave of anti-colonial struggles during First World War the colonial state apparatus braced for resurgence of popular movements and clandestine revolutionary actions as the war commenced. Individuals whose obedience seemed doubtful were summarily interned and restriction orders to his ‘native place’¹⁵ were issued. Ex-revolutionaries, Communists, Forward Bloc activists, trade unionists, anti-colonial students and a host of other people from all walks of life were branded as ‘undesirables’ and experienced the wrath of the colonial justice system. Amongst the educated Bengalis a tiny section was attracted to the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany and Italy in the inter-war period. The Nazi network had been tolerated by the colonial authorities for their virulent anti-communism. However the scenario changed radically as the war commenced in 1939. The figures associated with Axis powers now posed a serious threat to the safety and security of the Empire. For a select few it was the lure of money which dragged them into the Axis network¹⁶ and they acted as paid agents of the Axis powers. For the rest, adherence to the Axis cause was a conscious ideological choice.¹⁷

After the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the Imperial Japanese Army made lightning gains and the British regime made a hasty retreat from South-East Asia. As high-ranking colonial officials were rescued safely, Indians were left to fend for themselves. From 1942 onwards, fearful of Japanese retribution they started fleeing and entered Bengal after

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ WBSA IB 129/35.

¹⁷ WBSA IB 45/32.

making a torturous journey through Burma, Assam and Manipur. The extreme hardship of the journey was such that many of the refugees perished en-route.¹⁸ The embattled colonial regime viewed the refugee influx with great suspicion as it was believed that Axis agents, saboteurs would use the cover of the refugee crisis to infiltrate the Indian mainland. Immigrants whose antecedents seemed unconvincing to paranoid intelligence officials had been charged under the draconian Defence of India Act and had to go through several rounds of interrogation coupled with imprisonment.

Preservation of the racial hierarchy was central to colonial ideology. With the advent of British power in the subcontinent, India received a steady stream of foreigners coming from neighbouring countries to faraway European nations. Their quest for lucrative professions often remained futile. As a section of the white population descended into poverty in India, they became a source of imperial embarrassment. A number of steps were taken to control the 'white vagrancy'. Apart from establishing a number of work-houses for their rehabilitation, targeted deportation of destitute whites were also practised.¹⁹ In official documents the 'mean whites' were castigated for 'eroding the moral authority' of the British Raj.²⁰ Migrants from Asian nations generally left to fend for themselves. They did not garner official attention unless they delve into the criminal underworld. With the commencement of the war in 1939, suspicion and anxiety on foreigners superseded the feeling of embarrassment in official circles. The British intelligence network made sweeping generalisations and citizens of different European nations such as Yugoslavs, Lithuanians, and Norwegians were considered as potential enemy agents along with Germans and Italians. They were prosecuted as 'enemy aliens' and a network of internment camps were established for them. In the inter-war period a section of Jewish

¹⁸ Hugh Tinker, *A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942*, (Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol.6, No.1, March 1975), p.14.

¹⁹ Sarmistha De, *Marginal Europeans in Colonial India: 180-1920*, (Kolkata, Thema, 2008), pp. 145-151.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.132.

population while fleeing from the growing clout of the Third Reich over Europe found refuge in India. Their systematic persecution continued unabated as the imperial state assumed that the Nazi regime would coerce the Jews for intelligence gathering as well as for orchestrating subversive actions targeting the war effort. To allay the colonial apprehension, refugees with Jewish descent remained under close observation of state agencies and in most cases had been restricted in internment camps throughout the war years.²¹ Since First World War Bengal had an internment camp for non-combatant enemy subjects at Katapahar in Darjeeling hills. With the resumption of the war in 1939, this camp was reactivated and most ‘enemy aliens’ of Bengal were sent there.

The colonial apprehension of outsiders were not restricted to Europeans only; immigrants from Asian communities were also targeted. Throughout the first half of the 20th century China experienced internal strife and invasions from colonial powers culminating in the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1937. Resultant destabilisation of the society led a growing number of Chinese migrants to enter Bengal in quest of a decent living, which already had a sizeable Chinese migrant population.²² The fear of enemy infiltration²³ as well as the involvement of a section of the Chinese and Tibetan migrants in the burgeoning criminal underworld²⁴ put the immigrant community under intense official scrutiny. The Himalayan principality of Nepal had shared a frontier with Bengal. Following the treaty of Sagauli which ended the Anglo-Nepal war in

²¹ NAI 72/3/72/40-Pol(EW) 1940

²² Tansen Sen had observed that the connection between India and China predates the colonial empire, ranging from diplomatic and commercial exchanges to pilgrimages aiming to visit sites related with Buddhism. With the advent of British Raj in India, apart from Calcutta, the crown jewel of the empire in the east, Himalayan towns of North Bengal- Kalimpong, Darjeeling etc. had attracted a steady stream of Chinese and Tibetan businessmen, migrants primarily for their proximity to trading routes through Himalayan passes. Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History*, (The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., London, 2017).

²³ Christopher J. Murphy, ‘*Constituting a Problem in Themselves*’: *Countering Covert Chinese Activity in India: The Life and Death of the Chinese Intelligence Section, 1944–46* (The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2016), p.930.

²⁴ NAI 21/53/46 1946 Home Political

1816, the kingdom became a trusted ally of British imperialism²⁵ and emerged as an important area for the recruitment of the imperial army. Quest of political shelter or economic prosperity led some Nepalese to venture into Bengal. By the 1930s the political ferment in Nepal led a section of Nepali activists to forge close ties with Indian revolutionaries in their bid to topple the autocratic regime of the Rana dynasty. For the embattled British imperial power as an important supplier of the military labour, Nepal's importance grew manifold. Hence the prospect of destabilisation of the subservient regime in Nepal created great anxiety amongst the official circles. To meet this challenge, Nepalese immigrants were kept under strict surveillance and individuals were frequently targeted for their purported anti-Rana affiliations. The extent of colonial paranoia of outsiders was such that social drifters, Russian emigres were not spared from the state surveillance. Even Indian refugees from South-East Asia faced scrutiny and persecution as they fled the Japanese occupation. They had to make a torturous journey to enter the Indian mainland before being hauled up for interrogations and threatened with imprisonment as Japanese agents. Preceding sections testify that for the beleaguered colonial state almost every segment of Bengal inhabitants including the vagabonds, immigrants and refugees came under the aegis of suspicious subjects.

As Bengal became the staging ground of Allied armies in their effort to reclaim South-East Asia from Axis occupation, a large number of foreign troops amassed in army cantonments all over Bengal. It was not their ideological adherence to the enemy or their potential to halt the war economy, but their involvement in different shades of crime,²⁶ ranging from sexual assault, drunken brawl, and burglary to murder and smuggling²⁷ which had made them subject to surveillance. The state needed to check the 'rowdy' elements among the soldiers to mitigate

²⁵ Ali Riaz and Subho Basu, *Paradise Lost? State failure in Nepal*, (Estover Road, Plymouth, United Kingdom, Lexington Books, A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., First Paperback Edition, 2010) p.34.

²⁶ Janam Mukherjee, 'Japan Attacks', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited 'Calcutta: The Stormy Decades' (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), p.99.

²⁷ WBSA IB 1127/46 [M.F.].

the chasm between the foreign troops and the people. Apart from their involvement in criminal activities, foreign soldiers came under scrutiny and surveillance so that the anti-imperialist consciousness of the colonised subjects could not make inroads among them. Foreign army-men having left-wing sympathies in their countries of origin, often tried to forge ties with various left groups. Amalendu Sengupta in his book *Uttal Challish Asampato Biplab* depicted how communist army-men from various nations frequented the Indian People's Theatre Association office in Calcutta and immersed themselves in impromptu performances staged by the activists.²⁸ Archival documents show that the colonial government actively discouraged this bonhomie to the extent of punishing individual soldiers with internment.²⁹

In this sense, segments of population in wartime Bengal, inhabiting the same space and time yet divided by social and material locations, form the focus of my thesis. What connected them was the thread of official attention. They were all subjects under suspicion.

Literature Survey

Sumit Sarkar has traced the journey of Indian nationalism in detail. The political situation of India on the eve of Second World War and the impact of war on Indian political groups has been highlighted through his work.³⁰ The role of Second World War in the making and the unmaking of Indian society has emerged as a recurrent theme among historians and scholars engaging with late-colonial and post-colonial India. Yasmin Khan has explored lives of unknown Indian men and women, permanently changed by Second World War.³¹ People from

²⁸ Amalendu Sengupta, *Uttal Challish Asampato Biplab*, (Kolkata, Pearl Publishers, 1957), pp.28,29.

²⁹ WBSA IB 331/39.

³⁰ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, (New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd., 2004).

³¹ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at war: A People's History of India's Second World War*, (Gurgaon, Penguin Random House India, 2015).

varying social or economic backgrounds - Indian army-men deputed overseas, women nurses and clerks recruited due to the wartime exigencies, women political activists, economic hardship-ridden middle classes in the cities, foreign soldiers on Indian soil have received her attention. Keka Dutta Roy has documented the seething economic and political discontent in the immediate aftermath of Second World War.³² The participation of youth, students, trade union activists and peasants in the mass anti-colonial upsurge which shook the British Empire in its last days and hastened the Independence has been elaborated in her work. Anirudh Deshpande draws our attention to the 'neglected and misrepresented stories of colonial India' in his work. He depicts spontaneous mass upheavals in Bombay, Karachi and elsewhere spearheaded by militant working class agitations, in support of the Naval Mutiny of 1946.³³ D N Gupta focused on the nuances of the relationship between two of the leading anti-imperialist forces- i.e. INC and CPI, as the war unravelled. For him the 'isolation' of CPI during the war occurred due to its failure to formulate proper 'strategy and tactics'.³⁴ Amalendu Sengupta's seminal work has documented the role of communists in anti-colonial upsurges in Bengal before Independence and their participation in mass movements and labour strikes in the post-Independence period.³⁵ As the spotlight of Second World War was 'nowhere in India as bright as it was in Bengal',³⁶ several historical works have chosen to shed light on the impact of the war on the province. Srimanjari³⁷ has focused on the political economy of war and its role in the making of the devastating famine of 1943. She has pointed out that anticipating a Japanese military invasion of the Bengal mainland, the colonial regime initiated a 'scorched earth

³² Keka Dutta Roy, *Political Upsurges in Post-War India (1945-46)*, (New Delhi, Intellectual Publishing House, 1992).

³³ Anirudh Deshpande, *Hope and Despair: Mutiny, Rebellion and Death in India, 1946*, (Delhi, Primus Books, 2016).

³⁴ D.N. Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism in Colonial India 1939-45*, (New Delhi, Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2008). p.105.

³⁵ Amalendu Sengupta, *Uttal Challish Asampato Biplab*, (Kolkata, Pearl Publishers, 1957).

³⁶ Janam Mukherjee, 'Japan Attacks', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited 'Calcutta: The Stormy Decades' (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), p 93.

³⁷ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine: Bengal 1939-45*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009).

policy', which prompted the Government to collect reserved food-grains and destroy boats which were the lifelines of the peasantry in riverine Gangetic Delta. The resource extraction by the state, increased manifold due to the war, created spiralling of food prices. Already reduced to their bare minimum, the Bengal peasantry had no means to ward off the threat of famine. The article of Indivar Kamtekar underlines the ramifications of the colonial economic policy during the wartime. He observes that, 'although not a major battlefield, India became a major supply base in the Second World war'.³⁸ The colonial policy of resource extraction at the highest level, created unending miseries for the common people, while wealthier sections remained unaffected. Paul R. Greenough has demonstrated that the cyclone of 1942 which devastated Midnapore was the actual starting point of the Bengal famine. While the affected people flocked to the cities, the colonial administration's apathy worsened the situation and generated widespread famine in the Gangetic delta.³⁹ Janam Mukherjee has highlighted the prevalent socio-political climate of Bengal which connected the Bengal Famine with the communal bloodbath of 1946 and continued to haunt the truncated province after Independence.⁴⁰ According to Mukherjee, the process of dehumanisation set in motion by famine deaths was a precursor of ghastly communal massacres which followed. Madhusree Mukherjee has demonstrated the sinister role of the Winston Churchill led imperial Government in the making of the Bengal famine.⁴¹ While these above-mentioned books have highlighted different facets of colonial rapacity, the educated Bengali middle-class intellectuals have formed the central focus of Amit Kumar Gupta's study.⁴² Gupta has demonstrated

³⁸ Indivar Kamtekar, *A different War Dance : State and Class in India 1939-1945 (Past & Present, Aug., 2002, No. 176, pp. 187-221)*. Downloaded from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600730>.

³⁹ Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁴⁰ Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of Empire*, (Noida, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2015).

⁴¹ Madhusree Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War 2*, (Chennai, Tranquebar PRESS, 2010).

⁴² Amit Kumar Gupta, *Crises and Creativities: Middle-Class Bhadrakalok in Bengal c.1939-52* (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009).

political activism and progressive intellectual endeavours in the midst of war, famine, rising economic hardship, communal riots, Partition and a massive influx of refugees. Bengal workers have also received nuanced attention during the last leg of colonial rule. The increasing influence of ‘formal politics’ on them has formed the central theme of Nirban Basu’s work.⁴³ Siddhartha Guha Ray has specifically traced the prolonged struggle of tramway workers in the 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁴ Sukomal Sen has documented the journey of the working class movement at the pan-India level.⁴⁵ A host of scholars, including Suranjan Das,⁴⁶ Joya Chatterji⁴⁷ and Rakesh Batabyal⁴⁸ have based their works on the trajectory of communal politics in Bengal. Anthologies like *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*⁴⁹ and *Calcutta- The Living City Volume-2*⁵⁰ have portrayed the social and economic metamorphosis of the city when it went through a series of profound changes, demographically and politically. Elizabeth Kolsky⁵¹ projected the racial biasness as the hallmark of the colonial justice system, where white planters, army-men, and government officials used physical violence on Indians with almost total impunity. Her book becomes useful to locate the high-handedness of law-enforcing authorities while dealing with colonial subjects. Regarding the Axis network in India, scholarly articles by Eugene J.

⁴³ Nirban Basu, *The Political Parties and the Labour Politics 1937-1947 with special reference to Bengal*, (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1992).

⁴⁴ Siddhartha Guha Ray, *Calcutta Tramwaymen: A Study of Working Class History*, (Kolkata, Progressive Publishers, 2007).

⁴⁵ Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830-1990 (With an Overview upto 1995)*, (Calcutta, K P Bagchi & Company, 1997).

⁴⁶ Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-47*, (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴⁷ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali, 1943-47*, (New Delhi, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2005).

⁴⁹ Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades* (New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015).

⁵⁰ Sukanta Chaudhuri edited, *Calcutta the Living City, Vol. 2, The Present and Future* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵¹ Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of the Law*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010).

D'souza⁵² and Benjamin Zachariah⁵³ have drawn attention to the Nazi propaganda machinery in India during the interwar period. Milan Hauner has also documented the Axis strategy in the Indian subcontinent during Second World War.⁵⁴ A biographical account of the neo-Nazi proponent Savitri Devi has helped us to explore her activity in wartime Bengal.⁵⁵

Throughout the thesis some characters reveal themselves through their interactions with the layered underworld of colonial Bengal or register their presence through their lack of social moorings. To contextualise these disparate characters i.e. vagabonds, drifters, army deserters, bootleggers etc. I have explored historical accounts of colonial Bengal or wartime Europe dealing with army desertion, crime and criminality. Sumanta Banerjee⁵⁶ have dealt with the nuances of the criminal underworld in 19th century Calcutta. Sarmistha De and Titas Chakraborty have focused on the presence of poor Europeans in 18th and 19th century India. Sarmistha De⁵⁷ shows that economically marginalised section of white ruling class i.e. deserters, drifters, adventurers, professionals in various capacities frequently entered the Indian mainland hoping to earn a decent livelihood. As a section of them descended into abject poverty, they became a source of embarrassment for the colonial government for greatly undermining the archetypal image of the superior ruling class. Titas Chakraborty⁵⁸ has identified the desertions of European sailors and soldiers in 19th century Bengal as ‘the most

⁵² Eugene J. D'Souza, *Nazi Propaganda in India*, (Social Scientist, Vol. 28, No. 5/6, May- June 2000, pp. 77-90).

⁵³ Benjamin Zachariah, *Nazi Hunting and Intelligence Gathering in India on the Eve of the Second World War*, in Asley Jackson, Yasmin Khan, Gajendra Singh edited *An Imperial World at War: Aspects of the British Empire's War Experience , 1939-45*, (New York, Rutledge, 2017). Zachariah's research follows the archival material uncovered by D'Souza.

⁵⁴ Milan Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy: Germany, Japan and Indian Nationalists in the Second World War*, (Stuttgart, Deutsches Historisches Institut [London], 1981).

⁵⁵ Nicholas Goodrick-Clerke, *Hitler's Priestess: Savitri Devi, the Hindu Aryan Myth and neo-Nazism*, (New York, New York University Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ Sumanta Banerjee, *The Wicked City: Crime and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009).

⁵⁷ Sarmistha De, *Marginal Europeans in Colonial India: 1860-1920*, (Kolkata, Thema, 2008).

⁵⁸ Titas Chakraborty, *Desertion of European Sailors and Soldiers in Early Eighteenth Century Bengal* in Marcus Rediker, Titas Chakraborty, Matthias van Rossum ed. *A Global History of Runaways: Workers Mobility and Capitalism 1600-1850*, (California, University of California Press, 2019).

common form of resistance' practised by 'lower-level servants' of colonial empires. My study has underlined the fact that the legacy of desertion of low-ranking soldiers continued till the last days of the colonial empire. Donald Thomas⁵⁹ and Charles Glass⁶⁰ have shed light on the army deserters in Europe while documenting their pivotal role in the thriving underworld during Second World War. These studies have helped to contextualise the marginal Europeans in the social milieu of war-torn Bengal.

These studies have immensely aided this research which focuses on collectives, networks, and obscure individuals lying outside the ambit of prevailing historical narratives. The plight of the labourers engaged in multi-layered informal sectors in Calcutta, i.e. the book-binders, the shoemakers or the rickshaw-pullers and their fight for survival through unionisation, as well as panic-driven responses of the beleaguered imperial state fearful of a coordinated working class upsurge, are mostly overlooked in favour of documenting the trade union movements by their organised brethren. Wartime experiences of individuals who came under intense scrutiny of the colonial intelligence apparatus and branded as 'undesirables' in official parlance, largely escaped unnoticed. A probe has been made to reveal the situation of immigrants from various Asian nations in late-colonial Bengal. The predicaments of evacuees from South-east Asia who entered Indian mainland fleeing from the Japanese onslaught have also been traced. Certain efforts have been made to document previously uncharted lives and wartime experiences of citizens of enemy nations. Their struggle for existence inside Katapahar Internment Camp will also be revealed through the dissertation. The involvement of military men in criminal activities and the situation of the army deserters who used the thriving underworld network in Calcutta to sustain themselves also remains unexplored. The points of convergence between the political

⁵⁹ Donald Thomas, *An Underworld at War: Spivs, Deserters, Racketeers, and Civilians in the Second World War*, (London, John Murray, 2004).

⁶⁰ Charles Glass, *The Deserters: A History of World War 2*, (New York, The Penguin Press, 2013).

underground and the criminal underworld in the city also require necessary attention. The Nazi network in Bengal, which attracted mostly affluent individuals from upper echelons of Bengali society, will also be explored here. In this dissertation, with the help of relevant secondary literature which has helped me to understand the wartime context, these unknown aspects of wartime Bengal have been probed and uncovered.

Chapter Division

Economic destabilisation, social tumult which accompanied the war left a permanent mark on Bengal and its inhabitants. Chapters are formulated to reflect the multifarious repercussions of Second World War at the microscopic-level. This thesis portrays fragmented life-stories of forlorn figures, long-forgotten networks and persecuted individuals. It is divided into five chapters. The first chapter delves into life-stories of individuals who were branded as 'undesirables' in official parlance. For the embattled regime trade-unionists, anti-colonial activists of different shades, Germany trained engineers, ex-revolutionaries, Communists and Forward Bloc activists came under the aegis of 'potential threats'. Their externment order to Bengal had been coupled with stringent conditions aimed to control almost every aspect of their lives.

Changing dimensions of transnational connections that were forged in Bengal during the last decade of colonial rule form the focus of the second chapter. Throughout the period of colonial rule Bengal acted as a gateway for Tibetans, Chinese and Nepalese individuals who sought to enter Indian mainland in search of a decent living. The steady stream of migration gathered its pace as people of South Asia faced Japanese invasion, economic crisis and political turmoil. Sleepy Himalayan towns of North Bengal such as Kalimpong and Kurseong transformed into important transit points for cross-border smuggling involving Tibetan and Chinese migrants. The passage of arms through this corridor became a point of concern for the colonial

establishment. During Second World War Ramgarh in modern day Chattisgarh had a major base of the Chinese army. Keeping a tab on the activity of the Chinese deserters in Bengal, which already had a sizeable Chinese migrant population proved to be a daunting task for the embattled state apparatus. As Nepal became an important catchment area for the recruitment of soldiers, to please its rulers the colonial authority came down heavily on Nepalese fugitive networks in Bengal and beyond. This chapter examines these obscure networks as well as shed light on individuals involved in these endeavours. After Allied retreat from South-East Asia, Indian evacuees also trudged their way to Bengal and came under intense scrutiny as the imperial state was apprehensive for the infiltration of Axis agents using the cover of refugee influx. In the second chapter the predicaments of Burma evacuees are also portrayed along with Chinese immigrants and Nepalese fugitives.

The third chapter delves into the activities of Axis sympathisers of Bengal. Throughout the interwar period, British imperialism tolerated Nazi propaganda for their virulent anti-Bolshevism as the colonial state perceived communists as one of the biggest threats along with revolutionary nationalists. It was only after the Munich pact of 1938, when the British state finally realised the gravity of danger posed by imperialist ambitions of Axis powers. Subhas Bose and his followers became important targets of imperial surveillance as they made an ambitious attempt to uproot the colonial regime with the help of Axis powers. The din of the war and the prospect of an imminent Japanese attack on Bengal, attract a section of tricksters who chose to support the Axis cause in exchange of money. There were also select individuals in wartime Bengal who, enamoured by Nazi ideology became steadfast allies of the Third Reich and its war against Britain. These disparate characters, who remained under close surveillance as potential enemy agents through the war years are discussed in this context.

The fourth chapter traces the life-journey of Europeans branded as 'enemy aliens'. The colonial intelligence apparatus believed that hostile nations would activate previously dormant channels

to serve their interest and concluded that 'Britain's wartime enemies are different from peacetime opponents'.⁶¹ Foreign professionals, missionaries and wives of British or British-Indian subjects having roots in enemy nations emerged as prime suspects. In the inter-war period a section of Jews while fleeing from the growing clout of the Third Reich over Europe found refuge in India. They were also targeted as colonial intelligence officials believed that Jews could be coerced by the Nazi regime to be used as 'fifth columnists'. Echoing Nazi racial theory, the colonial bureaucracy divided the 'enemy aliens' into 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan' lines and a network of internment camps, parole centres came up to imprison them during the war years. The internment camp at Katapahar in Darjeeling hills which began its journey during First World War was reactivated as the war commenced in 1939. For many of the Jews state sponsored persecution did not end with their flight from the clutches of the Third Reich. The fear of repression was such that it drove a dental surgeon from Quetta in modern-day Pakistan to suicide.⁶² In Bengal even anti-Nazi activists were not spared.⁶³ To escape internments many of the Jews served the war effort in various capacities. Antecedents of long-forgotten characters who had spent the war-years in Katapahar camp constitute a significant theme of my chapter. It also serves the purpose of portraying certain dimensions of quotidian lives inside the internment camp. By documenting war-time experiences of 'enemy aliens' this chapter probes the ramifications of the stifling state surveillance on Jewish refugees in Bengal.

The fifth chapter explores nuances of layered interactions between the common people of Bengal and foreign troops deployed to counter the Japanese incursion. In the process, the criminal underworld on the eve of colonialism's end is uncovered. It also shed some light on the involvement of a section of foreign troops in criminal activities ranging from robbery to

⁶¹ WBSA IB 108/39 1939 Foreigners

⁶² NAI 43/14/41-Pol(EW)

⁶³ NAI 72/3/76/40-Pol(EW)

smuggling with a focus on revelations made by the police investigation on the murder of a British army deserter. The chapter also provides glimpses of Chinese deserters who chose to eke out living with the help of the large immigrant Chinese population in Calcutta. This chapter steps beyond the time-frame of war and concentrates on the immediate post-war years as economic and social dislocation made its presence felt through the increasing brutalisation of Bengali society. For the deserters it was the threat of demobilisation after the end of the war and the lure of the thriving underworld in late-colonial Bengal that came together in shaping their life choices.

A note on the sources

Most of the research is based on Intelligence Branch reports available in West Bengal State Archives, Special Branch reports available in Kolkata Police Museum, Home Political files available in the web-portal of National Archives of India (<https://www.abhilekh-patal.in>). Memoirs and autobiographies of reporters, political activists and intellectuals who lived in Bengal during this tumultuous period such as Manikuntala Sen⁶⁴, Tapan Raychaudhuri⁶⁵, Mihir Sen⁶⁶, Subrata Banerjee⁶⁷ and Abul Mansur Ahmed⁶⁸ form an integral part of primary literature used in dissertation. These accounts trace the volatile political situation of the province in the 1940s, when it was a space of contest between communal and anti-colonial forces, which ultimately resulted in consecutive anti-colonial upsurges and communal bloodbath.

⁶⁴ Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Kotha*, (Calcutta, Nabapatra Prakashan, 1982).

⁶⁵ Tapan Roychowdhury, *Bangalnama*, (Kolkata, Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2007).

⁶⁶ Mihir Sengupta, *Bishadbrikha*, (Kolkata, Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2013).

⁶⁷ Subrata Banerjee, *Fragments of Time: Memoirs of a Romantic Revolutionary*, (Chandigarh, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 2017).

⁶⁸ Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha Rajneetir Panchash Baochhor*, (Dhaka, Khosraj Kitab Mahal, 1995).

By depicting social responses, relationships and survival strategies of relatively obscure individuals, collectives and networks through police dossiers, this dissertation seeks to locate unexplored facets of state control over obscure and forgotten people living in late-colonial Bengal. Given the tumultuous times, the varied responses to the repressive state machinery were shaped by factors such as the economic situation, social position of the individuals and their ideological moorings. Regional, national as well as international strands of socio-political movements left their mark on the political positions they adopted. By this time, the crisis of the Empire had reached the penultimate point and the colonial authority was staring at its imminent downfall. A micro-level history of Bengal in this context has centred on obscure figures, circles and events which portray a bygone era, riddled with food scarcity, social insecurity and violence and underlined by regional and transcontinental dimensions.

Chapter One

The 'Undesirables'

Who were the real or imagined enemies of the embattled Raj, branded as 'undesirables' in official documents? In a period marked by intense anti-colonial feelings, communal bloodbath and the trauma of Partition, historical writings dealing with the concluding years of the British Raj have centred around economic, social, political implications of late-colonial state policies or mapped the trajectory of trail-blazing political personalities, popular movements and communal politics. Grass-root level activists who played crucial roles in disseminating anti-colonial ideas through active participation in contemporary politics have remained hitherto unexplored. In this chapter imperial surveillance reports were accessed to explore these long-forgotten foot-soldiers of anti-colonial struggle. By documenting wartime persecution of select individuals the following paragraphs also aim to elucidate the inner sinews of the late-colonial coercive network. Their tryst with the embattled British Raj would also reflect the angst of a tumultuous time marked by political ferment, social turmoil and communal bloodbaths.

As hostilities resumed in 1939, the state used the bogey of the war to ramp up its coercive machinery. Fear of saboteurs, enemy agents led intelligence agencies to scan every nook and cranny of the vast Indian subcontinent. Emergency laws were promulgated to obliterate remnants of civil rights. Emboldened with overwhelming powers the imperial authority came down heavily on subjects whose subservience seemed doubtful. Bengal, the province where shades of anti-colonialism made deep inroads during the interwar period had emerged as one of the main foci of the colonial repression. Amongst the anti-imperialist bloc Communists, Socialists and their offshoots had carved a niche for themselves in the political scene of Bengal apart from revolutionary underground groups and INC. During Second World War, INC went through a rift as Subhas Chandra Bose loyalists formed Forward Bloc in 1939, opposing the

alleged conciliatory approach taken by INC while dealing with colonial policies. INC leadership also came under the attack from the communists, as the Congress Working Committee was reluctant to start another round of anti-imperialist struggle. According to D N Gupta, in the initial phases of Second World War, CPI analysed the war as a clash between imperialist forces, which would eventually convert to a revolutionary war, paving the way for a new world order. Indian communists outrightly rejected possibilities of compromise with the colonial state and repeatedly derided the Congress 'inaction'. In the political field, CPI intensified working class movements as a preparation for the imminent revolutionary war as well as to 'expose the bourgeois leadership of the Congress'.¹ With the German attack on the USSR, a decisive shift eventually came in 1941. Guided by the Comintern, CPI leadership theorised that the Nazi attack on the USSR had qualitatively changed the character of the war. By calling it a 'people's war', communists had asked its cadres and sympathisers to support the Allies.² After much deliberation, the colonial bureaucracy legalised CPI in July 1942, ostensibly 'to create a counterweight to the perceived Congress threat during a period of military crisis.'³

As the war dragged on a number of factors came together to make the British position precarious. Japan's entry on the Axis side in 1941 and its lightning gains in South-East Asia catapulted Bengal as the staging ground of Allied offensives aiming to forestall Japanese incursions. In parts of east Bengal, stored paddies were forcefully collected from peasants and country boats were destroyed by government agents as part of the 'denial policy'. The Resulting food crisis would transform into a full blown famine which scourged through the countryside in 1943 and resulted in innumerable deaths. In the city of Calcutta frequent

¹ D.N. Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism in Colonial India 1939-45*, (New Delhi, Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2008), p. 126.

² Ibid. p. 193.

³ Sanjoy Bhattacharya, *The Colonial State and the Communist Party of India, 1942-1945: A Reappraisal* in South Asia Research, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1995.

Japanese air-raids, coupled with the price rise and illegal hoarding of essential items made the war an increasingly discredited fiasco for the general masses. In the labour sector emergency powers were used to make retrenchment of the workers easier. Apart from activists opposing the war, professionals employed in firms owned by citizens of Axis nations also came under intense scrutiny. This chapter unravels life-stories of long-forgotten characters who were on the receiving end of the colonial repressive machinery.

Policy of Externment

With the beginning of Second World War, the beleaguered colonial regime encountered a set of situations which were markedly different from First World War. The anti-colonialism of the period was more profound in the social sense and overflowing Bengal jails proved that incarcerating every activist was virtually impossible. The British Raj created an all-encompassing surveillance mechanism which was aimed at anticipating mass upheavals. Armed with the experience of containing the wave of anti-colonial struggles during First World War the colonial state apparatus braced for resurgence of popular movements and clandestine revolutionary actions as the war commenced. To safeguard the British Empire, the draconian Defense of India Act was reenacted in 1939. Through this Act ‘policemen and civil servants acquired unprecedented power and the state began to use its security apparatus for internal defense’.⁴ Subjects whose loyalty seemed doubtful such as trade-unionists, ex-revolutionaries, Germany trained engineers, Forward Bloc activists and a host of other people from all walks of life came under intense scrutiny. In the bureaucratic parlance of the Raj, they were branded as ‘undesirables’.

⁴Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War*, (New Delhi, Penguin Random House India, 2015), p.12.

In October 1940 a meeting of top-ranking CID officers was convened in Bombay to shore up the defensive mechanism of the beleaguered regime.⁵ The Conference was firmly of the opinion that externment was a ‘mistaken policy’ unless it was compounded with the restriction order to send the activist to his ‘native place’.⁶ In tune with this, in November 1940 the Home Department of colonial Central Government in Delhi issued a directive to provinces which elaborated the externment policy of ‘undesirables’ by emphasising that ‘each province should accept final responsibility of its own undesirables’. The directive also added that ‘persons normally resident in a province should not be externed from the province’ as it had been observed that individuals ‘externed from any particular province or area soon find means of transferring their activities to other areas where it may be more difficult to keep them under observation’.⁷ Hence the Home Department instructed the state governments to adopt the policy of passing orders of restriction in cases of residents of the concerned province. In cases of activists belonging to other states, provinces were asked to request the Central Government to pass orders restricting them to their home provinces.⁸

The following paragraphs will document wartime experiences of certain individuals, belonging to different political tendencies and social locations, who were victimised by the colonial policy of externment.

Forward Bloc activists

Bimalendu Sengupta⁹ was a youth hailing from the Mymensingh district of pre-Partition Bengal province. Bimalendu came under police scrutiny when he began organising students and youths on behalf of the Forward Bloc at Khasi and Jayantiya hills in Assam. In July 1940

⁵NAI 75/5/40-Poll(I) 1940.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

he became the General Secretary of Khasi hills district committee of the party and actively took part in the anti-war propaganda. Sensing trouble the government in December 1940 ordered Bimalendu`s banishment from Khasi Hills. But a section of the establishment was convinced that it was not a sufficient deterrence as he would `carry on propagation of Communistic programmes of the Forward Bloc and would continue to `spread the cult of terrorism especially among school boys and college students`.¹⁰ As they began pressing the Assam government to contemplate harsher punitive action, Bimalendu went underground in February 1941 almost coinciding with the externment order issued against him. At first local police officials were apparently convinced that he went back to his ancestral home in Mymensingh. But as he remained untraced in his home, a search warrant was issued against him. Following a manhunt of almost two months he could be arrested in April and slapped with a sentence of 18 months imprisonment for defying the externment order. After serving the sentence he was escorted to his home in Mymensingh town where Amalendu had to spend the rest of the war years. His repeated pleas for the withdrawal of the restriction order failed to move the colonial administration.¹¹

Trade union activist Haridas Chatterjee¹² was instrumental in building the organisational structure of Forward Bloc in the erstwhile North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) of British India. The police dossier showed that Haridas was born at the village of Hridaypur in 24 *Parganas*. His involvement in `terrorist and other activities in Bengal` made him a known face to the colonial intelligence apparatus much before his arrival in NWFP in 1938.¹³ While staying in Bannu, a city in modern-day Pakistan he emerged as one of its leading trade-unionists and led the striking scavengers in 1939. In 1940 he became involved with a `socialist agitation`

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹²NAI 75/1/41-Poll(I)Home Political.

¹³ Ibid.

which erupted in the town of Makran. Following this he was arrested by the British Police and sentenced to 6 months rigorous imprisonment. After his release he shifted his base to the city of Peshawar and became a vocal supporter of Subhas Chandra Bose. There, Haridas played a crucial role in the formation of a short-lived anti-imperialist organisation named League of Radical Congress Socialists. As Subhas left Indian National Congress to form Forward Bloc in 1939, Haridas merged his organisation with it and became the Vice-Secretary of Forward Bloc in Peshawar. Police suspicion on Haridas grew when he abruptly stopped political activity and published advertisements in Bengali newspapers ‘offering his services as a guide to tourists visiting the frontier’.¹⁴ He also began teaching several local youths as a private tutor. His sudden disappearance from the political scene along with his eagerness to forge ties with local youths made the colonial intelligence apparatus anxious about his real motives. This was happening at the time when Second World War had already erupted in Europe. The colonial state was intimidated by the continued existence of a man like Haridas Chatterjee who had a wide-ranging experience in mass movements in a province frequently threatened by tribal insurgencies. Thereafter Haridas remained under heavy state surveillance and his movements were closely shadowed by intelligence agents. In November 1940 an alarmed informer reported that in course of a visit to the border town of Jamrud along with an unidentified Bengali student Haridas casually took a rifle from an Afridi guard sitting nearby to explain the mechanism of the rifle to his companion. His visit to Landi Kotal-another border town with a ‘Congress photographer’ named Shaw Lal along with two Bengali youths raised the suspicion level. But the final straw was the report that two of his students from Peshawar College were selected for the Indian Army which prompted intelligence officials of the NWFP to contemplate his quick removal from the province. Defence of India Act was initiated against Haridas Chatterjee in

¹⁴ Ibid.

February 1941 to intern him from North West Frontier Province. Haridas was ordered to remain within the province of Bengal.¹⁵

Karuna Mitra¹⁶ was one of the leading members of the All India Youth League (henceforth AIYL) - the youth wing of Forward Bloc. Police documents showed that as an Executive Council member of the League he quickly rose through the rank of Forward Bloc to become one of the close confidants of Sarat Bose- a Congress stalwart and the elder brother of Subhas Bose. As a member of AIYL Karuna led the satyagraha movement of 50 volunteers in front of the Writer's Building in Calcutta. The police dossier mentioned that he maintained a cordial relationship with two employees of the Japanese Consulate, namely -Kageyama and Okazaki. Karuna and Sudhir Ghosh (a close confidant of M K Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru during the final years of Indian freedom struggle¹⁷) reportedly met with Japanese Consular officials where 'Okazaki promised a fixed permanent subsidy for the Hindusthan Standard instead of casual financial help'.¹⁸ Karuna wrote an editorial in the nationalist English daily 'Hindusthan Standard' on the 'Russo-Japanese Pact'.¹⁹ He also regularly contributed to the 'Forward Bloc'- the English mouthpiece of All India Forward Bloc and allegedly authored many 'seditious leaflets and pamphlets' in Bengali and English for the party. In 1941 Karuna Mitra was re-elected to the Executive Committee of the AIYL.

1941 was a momentous year for Bengal. In January, Subhas Bose escaped from home-internment and resurfaced in Germany three months later. His radio broadcasts envisaging a

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ NAI 29/1/42-Poll(I) 1942.

¹⁷ According to his memoir *Gandhi's Emissary* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1967), Cambridge educated Sudhir Ghosh was chosen by Gandhi as an interpreter and guide in 1945 when newly-elected British Prime Minister Clement Atlee sent a British Parliamentary delegation as a fact-finding team in India. <https://archive.org/details/gandhisemissary00sudh/page/n7/mode/2up>.

¹⁸ NAI 29/1/42-Poll(I) 1942.

¹⁹ In April 1941, Soviet Russia and Imperial Japan signed a nonaggression treaty. Both nations agreed to refrain from attacking each other. The treaty lasted till April 1945.

full-blown military attack on imperial state with the help of Axis powers fired the imagination of many Indians. June 1941 saw the beginning of Nazi invasion on USSR which prompted the CPI to change its anti-war stance, resulting a deep chasm within the anti-imperialist camp. In December Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour brought the war nearer to the home. In the backdrop of these developments police informers anxiously reported about a meeting of leading AIYL members in presence of Karuna Mitra where a decision had been taken to clandestinely organise a volunteer corps named *Shanti Sena*.²⁰ I.B. believed that this secret organisation would be used to create mass upheavals and 'to fight the Britishers when India would be invaded'.²¹ Police sleuths believed that Karuna Mitra was involved in secretly enlisting youths of Maniktolla for the *Santi Sena*. By late 1941 the Bengal Government became restive for his externment from Bengal. On 17 December, the Additional Secretary of the Bengal Government wrote a letter to the Home Department requesting his restriction at Giridih in the province of Bihar, where his father Rai Bahadur Aanta Nath Mitra—a retired district judge had been staying for the last 15 years. But a bureaucratic impasse ensued when Bihar Government refused to authorise his stay in the province under the pretext that Karuna's father was too old and weak to 'exercise any kind of control over his son'. Officials of the Bihar government were apprehensive that he would 'get into mischief in the colliery area of Giridih more likely'.²² The Bihar Government proposed the Central Government to restrict Karuna Mitra in Calcutta under the guardianship of his uncle, who was the proprietor of the Lily Biscuit Company. As the Bengal Government failed to banish Karuna Mitra from the province, it immediately decided to put him behind the bars. The Defence of India Act was initiated against him and Karuna was arrested in January 1942. In late 1943 when the last entry of his file was recorded Karuna Mitra

²⁰NAI 29/1/42-Poll(I) 1942.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

was still languishing in a Bengal prison.²³ From the silence of the archival documents thereafter, Karuna's withdrawal from active politics can be predicted.

Surveillance on veteran revolutionaries

As the British regime braced for successive waves of anti-imperialist outbursts, revolutionary activists whose antecedents were already known came under intense scrutiny. Amongst the enlisted 'undesirables' there was a veteran *Jugantar* revolutionary named Amarendranath Bose.²⁴ His dossier showed that he came under the police radar in 1915 as one of the convicts of the *Shibpur Dacoity Case* where a group of *Jugantar* revolutionaries robbed the house of wealthy businessman Krishto Behari Biswas and killed some villagers in the ensuing gunfight when chased by them.²⁵ It was also alleged that Amarendranath supplied arms to the revolutionaries involved in the *Madaripur Conspiracy Case* where a Government Pleader was killed.²⁶ For his involvement in revolutionary activism Amarendranath was arrested in 1916 and remained imprisoned till 1919. He was rearrested in 1924. From 1925 to 1928 he remained under house-arrest. In 1930 Amarendra resurfaced in police radar. This time as the leader of a north-Calcutta based revolutionary group named Karmi Sangha. In September 1931 his group came into limelight when they distributed leaflets headed *Atyachari Dhangsa Houk* (Let the Oppressors be Destroyed) at the Keoratola Crematorium on the funeral of Santosh Mitra- a revolutionary leader and political prisoner killed by the police inside Hijli prison. In the late 1930s under the influence of Subhas Bose Amarendra joined Indian National Congress. By 1939 he had become the Executive Committee member of the BPCC (Bengal Provincial Congress Committee) only to resign from it a few months later for joining the newly formed All India Forward Bloc (AIFB). Politically this period had been marked with the complete

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ NAI 44/28/44-Poll(I)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

rupture between INC and Subhas Bose, who began the agitation for the removal of Holwell Monument from Calcutta to consolidate his support base in Bengal. Amarendranath Bose spearheaded this movement in North Calcutta and reportedly collected Rs.2000 from his sympathisers for the cause. In connection with the movement, he was arrested in July 1940 under the Defence of India Act but was released in the following month. By late 1940 Subhas and his AIFB poised for a showdown with the embattled colonial regime and intelligence reports suggested that Amarendra became one of the members of Forward Bloc's 'Council of Action'- a secret group within the party created to spearhead mass agitations and labour strikes.²⁷

By this time Subhas Bose and his comrades were under close surveillance and Forward Bloc was infiltrated by police agents at almost every level. The intercepted letters, secret meeting resolutions of AIFB activists operating in Calcutta archived in the dossier of Amarendra portrayed how closely the situation of war in the international arena shaped the nuances of the anti-imperialist struggle at home. At initial phases of the war Indian activists were still hopeful that non-cooperation to the war effort through anti-war campaigns would be enough to force the state to consider the question of Indian independence. At a meeting of AIFB workers in March 1941, Amarendra opined that anti-imperialist parties should build up mass upsurges through 'anti-British and anti-war propaganda as long as the British did not change its policy towards India'.²⁸ But his hope that the Raj could be forced to change its policy through popular movements waned in the next few months as Viceroy Linlithgow's August Offer largely ignored demands of Indian sovereignty.²⁹ When Cripps Mission³⁰ also failed to address Indian issues, Amarendra as a loyal follower of Subhas Bose had begun to view Japan or Germany as

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition and After: A History of Modern India*, (New Delhi, OrientBlackSwan Private Limited, Second Edition, 2015), pp.411-412.

³⁰Ibid. p.412.

potential allies of the Indian freedom struggle. Buoyant by Japan's quick gains in East Asia and Germany's seemingly unstoppable war-machine in Europe, Amarendra opined that the 'programme of FB should depend on the international situation'.³¹ He had the conviction that Germany would eventually attack India through Iran and Iraq and Japan's invasion would reach India from the east.³² In a meeting with H V Kamath-the then General Secretary of AIFB, Amarendra proposed to create a pan-Indian volunteer organisation which would lead armed insurrections to felicitate the imperial collapse in the face of an Axis invasion. As Japan made lightning gains in South-East Asia, the fall of Calcutta seemed imminent.³³ In December 1941 intelligence reports alleged that Amarendra held a secret discussion with BPCP President Rajendra Dev for the prospect of taking over the administration of Calcutta and its surrounding districts in case of a British retreat from Bengal in the face of a Japanese ground invasion.

As a veteran of revolutionary politics who witnessed futile attempts of overthrowing the British regime with the help of foreign powers during First World War, Amarendra was not swayed by initial Axis successes and realistically contemplated the possibility of the British win. He envisioned that Allied win 'would lead to widespread revolution in the country because Britain would have to exploit India to make good of her losses in the war'.³⁴ Amarendra and his comrades were kept under close surveillance and his correspondences were thoroughly intercepted before the colonial regime decided to incarcerate him as a 'seditious undesirable' in March 1942. Amarendra's arrest coincided with the Japanese occupation of Rangoon and Andaman Islands. His dossier testified that he remained under surveillance while imprisoned. Within two years of his imprisonment in Buxa Special Reserve Jail Amarendra's health condition rapidly deteriorated. Though his health report showed that his diabetes became 'life

³¹NAI 44/28/44-Poll(I).

³²Ibid.

³³Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition and Afte*, p.414.

³⁴Ibid.

threatening' and he had lost 9 teeth, it failed to deter the colonial regime from extending his detention order on three occasions, i.e., in July 1944, in December 1944 and finally in June 1945. An IB report indicated that after the first extension of his detention order Amarendra became a forlorn figure who had 'resigned to his fate'. Colonial officials were much elated when instead of his failing health 'he had made no move or protested' the concurrent extension of his imprisonment. It was perceived as 'a reliable indication' of Amarendra's admission of his own guilt. Only after Japan's formal surrender in September 1945, the bureaucracy felt that it was safe to release Amarendra Nath Bose from incarceration.³⁵

Lilabati Nag and Anil Roy were a revolutionary couple³⁶ who came under the police radar in early 1920s when Anil Roy joined *Sree Sangha* and his neighbour in Dhaka Lilabati Nag founded *Dipali Sangha*. While Lilabati's organisation dealt with women education in and around the city of Dhaka, Anil Roy chose the physical culture movement of contemporary Bengal to popularise *Sree Sangha* among the city youths. In following years Lilabati opened a school named *Nari Shiksha Mandir* in Dhaka and began operating a girl's hostel in Calcutta.³⁷ She also advocated for voting rights of Indian women and became the Assistant Secretary of *Nikhil Banga Nari Votadhikar Samiti*.³⁸ Her role in disseminating women education had been proven by the fact that intellectual luminaries such as Rabindranath Tagore, P C Roy were signatories in the fund-raising pamphlet when the school building of *Nari Shiksha Mandir* suffered serious damages in a communal clash.

The dossier of Anil Roy mentioned that youths affiliated with the *Sree Sangha* gymnasium played a role in protecting *Bakshibazar* area of Dhaka from riotous mobs in 1930. By this time Anil Roy had captured the leadership of the group by side-lining Hem Ghosh- the founder of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ NAI 43/42/35-Political.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ <http://jayasreepatrika.org/articles/revolutionary-deshnetri-leela-roy/>.

the Sangha. As the activities of Sree Sangha attracted police suspicion, the organisation was thoroughly infiltrated by informers. In 1927 an informer reported that Lilabati had joined Sree Sangha, for which it suffered a series of desertion of members such as Hem Ghosh, Satya Bhusan Gupta and Bhupen Rakshit who opposed Anil's growing proximity to Lilabati. As multiple informers reported that Anil Roy had begun arms procurement for revolutionary actions, Sree Sangha was outlawed in 1930 and Anil was arrested from Calcutta. In connection with this case Lilabati's boarding house in Calcutta was searched and two girls were arrested for hiding weapons. Lilabati was arrested in early 1931 along with his brother Prabhat- an agricultural scientist. While remaining imprisoned her name resurfaced again in the Lebong Race Course Case.³⁹ One of her associates was Renu Sen. Renu had come under the scrutiny when Amiya Majumdar and her comrades made an abortive attempt to kill the Governor of Bengal at the Lebong Race Course in Darjeeling in 1934. Amiya allegedly confessed to the police that it was Renu- the close confidant of Lilabati Nag, who influenced her to join the revolutionary movement.

Archival documents showed that as an ex-M.L.A. and a retired Deputy Magistrate Lilabati's father Rai Saheb Girish Chandra Nag vainly tried to use his influence to secure the release of his daughter and son. Petitions of Girish Chandra Nag proved that Lilabati remained incarcerated till 1936 at least.⁴⁰

The dossier of Anil Roy showed that he was one of the organisers of the hunger strike in Deoli Jail which commenced in sympathy of the hunger strikers in Andaman Jail in August 1937. Following this he was frequently shifted from one to another prison before being released in 1938. Thereafter Lila Nag married Anil Roy and continued to play an active role in anti-imperialist politics. According to police reports the couple made 'continuous efforts to

³⁹NAI 43/42/35-Political.

⁴⁰Ibid.

amalgamate various revolutionary groups'.⁴¹ The couple maintained close associations with various left-leaning groups including Bolshevik Party of India, Revolutionary Socialist Party and made overtures to Forward Bloc. In 1940, Anil and Lilabati were imprisoned for a month for defacing the Holwell Monument while participating in a procession for its removal.⁴² To create organisational footprints of AIFB outside Bengal the couple began touring United Provinces in January 1941. UP police were alarmed when it was reported that the couple had formed 'extensive contacts, particularly among students'. While UP officials proposed to arrest them, the imperial government asked for their restriction to their home provinces. Accordingly, the Bengal government ordered the restriction of Anil Roy and Lilabati Nag in the city of Dhaka in April 1941. After the war they resumed political activism and remained steadfast in their commitment to AIFB. Before cancer took him away Anil unsuccessfully contested the constituent assembly election in 1946 as a Forward Bloc candidate.⁴³ Lilabati remained a lifelong champion of women rights issues and in her later years became part of a close-knit group who forged contacts with '*Bhagwanji*' - an ascetic living at Neemsar in UP. Till her death in 1970 she had the conviction that it was Subhas Bose who had returned to India, disguised as an ascetic.⁴⁴

Communist activists

The police dossier on Barin Roy⁴⁵ showed that he was a leading student activist of the left-leaning Bengal Provincial Student's Federation (BPSF). He came under the police radar in 1939 when he became the publisher and proprietor of a short-lived student magazine named '*Chhatra Abhijan*'. In late 1938 Calcutta witnessed strike waves by college students under the

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³<http://jayasreepatrika.org/articles/revolutionary-anil-roy/>.

⁴⁴<http://jayasreepatrika.org/articles/revolutionary-deshnetri-leela-roy/>.

⁴⁵NAI 75/25/41-Poll(I) Home Political(Internal).

leadership of BPSF when newly elected Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose was not permitted to attend the Annual Day celebrations of Scottish Church College.⁴⁶ According to the police dossier, Barin was one of the leading organisers. In 1940 he presided over the recruitment drive of BPSF in Munshiganj Sub-division of undivided Bengal. In 1941 Calcutta police raided his residence in 44, Kailash Bose Street from where they seized 300 copies of an English leaflet headlined ‘Hurl Back the Imperialist Offensive’ along with other ‘communist literatures’. He was prosecuted under the Defence of India Act and served with 9 months of rigorous imprisonment. Following his release the colonial government decided to extern him from the Bengal province. As his parents were settled in Hazaribagh town he was ordered to restrict himself there. The conditions attached with his restriction order proved that the embattled colonial regime wanted to control the social and private life of his recalcitrant subjects. The authorities were particularly interested in ensuring that he remained separated from local youths. Barin was ordered to stop visiting playgrounds, educational institutes without prior permission of the Officer in Charge of the Hazaribagh Police Station. Along with it he was asked not to visit anyone other than his blood relations and was instructed to allow police inspections in his home between 9 pm. at night and sunrise to satisfy them about his presence in home.⁴⁷

A school-boy, Nitai Ganguly⁴⁸ came under police surveillance in 1932 when he became a part of the group led by Kalipada Roy, a ‘known’ communist activist in Purulia town. They ran a library named ‘Friend’s Library’ and police suspected that the library was a legal cover for underground Communist revolutionaries active in Manbhum-Singhbhum area. In 1938, when Nitai’s name resurfaced in police radar he had become a leading member of the BPSF- a left

⁴⁶Subrata Banerjee, *Fragments of Time: Memoirs of a Romantic Revolutionary*,(Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development(CRRID),Chandigarh, India, 2017), p.89.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸NAI 75/22/41-POLL(I).

leaning student organisation. He was elected as the Assistant Secretary of the North Calcutta Student's Federation and the Secretary of the Scottish Church College Student's Union. He reportedly led the agitation of Calcutta University students against the Secondary Education Bill.⁴⁹

In 1939 the Fazlul Huq led government of Bengal witnessed another round of strikes demanding the release of political prisoners which snowballed into coordinated hunger strike movements involving freedom-fighters incarcerated in different Indian jails. Ultimately the central government had to yield and released many of the activists.⁵⁰ Nitai played an active role in organising student strikes in and around Calcutta. His dossier showed that when participating students and sympathetic teachers were dismissed from a school in Shyambazar- a suburb in Calcutta, Nitai successfully led the agitation for their reinstatement. According to the IB in a secret meeting of All India Student Federation held in Lucknow, Nitai was nominated as the General Secretary of BPSF and it was also decided that Nitai would replace Biswanath Mukherjee in 'the Central Fraction of CPI' in case of his arrest. In July 1940, as Holwell Monument removal movement erupted in Calcutta, on behalf of BPSF Nitai was seen organising numerous processions involving college students. In August 1940 his place in 73, Harrison Road was raided by the police. Following the 'seizure of communist literatures', Nitai was prosecuted under the stringent Defence of India Act and was sentenced to 6 months rigorous imprisonment, which was later reduced by the Calcutta High Court on appeal. Following release Nitai had resumed his political activities and organised a student procession against the arrest of Abani Lahiri- a firebrand communist leader. Meanwhile Nitai had become 'the leader of the CPI fraction working inside BPSF'.⁵¹

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Subrata Banerjee, *Fragments of Time: Memoir of a Romantic Revolutionary*, p.87.

⁵¹NAI 75/22/41-POLL(I).

Contemporary political scene of Bengal was marked by the growing ideological fissures within the anti-imperialist camp. As reflected in his dossier, Nitai's actions bore the unmistakable stamp of the tumultuous time. He actively campaigned for communist candidates in the Student Union election of the Calcutta University as opposed to the M N Roy led Radical Party candidates. As Subhas Bose launched Forward Bloc he was reportedly seen advising his comrades working in the student front to capture district leaderships of BPSF. from Bose loyalists wherever possible. The file of Nitai Ganguly also mapped the thought-process of a grass-root level party worker in the initial phases of Second World War. He was convinced that 'in a few months the present war would turn against Soviet Russia and it would then be the duty of all colonial countries and progressive groups and socialists to bring about a mass revolution'.⁵² Like many of his contemporaries, Nitai believed that the struggle against colonialism was part of a larger conflict for establishing a just and egalitarian society and the protection of the Soviet state system was central to that battle-plan. According to IB Nitai had become one of the trusted comrades of the communist leadership in Bengal. Besides his political duties Nitai would often act as a human 'post-box' for the underground workers of the outlawed CPI by receiving notes, party circulars from the leadership and forwarding them to designated places.⁵³

FB activist Karuna Mitra and CPI cadre Nitai Ganguly were contemporaries and participated in popular movements as comrades. However, the turns and twists of Second World War played a key role in shaping their world-view by putting them in opposing sides. After the fall of Rangoon British withdrawal from Bengal seemed imminent. While Karuna began organising a militia named *Santi Sena* to felicitate the British collapse, ideological influence of communist internationalism led Nitai to root for the survival of the USSR as key for the triumph of anti-

⁵²ibid.

⁵³ibid.

colonial struggles. The chasm within the anti-imperialist camp would grow to the extent of bloody street-fights. The brutal killing of budding communist intellectual and trade-union activist Somen Chanda in Dhaka in hands of supporters of Axis powers was a sad reminder of the painful past. From the memoirs of contemporary communist activists, it became clear that convincing its cadres and masses about the necessity of supporting Allied war effort became an uphill task for the CPI leadership.⁵⁴ In '*Pathe Jete Jete*'⁵⁵ Robin Mukherjee recollected that Nepal Roy- the secretary of the Bhabanipur Local Committee of CPI, went against the party line and began circulating military manuals amongst his comrades to prepare them for the imminent civil war against the Raj and its hirelings. Following which Nepal Roy was removed from his post by CPI. According to Robin Mukherjee's account dejected Nepal Roy severed his ties with CPI and ultimately left Calcutta for working at a stone quarry in Karmatar.⁵⁶

From early 1941 authorities of colonial Bengal contemplated 'quick removal' of Nitai Ganguly. As his father was a practising advocate in the court of Purulia town, then part of the province of Bihar, Bengal Police contacted Bihar officials, who after some dilly-dallying gave nod to his internment proposal. In August 1941, Nitai Ganguly was externed from Bengal. Nitai's internment order was added with a long list of stringent restrictions which enchained almost every aspect of his life. He was ordered to refrain from visiting educational institutes, clubs, play-grounds, meeting anyone living outside of the Purulia town apart from his blood relations. Moreover, he had to report to the police station daily in the morning and was asked to stay indoors at night. To ensure his presence at home Nitai was asked to allow police inspections at night. The silence of colonial archives following his internment in Purulia indicated Nitai's political oblivion.

⁵⁴Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Kotha*, (Calcutta, NabapatraPrakashan, 1982), pp.61-64.

⁵⁵Rabin Mukherjee, *Pathe Yete Yete*, (Kolkata, National Book Agency Private Limited, June 2000), p.26.

⁵⁶Ibid.

The IB dossier of Benoy Bhusan Chakraborty⁵⁷ showed that he was an accomplished doctor from Faridpur district of undivided Bengal. His employment as a Sub-Assistant Surgeon of the Assam Railways and Trading Company brought him to the town of Dibrugarh in Eastern Assam. With the passage of time Benoy Bhusan emerged as one of the leading Congress members who played a pivotal role in organising the workers of adjacent tea estates. As the President of the Dibrugarh Congress Committee he successfully led the striking workers of Margarita Tea Estate and Ledo Tea Estate. In the inter-war period Assam tea gardens witnessed sporadic movements against the ‘indenture system’. The institution akin to slavery severely restricted worker’s mobility outside tea-gardens, thus ensuring the owners of social as well as physical control over their workers.⁵⁸ Benoy Bhusan was one of the organisers of the movement against the dreaded indenture system. His activism against colonial capitalist interests paved the way for his removal from the Assam Railways and Trading Company. Though colonial archives espoused that Benoy Bhusan was sacked for his ‘incompetence and medical unfitness’, the actual cause for his removal was revealed when he was described as a ‘professional agitator’ who had ‘no means of livelihood save by fomenting and interfering with any grievance of the labouring classes wherever such arises in the district’⁵⁹. According to the police dossier Benoy Bhusan gradually drifted from the political line of Indian National Congress to maintain connections with underground revolutionary groups, especially the outlawed Communist Party of India. His home in Dibrugarh had become the favourite haunt of revolutionaries such as- Biswanath Mukherjee,⁶⁰ Jogesh Chandra Chakraborty,⁶¹ Indumati

⁵⁷NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) 1940.

⁵⁸Rana Pratap Behal, *Forms of Labour Protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930*, (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 20, no. 4, 1985: pp. 19–26). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4374009>.

⁵⁹NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I).

⁶⁰ According to the dossier, Biswanath Mukherjee was a ‘double-starred suspect of Bengal, an absconder under the Defence of India Act’. NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁶¹A leader of the Comilla branch of the Anushilan Party, NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

Singh⁶² etc. A report by an informer alleged that in September 1940, Pranesh Biswas the General Secretary of Assam Student's Federation stayed in his house for participating in a meeting of underground Communists in the province.

With Japan's involvement in the war, the colonial regime became eager to stamp out any kind of opposition which could undermine its interests in the conflict-threatened eastern provinces. He was branded as an 'undesirable' and the Assam government appealed to the central government for issuing a restriction order. Benoy Bhusan was externed from Assam in December 1941 and was asked to remain within the Faridpur district. Throughout the war he made several pleas to the Assam government for the withdrawal of the externment order. Documents showed that though Benoy Bhusan failed to budge the state, he had secured a monthly 'maintenance allowance' of Rs.20 from 1943. The silence of the IB dossier indicated that Benoy Bhusan's tryst with working class movements had ended with his externment order.⁶³

Kundan Lal Sain⁶⁴ was a youth of Punjabi descent hailing from the Hazara district of the erstwhile North West Frontier Province. Kundan came to study at the Krisha Nath College in Berhampore town of Murshidabad district when his father found employment at the Katihar Railway station of Bihar as a parcel clerk. His stay in the college hostel exposed Kundan to concurrent currents of anti-imperialist struggle in late-colonial Bengal. It was in 1940 when Kundan became a member of an unknown left-wing organisation- Communist League of India. According to surveillance reports, Kundan's quest for political literatures in mother tongue i.e. the Gurumukhi language led him to visit Calcutta together with his friend Sandwip Chand Sethia-another Punjabi student from Jiaganj. In September 1940, a report of an informer

⁶²Indumati Singh was a revolutionary political activist. She was the sister of Anant Singh-one of the architects of the Chittagong Armoury Raid.

⁶³NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁶⁴NAI 75/11/41- Poll(I).

suggested that he was ‘won over to the *Anushilan Samity*’ by Narendra Nath Das – an ‘ex-detenué’.⁶⁵ Kundan attended the district conference of BPSF on behalf of the *Anushilan Samiti* and became one of the members of the executive committee of Murshidabad BPSF-created to spearhead the student movement in the district. By January 1941 he had left *Anushilan Samiti* to join Forward Bloc and played a key role in organising student demonstrations in Berhampore town ‘held in connection with the Forward Bloc Week’.⁶⁶ But his connection with the Forward Bloc also seemed short-lived as within a month he reportedly became close to a group of communist student activists such as Priya Madhab Gupta, Brindaban Mondal, Ram Chandra Saha. An informer close to this group reported that together with Ram Chandra Saha he smuggled 500 copies of a leaflet entitled ‘*Lal Nishan*’ issued by the Bengal branch of outlawed CPI from Calcutta. In the night of February 19, Kundan and his friends allegedly distributed this leaflet among the hostel boarders and houses adjacent to the college. This feat of Kundan triggered the district administration to contemplate his persecution. Fearing that he would ‘create similar mischiefs’ Bihar government refused to intern him in the province. As Kundan Lal became ‘undesirable’ for both Bengal and Bihar the Central Government asked the North West Frontier Province to initiate internment procedure. Imperial government’s predicament increased when it was found that apart from a piece of farm-land Kundan had no relatives left in Ghazi- his ancestral village. Paranoid government officials feared that without watchful eyes of an able-bodied guardian he would have ‘nothing to do other than starting communist cells in the area where none now exist’.⁶⁷ After weighing in different options to persecute Kundan Lal the central Government concluded that his father should be the most suitable person to rein him in and coaxed the Bihar administration to issue a restriction order against him. In June 1941, Kundan was asked to stay within the limits of the Katihar Municipality till further notice.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

The way the colonial regime went at great lengths for persecution of a small-time student activist underlined its deep aversion against communists as well as reflected panic-stricken footsteps of a moribund regime depending solely on brute force for survival.

Cambridge University educated Renu Roy⁶⁸ was a niece of Bidhan Chandra Roy and came under the imperial surveillance as a 'post-box' of London based Indian radicals. From 1939, she became active in Indian politics. According to her dossier, Renu became one of the Joint-Secretaries of the All India Women's Workers League and was also a regular contributor of the All India Women's Conference mouthpiece '*Roshni*'. In 1940 as Calcutta witnessed waves of student strikes, Renu reportedly led a team of students to intellectual luminaries such as: Rabindranath Tagore and P C Roy and persuaded them to issue a statement against police repression on agitating students. It was her visit in United Provinces in January 1941 along with Hirendranath Mukherjee purportedly to organise AISF, which prompted the colonial state to contemplate punitive action against her. As an 'undesirable subject', she was ordered to refrain from activities which were 'prejudicial in nature' and was asked to stay within the erstwhile Bengal province in March 1941.⁶⁹

Though persecuted, Renu Roy continued to maintain her ties with CPI and found employment as a lecturer of English in Calcutta University.⁷⁰ After almost a year Renu's case resurfaced in a completely different context. By March 1942 Japan had joined Axis powers and overran large swathes of territories in eastern Asia with a lightning speed. Whereas Soviet Russia joined the Allied powers to halt the Nazi invasion on its soil. In January 1942 as Rangoon fell to the Imperial Japanese Army and Calcutta began witnessing occasional bombing raids, a full-blown attack on the city seemed imminent. Archived letters of Renu Roy testified that her family

⁶⁸NAI 75/4/41-Poll(I) 1941.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Subrata Banerjee, *Fragments of Time: Memoir of a Romantic Revolutionary*, p.96.

members were among the inhabitants who had left the city apprehending Japanese attack. Bound by the internment order Renu remained stuck in Calcutta. Her desperation to escape the looming war cloud was reflected in letters and telegrams she sent to colonial officials pleading for the withdrawal of the internment order. Echoing the changed posture of CPI in Second World War, she vouched for her unwavering support to the war effort. But the imperial bureaucracy remained sceptic and after much hesitation the restriction order was modified in May 1942 to confine her within the border of the United Provinces, so that she could unite with her family living there. The treatment of Renu Roy portrayed that imperial bureaucracy continued to view communists as arch-enemies and their persecution continued unabated. Often communists were not permitted to hold rallies or organise gatherings in support of the war effort. When a deadly cyclone devastated coastal areas of Midnapore district in December 1942, the government barred communists from entering the district for organising relief works. When Air Raid Protection (ARP) committees were formed in Calcutta and its suburbs, local authorities published written instructions to safeguard ARP units from communist penetration. Articles in People`s War- the CPI mouthpiece ‘complained that district authorities in Midnapore, Birbhum, Khulna, Jessore and the Asansol area of Burdwan behaved as if the CPI was still illegal’.⁷¹

With the fear of Japanese attack receding in 1944, Renu Roy returned to Bengal and resumed her political activities to become one of the leading members of *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* along with Manikuntala Sen, Rani Mahalanobis.⁷² During this period she also married eminent journalist Nikhil Chakravarty- the founder-editor of the *Mainstream* magazine. In her later years Renu became a successful parliamentarian to win two consecutive terms from Bashirhat⁷³

⁷¹Sanjoy Bhattacharya, *The Colonial State and the Communist Party of India, 1942-1945: A Reprisal*, South Asia Research, Vol.15, No.1, Spring 1995, pp. 63-65.

⁷²Renu Chakravarty: *A Profile/Two letters* (Mainstream Weekly, Vol. No. 44, October 21, 2017). <https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article7537.html>.

⁷³Ibid.

constituency. Till her death in 1995 Renu Roy (later Chakraborty) remained politically active in Bengal as well as on the national stage.

Suspected German spies

In May 1940 Intelligence Bureau officials of Bengal received a letter deemed 'strictly secret' from their Headquarter in Delhi seeking prompt action against 'two ex-revolutionaries', employed in a Calcutta based enterprise. The letter revealed that the Third Reich used a German firm named *Mercedes Book-Keeping and Calculating Machines* as a cover for intelligence gathering all-over Europe. As these machines were used in government departments and needed trained hands for maintenance, it became easier for German agents to infiltrate government institutions dealing with sensitive specifics.⁷⁴ While probing possible Axis infiltration in India a Calcutta based enterprise- British Tabulating Machine Company producing tabulating machines of similar kind,came under the scrutiny for their knack of employing Germany-trained Indian men. For the imperial intelligence it became a matter of great concern, when it was revealed that the firm had supplied machines to 'certain important Government of India offices'⁷⁵ and posted its employees for their maintenance. The suspicion primarily fell on its two newly-recruited Bengali employees- Deba Prasad Bose and Tejesh Chandra Ghosh. It was found that Deba Prasad Bose had already joined his post in the office of the Military Accounts Department in Rawalpindi for the maintenance of machines installed there, while Tejesh Chandra Ghosh continued to be an apprentice in the Calcutta office of the firm. Bengal CID was asked to keep them under close surveillance. Investigators were thoroughly intrigued when the British manager of the firm disclosed that 4 more Indian youths were being trained in Germany on behalf of the firm.⁷⁶

⁷⁴NAI 115/40 1940 Home Political(Internal).

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

The case history Deba Prasad Bose showed that he was an electrical engineer who came to know Tejesh Ghosh while working for the *Siemens Schuckert Works* in Berlin. While posted in London he married a British woman named Patricia Hayman. Following his resignation from the Siemens, he became a director of the *Orientourist*- a short-lived travel agency floated in Germany by a Bengali named P B Seal. Afterwards Deba Prasad Bose was found to be frequently visiting various Indian cities such as Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi for the purpose of opening *Orientourist* offices. The police report alleged that 'his ideas were more extravagant and he was far too lavish in expending the Company's money in India'.⁷⁷ As the *Orientourist* collapsed in 1938 he found employment in the British Tabulating Machine Company. He arrived in India in April 1940 together with his friend Tejesh Ghosh and Rosemarie Ghosh- the German wife of Tejesh Ghosh. Ensuing investigation involving foreign intelligence services concluded that apart from spending considerable time in Nazi Germany and convincing the Nazi state tourism department to help his *Orientourism*, Deba Prasad Bose was mostly untouched by the anti-colonial fervour raging in India and abroad.

The case history of Tejesh Chandra Ghosh revealed that he had a revolutionary past. Hailing from a wealthy family of tea-plantation owners in the town of Jalpaiguri, he was arrested from a boarding house in Deoghar along with three Bengali youths in 1927 when a catchment of arms and ammunition was discovered by a police raid. Following these arrests a broader clampdown was initiated on Bengali settlements of the Manbhum-Singhbhum area. He was one of the 20 youths who were implicated in the Deoghar Conspiracy Case in 1928.⁷⁸ Although he was later acquitted investigators seemed to be convinced of his involvement in the revolutionary movement for which he had to give a written undertaking ensuring his detachment from 'undesirable activities whilst abroad' before he was allowed to move to

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸L N Rana, *Revolutionary Nationalism in Jharkhand* in Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 2000-2001, Vol. 61, Part One: Millennium (2000-2001), pp. 718-732.

Britain for higher studies.⁷⁹ In Europe, though Tejesh Ghosh remained politically inactive, his occasional appearances in various anti-colonial forums convinced the Raj of his enmity. In 1932 while studying in the Glasgow University he was noticed for attending a meeting of the Indian Independence League. He was reported to be in the coterie of Nirmal Sengupta—a London based anti-imperialist activist. While studying Electrical Engineering in Sweden he frequented Berlin, and became friendly with Benoyendra Nath Ray Chaudhury, Sudhir Sen, Manmatha Nath Chakravarty. All of them were well-known to the imperial authorities for their anti-imperialist views. An unconfirmed report suggested that Tejesh visited Moscow from Berlin in 1936. The way even private utterances of Tejesh Ghosh found its place in the police file proved that anti-colonial circles in inter-war Berlin were thoroughly infiltrated by imperial intelligence agents.⁸⁰ In April 1937, he decided to marry his lover— a 17 year old German student named Rosemarie Bieler. To bypass Third Reich's racial laws they chose to marry in England, where Deba Prasad Bose was present as a witness. In the later part of 1937 Tejesh Ghosh sailed to Bombay to join his post in a German owned company named A E G Electronics. Police officials were surprised by the way Nazi authorities chose to 'overlook irregularities of his marriage'⁸¹ and hired him in a German company. It also raised the suspicion level on Tejesh as a potential Axis spy. According to the Bengal Intelligence Bureau report, by 1938 he had resigned from his post in A E G Electronics and went back to Berlin with his wife. They were seen attending various programmes which were critical to British imperialism. In December 1938, he found employment in the British Tabulating Machine Company as a machine repairing engineer and proceeded to India in 1940 along with his wife Rosemarie Ghosh and friend Deba Prasad Bose. As Tejesh was brought in for interrogation, his evasiveness on

⁷⁹NAI 115/40 1940 Home Political(Internal).

⁸⁰It was reported that while in England he did not take any active part in revolutionary movements and was a quiet efficient sort of person, but utterances made to other Indians in Berlin, (whom he had reason to believe held similar views) were definitely anti-British' NAI 115/40 1940 Home Political(Internal).

⁸¹NAI 115/40 1940 Home Political (Internal).

questions related to his frequent forays to Berlin apparently convinced the IB on his close relationship with the Nazi regime and prepared the ground for his persecution.

During the initial phases of investigation IB was convinced that the British owned company acted as a cover for the intelligence gathering machinery of the Third Reich and contemplated strict action against the company including its owner. On the other hand, officials of the Home Department demanded prosecution against two individuals under suspicion instead of the rank and file of the company officials. The Home Department was apprehensive that any action against the firm would reveal that such machine making companies were suspected of spying for Germany, which in turn would alert the enemy to alter their ways for intelligence gathering. To hide the real motive that Tejesh Ghosh and Deba Prasad Bose were under suspicion for espionage, the Home Department instructed the police to frame them as 'ex-revolutionaries'. Archived documents revealed that right from the beginning investigators were convinced that Deba Prasad Bose was not a 'revolutionary suspect', but failed to budge the paranoid Home Department to change the course of action. For the colonial regime the gravity of the case was such, where 'individual consideration must be subordinated' to the safety and security of the British Raj.⁸² In May 1940, as the probe dragged on, the Home Department decided to proceed against the duo without further waiting for 'Calcutta's reply'. To 'manufacture the cover' Home Department instructed the CID to arrest them in such a way that an impression could be created that they were indulging in 'dangerous revolutionary activity'. In June 1940, Deba Prasad Bose and Tejesh Chandra Ghosh were arrested. Rosemarie Ghosh was also arrested and was sent to Katapahar Parole Settlement as an 'enemy alien'.⁸³

As Deba Prasad Bose remained imprisoned, his British wife Patricia Hayman intervened. She came to India and met several top-ranking police officers to plead for the 're-examination of

⁸²ibid.

⁸³ibid.

the case'. Patricia wrote letters to David Crawford- the manager of the overseas department of the British company and urged him to communicate with CID. As requested, the manager wrote a letter ascertaining that Deba Prasad Bose was unwilling to return to India from the very beginning and highlighted the fact that he had not influenced David- his immediate employer to post him in Government establishment in any way. Following these developments the Home Department began to reorient its seemingly immutable position on Deba Prasad Bose. After much hesitation, he was finally released in December 1940. The way intervention of a British citizen was needed to reconsider a case which seemed far-fetched from the very beginning, spoke volume on the duplicity of the colonial justice system. It also highlighted that bureaucratic whims and racial prejudice were deeply embedded within the body politic of the Raj. Last few entries of the file showed that following his release Deba Prasad Bose appealed to the government for compensation and continued his usual extravagant lifestyle. A letter from Thomas Cook and Sons Limited dated 29 September 1941 showed that Deba Prasad Bose had borrowed more than Rs. 1000 from the firm and failed to repay. Thomas Cook sent enquiries to the Central Government on the chances of compensation granted to Deba Prasad Bose and requested the authorities to withhold the loaned amount from the compensation money.⁸⁴

Tejesh Chandra Ghose had to wait a little longer for his release owing to his tryst with revolutionary activism. Debesh Chandra Ghose, the wealthy elder brother of Tejesh, had to intervene to secure his release from Hijli Special jail. The police file revealed that Debesh was one of the major Indian tea planters who played an instrumental role in brother`s employment in the British Tabulating Machine Company. Archival records showed that he wrote several letters and met British bureaucrats to secure his brother`s release. Although Tejesh Ghose was finally released in May 1941, the government issued a warning to its departments dissuading

⁸⁴ibid.

them from ‘employing him to offices or factories engaged on vital war supplies’.⁸⁵ The file remained silent on Rosemarie Ghose.

The file of Tejesh Ghosh and Deba Prasad Bose elucidated how wartime emergency laws unhinged mindless coercion of the subject population. They were deployed to satisfy the whims of paranoid officials, resulting in the victimisation of hapless individuals in the name of safeguarding imperial control.

A rebellious Sikh

Harnam Singh Malli⁸⁶ was a Sikh immigrant who came under the police scanner in 1926 when he was arrested in connection with a robbery in Calcutta. His police dossier showed that he did not have a fixed source of income and lived alone in the city. Time to time he worked as a bus driver or eke out living as a factory worker. Although IB failed to ascertain the year in which Harnam came to the city, during the early 1930s he became fairly well-known to police for his association with the Bengal unit of the Punjab based Naw Jawan Bharat Sabha and Kirti Lahar Party. In Calcutta he became one of the associates of ‘externed *Ghadarites*’ such as Balwant Singh Pardeshi and Kirthi Singh Azad.⁸⁷ Police informers identified Harnam Singh as the man who gave a speech at the Ballygunge Gurdwara in 1931, hailing the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguruand. There he was reportedly seen urging ‘Sikhs to be united in the service of their country’ in the course of the Sunday congregation. In 1933, he was caught smuggling a revolver from the princely state of Bharatpur, allegedly to assassinate the Police Commissioner of Calcutta. While the police failed to prove the allegation, Harnam was convicted for the illegal possession of arms and was sentenced for 3 months rigorous imprisonment together with a fine of Rs.100. Harnam had to spend additional 6 weeks in jail

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶NAI 94/12/45-Poll(I) 1941.

⁸⁷Ibid.

as he failed to furnish the money. Colonial repression failed to break his spirit, as Harnam reportedly made overtures to almost every group active in the anti-imperialist struggle following his release. He was reportedly seen distributing leaflets of CPI, BLP, Bolshevik Party and participated in processions of working classes, students, Sikh drivers and attended meetings of socialists, communists, trade union activists.⁸⁸

In 1939, as Punjab witnessed waves of peasant movement Harnam took initiative to send a batch of *Kisan Satyagraha* to Lahore from Bengal. Later that year he left Calcutta to join as a worker in the Tata Factory in Jamshedpur. Together with Narayan Jha and Sant Singh, Harnam became instrumental in organising workers in the ‘wired-products section’ of the factory and allegedly ‘assisted the Secretary of the Jamshedpur strike committee in raising funds’ for the striking workers. An intercepted letter showed that Harman insisted the editor of the magazine *Kirti Lahar* to publish reports on the working class movement inside the Tata Factory. IB report indicated that it was also this time when Harnam finally chose his political camp to become a follower of Subhas Chandra Bose. Harnam met Subhas and acquainted him with the ‘labour situation of Jamshedpur’.⁸⁹ With the beginning of Second World War Harnam Singh was one of the signatories of a leaflet published on behalf of the workers of the Tata Factory entitled ‘Our War Demand’ which asked for ‘war bonus for workers, employment of more hands’ and emphasised on their right to unionise.⁹⁰ In early 1940 Harnam became the President of the Jamshedpur town Forward Bloc and increased the concern of IB when he began visiting working class ‘bustees’ frequently. As informers reported that Harnam along with other leading trade-union activists in town were preparing to launch a movement demanding ‘war bonus’ Bihar Government hastened to issue his externment order from the province. Harnam’s return

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid.

to Calcutta had been marked with his temporary loss of touch with Forward Block and he 'began to work among the Sikhs on behalf of the BLP'. Following a few weeks of joblessness he found employment as a private bus driver in June 1940 and rose through the rank of their union to become the Assistant Secretary of the Driver`s and Conductor`s Association. IB also noticed him 'mixing with Dr Bhag Singh- an America returned Ghadarite'.⁹¹ When the political scene of Calcutta got electrified for the removal of the Holwell Monument, Harnam oscillated towards Forward Bloc. In the course of the movement Harnam had transformed into a fiery public speaker who had delivered speeches at gatherings of Deshapriya Park, Albert Hall and addressed numerous rallies in and around Calcutta. Apart from demanding the unconditional release of all political prisoners including Subhash Bose he was often seen exhorting the audience to rebel against the Raj by urging the 'factory operatives, *Dock Mazdurs* and Railway workers to strike'. IB was particularly alarmed in July 1940 when it was reported that at a gathering of *Sikh Sabha*, Harnam evoked incidents of colonial repression on Sikhs in the recent past and recalled incidents of 'Budge Budge Ghat, Guru ka Bagh, Jaito and the hanging of Kartar Singh Sorabha' to make a rousing appeal for non-cooperation with the colonisers. In the course of the speech Harnam extolled the feat of Bina Das⁹² and urged fellow Sikhs to join Subhash Chandra Bose en masse to wage the war of Indian independence. Incensed by this speech Harnam Singh was charged under the Defence of India Act and was imprisoned for three months. In December 1940, as his prison sentence was nearing its end, the Bengal Government initiated the procedure to banish him from the province. Eventually, a minor bureaucratic tussle ensued between Bengal and Punjab when Punjab refused to recognise him as a resident of the province and vainly persuaded the central government to issue a fresh arrest

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Bina Das was a trailblazing revolutionary. As a student of Bethune College, she attempted to assassinate Bengal Governor Stanley Jackson while attending the convocation ceremony of Calcutta University in February 1932.

warrant for his indefinite arrest at the Central Internment Camp of Deoli. The Under Secretary of the imperial government had to coax the Punjab bureaucracy to accept Harnam Singh Malli. In April 1941, Harnam Singh was expelled from Bengal as an ‘undesirable’ and was asked to remain within the boundaries of his ancestral village of Mallian. The dossier of Harnam Singh also mentioned names of two Sikh bus drivers- Kripal Singh and Daman Singh who were also externed from Bengal along with him.⁹³ However their political antecedents or their connection with Harnam Singh remained unknown to us.

Since the days of First World War, led by the Ghadar movement a sizeable section of Sikh immigrants living in and around Calcutta were touched by the nationalist fervour, even to the extent of participating in revolutionary actions in coordination with local groups.⁹⁴ In the interwar years various strands of egalitarian ideas i.e. radical socialism and communism found resonance amongst them. Harnam and his comrades are to be located in this context. These long-forgotten characters also testified that the legacy of political activism of the Sikh diaspora continued till the very end of the colonial empire in Bengal.

A ‘Seditious Ascetic’

Narendra Mohan Sen⁹⁵ came under the police radar in 1906, at the tender age of 14, when he became a member of the *Anushilan Samiti* active in Dacca. He Was one of active participants of the early revolutionary nationalist wave which gripped the Bengal political scene on the eve of First World War. In 1918 Narendra Mohan Sen was indicted in numerous political robberies and murders allegedly committed by the *Anushilan Samiti* and was imprisoned for 10 years. Following his release in July 1928 he took vows of celibacy to join the Ramkrishna Mission

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *Voices of Komagata Maru: Imperial Surveillance and Workers from Punjab in Bengal*, (New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2018), pp. 100-109.

⁹⁵NAI 75/2-A/41-POLL(I) 1941 Home Political

and became known as Narendra Maharaj or Brahmachari Maharaj. The IB report on him alleged that though he became an ardent follower of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda cult, Narendra did not sever his ties with the revolutionary movement and intelligence agencies kept him under close watch.

Under the 'garb of a sannyasi' he participated in the *Anushilan Conference* held in 1931 and allegedly supported the motion which proposed for the annihilation of police informers, CID officers. He was arrested for the second time in 1932 and was externed from Bengal. For the next 6 years he would remain in the United Province and stayed in the premises of Ramkrishna Mission Ashram in Benaras. During this period Narendra Maharaj reportedly met a fugitive Anushilan leader- Pratul Ganguly and agreed to continue as an adviser of the Anushilan Party. While in Benaras he raised funds for a little known revolutionary organisation named *Pragati Sangha*. Following the withdrawal of the externment order in 1938 he went back to his hometown Dacca and toured different parts of Eastern Bengal purportedly to revive his old contacts in the anti-imperialist camp. In 1939, he began frequenting Ranchi on behalf of the Ramkrishna Mission- where the organisation was constructing a Tuberculosis sanatorium. His long absence from Ranchi ostensibly to collect subscriptions for construction of the sanatorium was noticed by IB. According to the police report in one such period of absence he secretly met Jadu Gopal Mukherjee⁹⁶ of the Jugantar Party to discuss the possibility of uniting Jugantar and Anushilan organisations. While attending the Ramgar conference of the Indian National Congress Narendra Maharaj reportedly took part in a parallel meeting held secretly along with other leading members of the *Anushilan Party* to launch the All India Revolutionary Socialist Party. IB believed that he played an instrumental role in inducting youths from different revolutionary factions in the newly launched organisation. In August 1940, it was reported that

⁹⁶ After the martyrdom of Jatindranath Mukherjee, Jadu Gopal Mukherjee led the *Jugantar Group*.

he ‘acted as an intermediary’ in another unsuccessful attempt to unify Anushilan and Jugantar organisations. His constant effort to amalgamate different revolutionary groups into one alarmed the colonial establishment to use the Defence of India Act. In November 1941, the internment order of Narendra Mohan Sen was issued. He was interned in his home-town Dacca and was asked to report to the local police station daily.⁹⁷

A lovelorn revolutionary

Surendranath Sarkhel⁹⁸ was arrested from the United Province as a ‘precautionary measure’, when HSRA attempted to bomb the ‘Viceregal Special’ train carrying Lord Irwin in 1929.⁹⁹ For this purpose, he allegedly smuggled several revolvers from Calcutta to Banaras. Although the police failed to prove his direct involvement, he was convicted for a multitude of seditious activities including- ‘political dacoities, arms carrying etc’. But incarceration failed to break his spirit and Surendranath remained ‘troublesome’ for the colonial establishment even after he was sent to the infamous Cellular Jail in Andaman. For his occasional frictions with prison authorities he was convicted in the Prisons Act. In the police dossier Surendranath was mentioned as ‘one of the worst behaved terrorist prisoners in Bengal’.¹⁰⁰ His case history showed that due to his failing health he was relocated to a prison in the Indian mainland in December 1935. Surendranath was finally released in November 1939 as he developed acute asthma in jail.¹⁰¹ Following his release, he began staying in Banaras and maintained himself by giving tuitions. As an ex-detenué, Surendranath also remained under continuous police surveillance. He became a member of the local Congress committee and allegedly took initiative to organise a revolutionary organisation in Banaras under the façade of a gymnasium.

⁹⁷NAI 75/2-A/41-POLL(I) 1941 Home Political.

⁹⁸NAI 45/1/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

IB believed that in March 1940, he participated in a secret meeting of Bengal revolutionaries at Ramgarh in United Provinces. As his health continued to deteriorate, he removed himself to Sevagram Ashram in Wardha where Gandhi obliged to take him under his wings. Surendranath began volunteering as the librarian of the Ashram.

Unknown to the latest development of Surendranath's life the government issued the internment order of Surendranath Sarkhel in May 1940. The order described him as a resident of the Banaras city and asked for his removal to Bengal within a fortnight. When police failed to locate him in Banaras a search operation was initiated which finally pinpointed him at the Sevagram Ashram in Wardha. At Wardha it was Gandhi's intervention which saved the day for Surendranath. In July 1940, Gandhi's secretary Mahadev Desai wrote a letter to Sir Reginald Maxwell- a Viceroy's Executive Council Member in charge of Home Affairs in which he pleaded for the withdrawal of the internment order. As Gandhi guaranteed Surendranath's 'good behaviour' and vouched for his complete detachment from 'violence and revolutionary activities' the colonial government decided to modify the earlier order by interning Surendranath in the village of Sevagram itself. The modification of Surendranath's internment order after Gandhi's intervention highlighted the fact that for the Raj the public persona of Gandhi was a force to reckon with.

The next entry of Surendranath's dossier indicated that after almost a year in Sevagram, he began to feel restless as he vainly petitioned local authorities for the removal of his restriction order. In May 1941 'regretful' and 'disappointed' Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's Secretary, had to write another letter to Sir Reginald Maxwell informing him about the sudden disappearance of Surendranath Sarkhel from Sevagram. According to him the Ashram authorities had hoped that

through the continuance of Surendranath's 'good behaviour' they would be able to persuade the Raj to withdraw his internment order in near future.¹⁰²

In the course of the letter it was also revealed that before leaving, a remorseful Surendranath also left a note to Gandhi where he pleaded 'not to judge him wrongly' while admitting that he had 'gone away with the Ashram money'.¹⁰³ Surendranath rued that he was not in a right state of mind and he was contemplating suicide by using the Potassium Cyanide vial he was carrying. However Surendranath decided to remain silent about the immediate cause behind such a drastic step and promised to write a letter to Gandhiji within a fortnight detailing the cause. Mahadev Desai shared the note with the local police and promised that Ashram officials would 'keep the local authorities informed of anything' whenever they had any information on him.¹⁰⁴ Throughout the fiasco Mahadev Desai remained conspicuously silent about the motive behind the disappearance of Surendranath Sarkhel. As the police began an elaborate search operation they also chose to overlook prospective motives of his 'sudden change of heart'.¹⁰⁵ A report of the Under Secretary of the Central Provinces and Berar, stated that Surendranath appeared 'to be worried since the departure of a girl named Abha from Sewagram'. According to the report Abha and her father Amritlal 'were expelled from the Ashram' for some unknown reason. The archival documents showed that Ashram authorities remained tight-lipped on the background behind Surendranath's flight or his 'loss of mental equilibrium'.¹⁰⁶ Other than hounding him the police also did not bother to delve deeper into his disappearance. His failed petitions for the withdrawal of the internment order indicated that after spending a year in the Ashram Surendranath was eager to get back his normal life. Then came the removal of Abha- his love interest from Sewagram which had wrecked him mentally to the extent of

¹⁰²ibid.

¹⁰³ibid.

¹⁰⁴ibid.

¹⁰⁵ibid.

¹⁰⁶ibid.

contemplating flight and suicide. Rather than the fervent socio-political atmosphere, emotive factors had driven Surendranath to defy the colonial order.

Following the disappearance from Sewagram, Surendranath continued to evade arrest for three more months before being caught on 25 August 1941 from Gonda (a small town in the erstwhile United Provinces) in the face of a wider search operation involving state agencies of multiple provinces. He was brought back to Wardha to be prosecuted under the Defence of India Act and was promptly sentenced with 4 years of rigorous imprisonment. The silence of the colonial archives indicated the political oblivion of Surendranath Sarkhel following his release.¹⁰⁷

While emotional outburst prodded Surendranath to resist colonial writ, archival documents revealed names of activists who refused to be cowed into submission by going underground. Two *Anushilan Samiti* activists- Sushil Chandra Bhattacharji and Abani Kanta Chakraborty operated from the United Province. Slapped with the restriction order in Bengal, both of them went into hiding. While Abani remained untraceable, Sushil was caught from Allahabad and had to languish in Deoli Detention Camp for the rest of the war-years.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Life-stories of long-forgotten characters who irked the beleaguered regime and received the wrath of its criminal justice system provide glimpses of a critical juncture in history marked by war paranoia, intensified state surveillance and rising tides of anti-imperialism. For the activists the rise of a new world order from the ashes of moribund colonial empires was imminent. The colonial bureaucracy greeted the entrenchment of anti-colonial sentiments with the policy of rampant persecution of dissenting voices. From tour guides, Germany-trained engineers to

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸NAI 45/1/40-POLL(I).

minor figures of anti-imperialist politics, i.e. college students, ex-revolutionaries, youth organisers, trade union activists were randomly targeted.

The participation of activists with wide-ranging political affiliations such as ardent communist Nita Ganguly¹⁰⁹, Bose loyalist Karuna Mitra¹¹⁰, Sikh radical Harnam Singh¹¹¹ or ex-revolutionary Leelabati Nag¹¹² in the movement demanding the removal of Holwell Monument in Calcutta testified that in the initial phases of the war, Bengal witnessed united resistance against the British Raj. The brief involvement of Kundan Lal Sain¹¹³- a Punjabi college student hailing from the far-away North-Western Frontier Province, in radical politics before his banishment from Berhampore town, echoed the politically charged atmosphere of Bengal in 1940s as documented in Amalendu Sengupta's book '*Uttal Challis Asamapto Biplab*'.¹¹⁴ The individuals dealt here also registered the fact that conscious effort had been made by different revolutionary factions to close their ranks on the eve of Second World War and increasing state repression. Intelligence reports documented that revolutionary veterans such as ascetic Narendra Mohan Sen¹¹⁵ or Leelabati Nag¹¹⁶ were part of initiatives taken to amalgamate multiple groups under one umbrella.

However, the united front forged against the embattled imperialism would fall apart, when the trajectory of Second World War created deep fault-lines inside the anti-imperialist camp following the Nazi invasion of the USSR. As a result, Left-wing parties sought to recalibrate their party line. The support of CPI, RCPI, Bolshevik Party, RDP to the Allied war effort was seen by sympathisers of FB, Anushilan and Jugantar as an effort to prop up the moribund

¹⁰⁹NAI 75/22/41-Poll(I).

¹¹⁰NAI 29/1/42-Poll(I) 1942.

¹¹¹NAI 94/12/45-Poll(I) 1941.

¹¹²NAI 43/42/35-Political.

¹¹³NAI 75/11/41- Poll(I).

¹¹⁴AmalenduSengupta, *Uttal Challish Asamapto Biplab*, (Calcutta, Pearl Publishers, January 1957).

¹¹⁵NAI 75/2-A/41-POLL(I) 1941 Home Political.

¹¹⁶ NAI 43/42/35-Political Home Political.

regime. Growing friction between these two camps would be visible in the dossier of Nitai Ganguly.¹¹⁷ An informer reported that as an ardent communist he had asked his comrades to capture the district leadership of BPSF, wherever possible from the student activists belonging to FB. As emotions ran high, this friction would soon evolve into bloody street fights. In Dhaka one such fight resulted in the brutal killing of Somen Chanda- a young communist intellectual and a trade union activist.

Archival documents explored here also testified the fact that notwithstanding ideological differences between anti-imperialist groups, grass-root workers often changed their political affiliations depending on their perception of the righteous cause. Colonial intelligence reports indicated that individuals such as Harnam Singh¹¹⁸ or Kundan Lal Sain¹¹⁹ sided with almost every organisation active in the political field of Bengal. Harnam`s role as a political agitator in grass-root movements that shook the city of Calcutta, during the wartime indicated on the continued legacy of anti-colonial activism of Sikh migrants. The silence of colonial archives following punitive actions against `undesirables` indicated that the state repression often acted as a successful deterrent and their involvement with radical politics was a passing phase of their lives. Barring a few activists, such as Renu Roy¹²⁰ or Leelabati Nag¹²¹ many of them followed the colonial dictum and sunk into political oblivion. However, the sheer number of popular movements which erupted in different parts of post-Second World War Bengal testified that there was no dearth of activists who swiftly replaced their detached comrades. The intelligence dossier of Tejesh Chandra Ghosh and Deba Prasad Bose¹²² elucidated how wartime emergency laws were used by the beleaguered colonial power to satisfy whims of

¹¹⁷NAI 75/22/41-Poll(I).

¹¹⁸NAI 94/12/45-Poll(I) 1941.

¹¹⁹NAI 75/11/41- Poll(I).

¹²⁰NAI 75/4/41-Poll(I) 1941.

¹²¹ NAI 43/42/35-Political.

¹²² NAI 115/40 1940 Home Political(Internal).

paranoid officials. Hapless individuals were victimised by the colonial bureaucracy in the name of safeguarding the empire. The fact that the colonial regime went at great lengths for persecution of small-time activists underlined their deep aversion against egalitarian ideas. Moreover these persecutions reflected panic-stricken footsteps of a moribund regime solely depending on the brute force and an ever-expanding intelligence network for survival.

Chapter Two

War and Obscure Lives

The vast and expansive British Empire always attracted a steady stream of drifters who entered the Indian subcontinent in quest of social security or economic solvency. Their forays into colonial India often proved futile and a section of them had to depend on the burgeoning criminal underworld for survival. These obscure characters i.e. stateless individuals, petty criminals, political dissidents, army deserters, and runaway kids lived on the margins of the colonial society and found ingenious methods to circumvent colonial laws. A firm conviction in the superiority of the white people was deeply embedded within the body politic of the empire since its inception. For the colonial bureaucracy, the presence of poor whites in the colony was a point of great embarrassment as they were accused of being responsible for lowering the prestige of the British Empire. From the creation of a network of work-houses for their rehabilitation to deportations, concerted efforts had been made to get rid of the ‘mean whites’.¹

While European vagrants and adventurers remained under scrutiny throughout the colonial period, migrant populations from other parts of the world were left to fend for themselves. With the beginning of Second World War state surveillance increased manifold. As the utmost loyalty to the imperial authority became the sole lifeline for escaping persecution, these vacillating populations found themselves under tight surveillance. After 1941, Japanese advance in South-East Asia resulted in the forced migration of a significant section of Indo-Burmese population who sought refuge in British India fearing Japanese retribution. The colonial state was apprehensive that Axis agents, saboteurs would use the cover of refugee influx to infiltrate British India. Hence,

¹ Sarmistha De, *Marginal European in Colonial India: 1860-1920*, (Kolkata, Thema, 2008) p.133.

the Indian refugees from South-east Asia also came under the ambit of colonial surveillance. Apart from them there were Nepalese fugitives and activists who found shelter in the Himalayan hill-tracts of North Bengal, as they sought to subvert the Nepalese monarchy with the help of Indian revolutionaries. The fact that the Himalayan kingdom acted as a major catchment area for the beleaguered colonial army, led the imperial bureaucracy to contemplate a crackdown on the anti-Rana network active in Bangal.

During the days of Second World War, Bengal with its unique geographical location became one of the favoured haunts of a vacillating population migrating from various Asian nations. As the war-paranoia gripped the colonial bureaucracy, imbued with entrenched racial outlook the imperial state tended to observe the sudden influx of the Chinese, Nepalese or Indo-Burmese individuals with great suspicion. The fact that a section of them made inroads into the underworld to make a living had made the situation worse. Through this chapter ramifications of the war on these obscure lives was explored.

Chinese Immigrants and Bootleggers

From commercial exchanges to cultural and religious missions, China was closely connected with the Indian subcontinent since ancient times. Author Tansen Sen in his book ‘India, China and World – A Connected History’ had observed that with the advent of the British colonial regime, Calcutta, the crown jewel of the British empire in the East and Bengal in general had emerged as ‘the main centre of interactions’ for China and it was maintained till ‘the mid twentieth century’.² Throughout the first half of twentieth century China experienced bloody civil war, brutal Japanese occupation and an armed resistance against the invading Imperial Japanese Army. Resultant

² Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History*, (The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., London, 2017), p.236.

destabilisation of the society paved the way for the forced migration of the Chinese people. In India, the city of Calcutta with its pre-existing Chinese population emerged as their favoured shelter.³ With Japan's entry into Second World War a large number of Chinese Army soldiers were deployed in India. Ramgarh in the state of Jharkhand became their primary base of operation.⁴ There was also a noticeable upswing of commercial interactions with Tibet and China during the war, in which Himalayan tracts of North Bengal had played a key role. The apprehension that the Chinese migration could be used by the Japanese agents to infiltrate, led the colonial intelligence apparatus to recruit and train Chinese operatives. They had to check personal correspondences of Chinese migrants and were instructed to identify potential threats to the colonial empire.⁵

Chinese immigrants and businessmen usually trekked the hilly terrains of Tibet and Sikkim and entered the Indian mainland through North Bengal. In 1945, 18 year old youth Chang Tzu Tien entered Bengal without any travel document and got himself admitted in a Chinese school in Calcutta.⁶ Local authorities noticed his case when the Chinese Consul initiated the admission procedure. Following this revelation, the Chinese Consul was reprimanded and Chang Tsu Tien was promptly deported back to China.⁷ Chang Chiu Pu was a businessman who entered Bengal in 1944 without official documents and remained untraced.⁸ While most of the immigrants did not have economic means or social outreach to counter deportation orders and evaded law enforcing authorities as long as possible to survive in the city, Yang Lu Liang was an exception. He employed

³Christopher J. Murphy 'Constituting a Problem in Themselves': *Countering Covert Chinese Activity in India: The Life and Death of the Chinese Intelligence Section, 1944–46*, (The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, Taylor and Francis, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2016), p.930.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. pp.935-938.

⁶ NAI 543(2)-C.A. Home Political.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

a 'well-known Calcutta Chinese barrister' to overturn the deportation order.⁹ The unnamed lawyer successfully proved that Yang was a 'Rangoon born Chinese and a refugee from Burma' which led to the revocation of the expulsion order.¹⁰

According to Tansen Sen, with the advent of British power in Bengal, towns in north Bengal such as Darjeeling and Kalimpong had emerged as 'important sites for political negotiations, espionage activity, and commercial transactions', specifically to maintain a connection with the land-locked Tibet.¹¹ In the 1940s there was a sudden influx of Chinese and Tibetan traders especially cloth merchants in and around Kalimpong- a town in North Bengal. Their settlements came under the scrutiny and IB had to submit a detailed report explaining the sudden spurt of economic activities in sleepy Himalayan hamlets. In the report Darjeeling IB explained that the 'war and extremely high prices' of essential goods including clothes led to this 'abnormal situation'. Two commercial syndicates were formed in Kalimpong namely 'Tibet Trade Association' and 'Marwari Cloth Association' which controlled most of 'heavy trade in textile'. These enterprises maintained commercial connections with 'Lhasa, Kathmandu, Raxaul etc.' The report elaborated that the Marwari Cloth Association 'was formed by local Marwari businessmen with the consent of the Textile Department to trade in textiles to Tibet under Government permit', while the other organisation was secretly financed by Rai Bahadur Tashi Densupa, the Private Secretary of the Maharaja of Sikkim. The colonial state heaved a sigh of relief when IB concluded that apart from reaping benefits from the 'abnormal situation' there was no apparent political motives involved in these endeavours. However archival documents indicated that steps were taken to increase the level of surveillance in Kurseong and Kalimpong. Imperial officers from Lhasa and Sikkim

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History*, p.236.

Durbar were found regularly supplying intelligence inputs on Chinese and Tibetan subjects crossing over to British India 'illegally'.¹²

In 1942, notwithstanding strict border checks, the Chinese and Tibetan population grew enough in Kalimpong to start a school with the tacit support from the Chinese government.¹³ By this time the Chinese nationalist leadership made overtures to Indian nationalist leaders and remarked critically on the British policy in India. As a result, the colonial regime became aware of their mutually opposing 'interests' in India.¹⁴ This realisation increased the level of colonial anxiety on Chinese migration. Now the suspicion was not restricted to the infiltration of Japanese agents only. From its inception the Chinese school in Kalimpong attracted police suspicion and was infiltrated by a police informer.¹⁵ The school had 65 students and 4 teachers. Among the teachers apart from the Chinese headmaster, there was an American missionary couple- Mr. and Mrs. Mc. Ghee, who taught English and spoke fluent Chinese owing to their experience of missionary activities in China. According to the report, a Tibetan named Tharchin who was 'a preacher in the Scottish Mission at Kalimpong' and the editor of the local Tibetan newspaper was also roped in to teach Tibetan language in school. While touring Kalimpong in 1942 the Chinese Consul General in Calcutta gave a lecture in the school highlighting the sufferings of the people caused by the Japanese occupation. The extent of the enthusiasm generated by the lecture could be proved from the fact that Rs. 26000 was reportedly raised. Half of which was to be used in the Chinese war effort, the other portion was earmarked for expenses in the making of the new school building. The report also indicated the incipient tension between the Tibetan and Chinese communities. It

¹² Ibid.

¹³ NAI 96-X/43 1943 Home Political.

¹⁴ Christopher J. Murphy, p.932.

¹⁵ NAI 96-X/43 1943 Home Political.

was suggested that Tibetan traders 'finding it difficult to do otherwise' contributed to the fund only with reluctance.¹⁶

Another intelligence report from September 1943 showed that the school was running in full swing and recruited two new teachers from Calcutta. One of whom was Shen Fu Min who had been known to IB officers 'to be airing his views rather freely'. In Kalimpong he struck up a close friendship with an 'ex-detenu' Jagadish Ghosh. Following this development he had been 'kept under surveillance and correspondence intercepted'. The extent of suspicion suggested that the prospect of cooperation between two anti-imperialist individuals rattled the colonial state to the core. The colonial establishment heaved a sigh of relief when it was reported that Shen Fu Min was 'being replaced by a newcomer from China'. The silence of the dossier on the background of his abrupt removal from Kalimpong indicated a subtle machination of the imperial state.¹⁷ The imperial suspicion on the Chinese population in Bengal was such that even highly placed Chinese officials were not spared. Hsuing Shao-Lun was an employee of the Chinese Ministry of Information.¹⁸ In 1942 he was offered a post as a translator to the British Army in New Delhi. Within a few months he resigned citing insufficient salary and established a Chinese book shop in Calcutta. As it was disclosed that he had hidden that his wife was Japanese by birth, it led to the detention and deportation of the couple in 1945. The intervention of the Chinese Consul in Calcutta along with the revelation of the fact that in China Hsuing Shao-Lun's wife worked as a 'anti-Japanese radio propagandist' was not enough to allay the suspicion on them.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ NAI 1/5/45-Poll(E) Home Political.

¹⁹ Ibid.

A section of the Chinese and Tibetan immigrants also wandered towards the thriving underworld of Bengal and beyond. Their involvement in prostitution rackets, gold and arms smuggling were evident in archival documents. According to a Home Political file the Tibetan prostitution ring in Calcutta began operational in 1943 when a few Chinese immigrants from Calcutta went to Kalimpong and married women from families of Tibetan immigrants. These hapless women were subsequently forced by their husbands into prostitution when they returned to the city along with their wives.²⁰ Eventually ‘Tibetan bat-hats’ from Calcutta followed suit and women were procured from Tibet itself with the lure of ‘good jobs’. As the income from the prostitution ring was reported to be ‘enormous’, ‘several secret brothels sprang up in no time’ and trafficking of women from Tibet became an integral part of the ‘regular trade’.²¹ The intelligence report indicated that the abject poverty of some Tibetan families compelled them to sell their daughters.

By 1945 Tibetan elements in Calcutta underworld became so numerous that they ‘formed associations named after actual areas in Tibet’.²² After gaining a foothold in the burgeoning flesh market, Tibetan and Chinese members of Calcutta underworld diversified their business interests by procuring arms from soldiers who visited the brothels. Workers and ‘coolies’ employed in the building of military installations in Assam also procured arms for them. A section of these arms found its way to Kalimpong where they were sold by their partners to Tibetans visiting the town during the trading season.²³ As returning Tibetans were not frisked, contrabands from British India smoothly found its way to Tibetan heartland. Police reports indicated that Kalimpong had emerged as a major transit point for cross border smuggling. American made goods such as water-bottles,

²⁰ NAI 21/53/46 1946 Home Political.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

cameras, binoculars etc. allegedly had an extensive demand in neighbouring Chinese and Tibetan markets. With the conclusion of the war in 1945, the colonial authority decided to clamp down by identifying the individuals involved in the trade of contrabands. A Tibetan immigrant named Khanduk was identified as one of the influential members of the smuggling gang. From his base in Kalimpong he received consignments of contrabands including automatic rifles and pistols. To trace other members of his underworld network in Calcutta strict surveillance on Khanduk was ordered.²⁴ His house was raided, but police failed to retrieve anything incriminating. Eventually a police informer divulged that he was heard bragging about his closeness to low-ranking police officials. A government order in November 1946 showed that a joint action involving police forces of Darjeeling, Calcutta and Shillong was planned for deporting Tibetan and Chinese criminals associated with trafficking of women.²⁵

The fact that the late-colonial regime was unable to contain the Chinese immigrants from making forays into the burgeoning underworld was highlighted by the police report implicating a Chinese refugee in a far-flung gold smuggling racket. Ah Hong was a carpenter who came to Calcutta in 1937 from Kwangtung in China.²⁶ From 1942 he began working in merchant navies and shifted his base to Bombay thereafter. In 1948 he was arrested from Bombay along with another Chinese-
Tham Loon for possessing a leather bag containing 100 gold bars.²⁷ Both of them were convicted for running a gold smuggling racket involving Chinese nationals from Middle-East Asian nations. The intelligence report revealed that ‘many of those who were indulging in opium smuggling in the past, had taken to the more profitable line of smuggling gold into India’.²⁸ While Ah Hong and

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ NAI 639-C.J.K./49 Home Political.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Tham Loon were convicted of the charges and faced deportation following prison sentences, their compatriots in India remained untraced.²⁹

Anti-Rana Conspirators in Calcutta and Darjeeling:

Amongst the neighbouring nations of British-India, unified Bengal shared a special connection with Nepal. Disaffected Nepalese nobles often found refuge in Calcutta. Better facilities of education and livelihood in colonial Bengal also led a steady stream of Nepalese migration. After the Anglo-Nepal war which concluded in the treaty of Sagauli (1816) a British resident was posted in the capital city of Kathmandu and the principality of Nepal came under the indirect control of the colonial state.³⁰ With the help of the subservient ruling elites, Nepal also became one of the main recruiting areas for the colonial army. In 1846 Prime Minister of the kingdom Jung Bahadur Rana killed influential nobles and usurped the political power. The king was reduced to the titular head of state. ‘Thus, the Rana family became the hereditary prime ministers and de facto head of the state’.³¹

By the turn of the century Nepal experienced a political awakening of a section of educated elites. To oust the Ranas they formed an underground organisation called *Nepal Praja Parishad* in 1935.³² With the beginning of Second World War the demand for soldiers grew manifold and Nepal emerged as one of the main catchment areas outside the Indian mainland. For streamlining the recruitment process, the unwavering support of the Nepalese royals were essential for the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ali Riaz and Subho Basu, *Paradise Lost? State failure in Nepal*, (Lexington Books, A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., First Paperback Edition, 2010), p.34.

³¹ Ibid. p.35.

³² Santwana Tewari, *Democratic movement in Nepal and the Indian left*, (Doctoral dissertation, University of North Bengal, Department of History), <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/149405>, p.69.

embattled colonial regime. The British-Indian government was utterly dismayed when the simmering tension between the king Tribhuban and his Prime Minister Judhha Samsar Rana came to the fore as a plot to kill the Ranas with the tacit support from the king was allegedly exposed in 1940.³³ In this connection *Praja Parishad* members and their connections in Indian revolutionary groups were implicated. This was the background which led the Nepalese court to request the British Raj for initiating persecution of elements allegedly involved in the ‘anti-Rana conspiracy’.³⁴

The curtain-raiser was the raid by Nepalese state forces in October 1940, on the house of Dharam Bir Singh—a suspected activist of the *Nepal Praja Parishad*. During the search a letter was allegedly recovered from Dharama Bir Singh indicating that he ordered certain chemicals used in explosives from a Bombay based company named Excelsior Finishing Products Limited. Using this letter as a pretext, the Nepalese regime initiated a wider clamp down on political activists, their Indian comrades and a host of other people who rubbed the Nepalese rulers the wrong way. Nepal handed over a long list of Nepalese and British-Indian subjects to the imperial regime and requested for their persecution. The gravity of the situation was such that the colonial government initiated a large-scale operation to trace the activists. In a centrally coordinated move, police forces of several states were instructed to hold simultaneous searches on 22 December 1940 to deny the suspects ‘any opportunities to remove incriminating evidence’.³⁵ Imperial authorities were convinced that the subversion of the Nepalese regime in turn would destabilise the war effort by hampering the recruitment process. Though the authorities acknowledged that they had ‘prima facie very little to go upon’, and information regarding the nature of involvement of enlisted suspects were sketchy

³³ Ibid. p.76.

³⁴ NAI 59/60/40-Poll(EX) 1940.

³⁵ Ibid.

from the very beginning, provincial governments were pressed to use the Defence of India Act on the Indians subjects who featured in the list.³⁶ Amongst the Indian suspects there was the ‘leader of HSRA’-Jogendra Sukul whose ‘interest in Nepal was already known’ to the imperial authorities.³⁷ Socialist Party workers in neighbouring Bihar such as Benode Beharee Banerjee, Anil Mitra, Suraj Narain Singh, Debendra Prasad Singh etc. and a host of other people whose political antecedents remained unknown to us were also mentioned in the list.³⁸ In Bengal, the name of Jagadish Chandra Ghosh- of Kalimpong- the ‘ex-detenu’ who came under the suspicion of the colonial police for maintaining a cordial relationship with a Chinese teacher in the town again surfaced as a conspirator. The police file also highlighted a fragment of his daily life in Kalimpong. We came to know that following his release from the notorious Andaman Jail, Jagadish shifted to Kalimpong ostensibly to recuperate his declining health. There he became a Homeopathy doctor for sustenance. However he seemed to be bedridden for the most of the time due to a severe bout of illness. Occasional resurfacing of his name in police files seemed to indicate that notwithstanding his health condition he maintained some sort of connection with the revolutionary movements raging in India and elsewhere. The Nepal government came to know that it was Jagadish Chandra Ghosh who allegedly supplied 5 dynamite sticks to Dharma Bhakta Mathema- one of the 4 main accused of the plot to overthrow the Rana regime. The colonial police swung into action and his house in Kalimpong was searched, but no incriminating articles were found. Investigators were not bothered to arrest him as the severity of his illness was such that it removed the chance of his flight. However he was kept under strict supervision and his correspondences were checked.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Amongst the Nepalese subjects Bishweshar Prasad Koirala- the future Prime Minister of Nepal was also mentioned in the list. However he escaped the persecution, when the police failed to recover any suspicious items from him. The dossier of anti-Rana Conspirators showed that the Bengal government arrested four persons viz. Thakur Nath Raimal, Bhet Narayan Bahadur, Subha Adi Bhakta and Santabir Lama. Amongst them Thakur Nath Raimal was not on the list. He was arrested when Calcutta police raided the house of Batuk Raj in Meher Ali Street, but found Thakur Nath Raimal instead of the enlisted suspect. Though he had no connection with Nepalese politics, to appease the Rana Regime, Thakur Nath was arrested. Thakur Nath had to languish in prison for four months before he was set free with ‘the warning against mixing with the bad characters’.³⁹

Bhet Narayan Bahadur hailed from a family of Nepalese nobles. According to his interrogation report, after his first wife died Bhet Narayan married for the second time in 1938. His second wife belonged to the all-powerful Rana family who disapproved of the marriage. Instigated by his mother-in-law, the Nepal government had seized his property and he had to flee to Calcutta to save his life. To survive in Calcutta Bhet Narayan had to sell his wife's diamond ear-rings and gradually descended to abject poverty. Archival documents showed that when Bhet Narayan was arrested he was suffering from acute Tuberculosis. As he remained incarcerated in Alipore Central Jail in Calcutta, his condition deteriorated. Jail doctors predicted that he would not survive more than a year and requested higher authorities to shift him to a tuberculosis sanatorium. Fearing that Bhet Narayan would be extradited to Nepalese authorities his wife Dibyaswari Devi pleaded the Bengal government explaining the threat to his life owing to the ongoing power struggle among the Nepalese elites and royal scions. As a result, repeated requests of extradition by Nepalese authorities were rejected. The government ultimately shifted Bhet Narayan to the Jadavpur

³⁹ Ibid.

Tuberculosis Hospital and permitted his wife to stay with him. Against all odds Bhet Narayan survived the ordeal. In May 1941 Nepalese authorities communicated with their British counterpart for his release. Bhet Narayan regained his independence in the next month but was kept under surveillance as requested by the king of Nepal. The persecution of Bhet Narayan and Thakur Nath Raimal underlined the eagerness of the beleaguered colonial regime to appease the Nepalese authorities for the smooth functioning of the army recruitment process.

Subha Adi Bhakta was a royal official who began staying in Calcutta after he was removed from his post in 1911. He was implicated when his son Dharma Bhakta Mathema- the physical instructor of the king was arrested and subsequently executed as one of the alleged architects of the plan to liquidate the Rana. He allegedly acted as the link between *Praja Parishad* and the king Tribhuban. Dharma Bhakta had spent his childhood in Calcutta and was a student of the Scottish Church College. Allegedly Dharma Bhakta printed anti-Rana leaflets from a Calcutta press and kept most of them with his father. However the police raid in the house of Subha Adi Bhakta failed to recover any incriminating material. Adi Bhakta in his testimony, vehemently denied his involvement in the plot and claimed that even after his removal from the royal post he maintained a cordial relationship with most of the nobles including the Rana himself. Subha Adi Bhakta also mentioned that he often acted as an agent of Nepalese nobles who invested in the British-Indian share market. Still he was charged under the Defence of India Act and after languishing in Alipore Jail for almost 6 months Nepalese authorities wrote for his release.⁴⁰

On the morning of 23rd December Santabir Lama was arrested from his house at Sukhiapokhri in Darjeeling hills. His dossier showed that his antecedents were already known to the British police

⁴⁰ Ibid.

when his name surfaced as a participant in the plot to overthrow the Nepalese regime. The colonial authorities believed that he was actually a Nepalese subject who was convicted in an armed robbery in Nepal but managed to escape from the prison and settled in Sukhiapokhri, a hamlet in North Bengal very close to the Nepal border. In Sukhiapokhri he began potato farming and set up a business in pig bristles. According to the police report Santabir was a ‘man of dangerous character and a bully’ who often borrowed money from Marwari businessmen but never returned. Reportedly in 1934 he robbed and assaulted a postal peon of Nepal who eventually died in hospital. In connection with this crime Nepalese authorities formally proposed his extradition. But his clout on local people was such that ‘the oldest man of Sukhiapokhri, Goray Dukpa’ travelled all the way to Calcutta and deposed that Santabir Lama was born in British territory’.⁴¹ Hence he could not be extradited and eventually murder charges against him were also dropped. By late 1930s he reportedly formed the *Gorkha Hitaishi Sammelan* ostensibly to organise ‘the hillmen’.⁴² Although the police believed that he was a ‘terror to the local people’ his nature of involvement in the ‘anti-Rana conspiracy’ remained sketchy from the very beginning. The information shared by the Nepalese officials with their British counterparts showed that Santabir was a trusted comrade of one Tank Prasad- who was sentenced for life for his alleged involvement in the plot. During the search of Santabir’s house, the police seized two proscribed manuscripts, viz. *Nepal Rajnoitik Sahitta Mala* by Shankar Prasad Sharma and an untitled book by Bisweshwar Prasad Koirala. Like others implicated in the plot to overthrow the Rana regime, he was also arrested under the Defence of India Act and was sent to the Darjeeling Jail.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Through a lawyer his wife Padmavati Devi wrote a long petition to the Bengal government in January 1941. According to the petitioner, Santabir Lama 'although was a hill-man ... out-bidden all the up-country and Marwari businessmen of the locality'. Business rivalries had created enemies across the Indo-Nepal border and resulted in 'a series of prosecution both by Nepalese authorities and Darjeeling police'.⁴³ She also elaborated Santabir's unflinching loyalty to the British crown. By mentioning his endeavor to raise money for the Defense of India Fund and attaching photographs of events in which his husband was seen felicitating British officials visiting Sukhiapokhri, Padmavati Devi pleaded for his innocence. Reportedly Santabir also travelled to Calcutta and paid his respect to the King of Nepal when he visited the city in 1939. The imperial government remained unfazed and even proposed to shift Santabir to Deoli Central Internment Camp as a security prisoner. Though that was not implemented, Santabir continued to languish in Darjeeling Jail. In May 1941, Padmavati Devi wrote another petition to the central government reiterating Santabir's innocence. Finally in September 1941 Santabir was released, but kept under strict surveillance and district police were ordered to report any suspicious activity directly to the imperial government.

The dossier of Santabir Lama portrayed two mutually opposing personas of him. The official version had depicted him as 'a murderer', 'a drunkard', a dread to the local women, while his wife represented him as a 'respectable businessman', 'a faithful British subject' who had fallen victim to a series of sinister plots hatched by his business rivals i.e. 'marwaris and up-country men'. Santabir Lama's file shed light on the incipient tension between the hill-tribes and settlers from other regions who entered the Himalayan tracts of North Bengal as the British imperialism spread its tentacles. People from the vast Gangetic plain and beyond began converging on sleepy hamlets

⁴³ Ibid.

as thriving businesses of timber, tea plantation made sweeping changes on local demography and society.⁴⁴ As the local people often reduced to the marginal figure in the outsider dominated economy, apprehension of the new settlers began to take root. The ever-growing gulf also surfaced in Darjeeling town in May 1934 when a group of Bengali revolutionaries made an abortive attempt to kill the Governor of Bengal John Anderson at Lebong Race Course.⁴⁵ In his report the District Superintendent of Police had mentioned that immediately after the news of attempted killing of Bengal Governor spread, a mass frenzy had gripped the Darjeeling town and he had to spend a lot of time rescuing Bengalis from being lynched by enraged local population. Amongst the victims of the anti-Bengali riot were highly-placed government officials such as the Deputy Magistrate of Bihar and Orissa Nagendra Nath Rai. Darjeeling police was apprehensive that ‘the temper of the local crowd’ was such that if the Governor had not escaped unscathed the ‘situation in the town would have been very serious’.⁴⁶

With the active help of the beleaguered British imperial power though Nepal crushed *Praja Parishad* movement in 1940, the colonial apprehension that Nepal would face a revolution became a reality in 1951, when Rana regime was toppled in a mass upheaval. Like a decade ago, Indian socialists coordinated with Nepali revolutionaries and Calcutta also continued to play its role as one of the favoured haunts of the Nepalese dissidents. In 1947 the city hosted a meeting, where Nepali Congress was formally launched.⁴⁷ The Nepali Congress would spearhead the movement

⁴⁴ সৌমিত্র ঘোষ, *সময় ভ্রমণঃ দার্জিলিং পাহাড় সমতলের গল্পগাছা* (কলকাতা, সুপ্রকাশ প্রকাশনা, ২০২১) পৃষ্ঠা ৩৯, ১১০-১১১, ১২৬-১২৭।

⁴⁵ NAI 45/26/34-Poll 1934 Home Political

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Riaz and Basu, p.40.

in the 1950s and emerged as one of the major players in the political field of Nepal for years to come.

A Runaway Girl

In the initial years of the war the Imperial Japanese Army made lightning gains as Britain retreated from South-East Asia. With the imminent collapse of the imperial edifice a large number of Indians were evacuated. However as the British authorities were preoccupied in rescuing high-ranking colonial officials most Indians were compelled to make a long and arduous journey through Burma, Manipur and Assam to reach the Indian mainland. In the article '*A forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma 1942*' author Hugh Tinker vividly portrayed the predicaments of Indian evacuees who tottered on the verge of madness due to the extreme hardship they experienced during the perilous journey.⁴⁸ The colonial state viewed the refugee influx with extreme suspicion and believed that Axis forces planted agents, saboteurs amongst the evacuees. Thus the evacuees remained under the close watch of a paranoid imperial state which was ready to persecute anyone who failed to comply with the whims of its ever-expanding intelligence apparatus. They were often subjected to police interrogation and persecution.

As Hong Kong came under the Japanese occupation in December 1941, a young lady named Ruth Naidu ran away from her home and joined other Indians in their effort to reach the Indian mainland.⁴⁹ Incidentally Ruth Naidu was the daughter of the President of the Indian Independence League in Hong Kong. More than a year passed before the Intelligence Bureau seemed to notice her presence in Calcutta in September 1943. By this time Ruth Naidu was staying at a hostel run

⁴⁸ Hugh Tinker, *A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942*, (Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, March 1975, Vol.6, No.1, The Cambridge University Press on behalf of Department of History, National University of Singapore), p.14.

⁴⁹ NAI 39/34/43 1943 Home Political

by a Christian missionary organisation- The Salvation Army in Dharamtalla Street and became a professional nurse to earn her living. The Assistant Director of IB pressed for her further interrogation in Delhi, though the police official lamented to his colleague that he did not know ‘just what law or rule could be used for this purpose’.⁵⁰ Her dossier showed that Ruth had already gone through a round of interrogation in Calcutta, in which she was praised for her ‘excellent character’ and ‘definite pro-British leanings’.⁵¹ As the investigating officer in Calcutta- Doctor Douglas Liang was found to be Chinese, the Intelligence Bureau resolved to brush aside his report on Ruth Naidu. Reeking with unabashed racial prejudice, the colonial government emphasised the need for using Defence of India Act by explaining that ‘Chinese as a class was particularly prone to be unreliable when vouching for individuals’.⁵² As instructed, in December 1943 Ruth Naidu was charged under the Defence of India Act and was ordered to proceed to Delhi for further interrogation. Though her dossier did not divulge further details, the fact Ruth Naidu had to remain under the relatively lenient ‘unobtrusive watch’ indicated that she almost managed to allay the imperial apprehension regarding migrants.⁵³

In a parallel world, as Ruth Naidu contemplated running away from her home in Hong Kong, a strong-willed woman and doctor Lakshmi Swaminathan renounced her comfortable life in Chennai to make a voyage to Singapore. In Singapore she would start a clinic mostly catering underprivileged Indian workers.⁵⁴ For both of these young women the war in South-East Asia acted as the catalyst for their plunge into the unknown. The crumbling edifice of the empire created

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² NAI 39/34/43 1943 Home Political.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Smita Gupta, *Comrade Lakshmi Sahgal (1914–2012): Revolutionary, a true daughter of India*, (Social Scientist, September–October 2012, Vol. 40, No. 9/10), p.85.

repercussions on almost every level of the society. Waves of mass movements and resistance against societal norms on an individual level went hand in hand and heavily influenced one another. Infused with the prevalent spirit of defiance, Ruth Naidu rebelled against her household. As his father became a top official of the Indian Independence League, she chose the opposing side by making an arduous journey to British-India and eventually became a victim of the British paranoia. While Ruth Naidu restricted her act of rebellion at a more personal level, Lakshmi Swaminathan chose the moment to thrust herself into the Indian freedom struggle. She led the Rani of Jhansi Regiment on behalf of the Indian National Army. In her later years, Ruth Naidu vanished into historical obscurity. On the other hand, following her release as a Prisoner of War, Lakshmi married one of her comrades in INA Prem Sahgal, and continued the battle against economic and social inequalities plaguing Independent India, till she breathed her last in 2012. Captain Lakshmi Sahgal remains a legendary figure to this day.

Predicament of a menial worker

The search of livelihood led Phul Chand-a man hailing from a village in the district of Dinajpur to Rangoon. In Rangoon Phul Chand was employed as a sweeper in the house of a Burmese session judge- U Aung Thaw Gyaw.⁵⁵ As the Imperial Japanese Army closed in, his employer was safely removed from Burma by the retreating Imperial government. Hapless Phul Chand had to join other Indians fleeing the war. In the course of his flight, he lost his way and ‘fell into Japanese hands’.⁵⁶ He was subsequently handed over to INA and he became their cook. According to his testimony Phul Chand successfully persuaded them for his release, so that he could proceed to India and visit his place in Dinajpur. But en route to India he was captured by the Allied military and persecuted

⁵⁵ NAI 39/01/43-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

under the dreaded Defense of India Act. Subsequently he was sent to Delhi in the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (henceforth CSDIC) for further interrogation. Archival documents showed that the imperial intelligence apparatus assumed that INA saboteurs, spies would use the refugee influx from Burma to infiltrate British-India. CSDIC was primarily established to interrogate Burma evacuees under suspicion. Though Phul Chand's repeated interrogation did not divulge anything incriminating, and interrogators were convinced that his role in INA camp was restricted to cooking mills for the soldiers, he continued to languish in a Delhi jail. The official paranoia even baffled his former employer. In April 1944, he wrote to the Deputy Secretary of the Imperial Government wondering about the cause for which 'so insignificant a person attracted so serious notice' of the authority and also offered to re-employ Phul Chand.⁵⁷ At that time U Aung Thaw Gyaw was posted as the Senior Civil Affairs Officer in Arakan. Though Phul Chand was eager to take up the opportunity, it was denied citing that his employment near 'forward areas' could lead him to cultivate 'undesirable contacts'.⁵⁸ Following entries in the dossier of Phul Chand undeniably proved that the excuse was a ploy to mobilise hapless working class people for the war effort. As right after the denial to proceed to Arakan, military authorities prodded CSDIC officials for his release. Phul Chand was offered to join as a sweeper in an army medical facility in Arakan in exchange for his release. As Phul Chand resolved to take up the opportunity, in May 1944 he was released from the CSDIC custody.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century Asian nations experienced profound changes culminating in Second World War and the demise of colonial empires. Amongst India's immediate neighbours China was going through a prolonged civil war as well as national liberation struggle against the Japanese invasion. The principality of Nepal was also experiencing tremors against the rule of the Rana dynasty. After 1941 a large portion of South-East Asia came under the military occupation of Japan, which followed the migration of war-weary people. As a result of this great churning, uprooted people from China, Nepal, Burma and other South-East Asian countries often sought refuge in British India. This chapter has examined how trans-territorial connections were forged and reinforced through refugee networks and journey of lone travellers during the Second World War in Bengal. Bengal's geographic location as a border zone and gateway to South-East and East Asia had meant a history connecting this region with Eastern Asia since ancient times. It is not surprising therefore that the Second World War which affected Eastern Asia would bring in refugees in large numbers. This chapter documents their varied experiences as the migrants and their cross-border networks came under intense scrutiny of the beleaguered colonial regime.

Apart from the Nepali dissidents who often came to India to further their political struggle, the bulk of the migrants entered the country to earn their sustenance. Resource extraction for the war effort had put South-East Asia in dire straits, which in turn generated several back channels for wealth accumulation. Archival documents explored here proved that a certain section of this vacillating population grew dependent on the thriving underworld for their bread and butter. The people of wartime Bengal were greatly tormented by the scarcity of food and clothing. The appearance of Chinese and Tibetan curtails dealing with smuggled clothes along with other essential items highlighted that almost the same situation prevailed in other parts of South-East

Asia. Their involvement in bootlegging gangs also shed light on the process through which sleepy Himalayan towns of North Bengal such as Kurseong and Kalimpong had transformed into important transit points of the smuggling network. Police dossiers accessed here underlined that the large scale troop movements in wartime Bengal and Assam infused foreign arms and ammunition in the society. A similar trend could be noticed in the activities of Private Rutherford and his compatriots, who had sold stolen revolvers from the Barrackpore Military Transit Camp and were engaged in criminal activities ranging from opium peddling to robbery in 1946.⁶⁰ The ramification of the process would be felt when the orgy of violence engulfed almost every nook and cranny of Bengal during the last leg of the colonial rule.

From the 1930s Indian revolutionaries and Nepali dissidents often coordinated with each other. Documents explored here also displayed their close cooperation which would grow manifold in the concluding years of the Raj. Nepalese leaders such as B P Koirala even became the Assistant Secretary of Congress Socialist Party in Bihar for a short spell of time.⁶¹ The file of Santabir Lama indicated a gashing wound which continues to pester the body politic of post-partition Bengal. Notwithstanding the passage of time and the collapse of the colonial empire, the issue of mistrust between the Himalayan tribes of North Bengal and settlers from Gangetic plains remains a harsh reality to this day.

As Indian evacuees from South-East Asia reached Indian mainland they brought with them stories of British military disaster, which greatly lowered the prestige of the colonial empire and spread rumours about the imminent downfall of the British Raj. For the beleaguered state evacuees became another source of concern. It responded by using the Defence of India Act on refugees

⁶⁰ IB 1127-46(M.F.)- Desertion of no.7259615 Pte. J. Rutherford, East Yorkshire Regiment.

⁶¹ Santwana Tiwari, p.67 and pp.83-108.

from South-East Asia whose allegiance to the British Crown seemed doubtful. Runaway youths, menial workers were not spared from interrogation and arduous imprisonment. The over the top reaction of the colonial intelligence even astonished highly placed Government officials. The Chinese descent of the primary interrogator of Ruth Naidu was used as a pretext to set aside the report, which indicated her innocence. In the case of the persecution of Phul Chand, the testimony of an Asian session judge was not taken into account. The intelligence officials relented only when it was resolved to use the physical labour of Phul Chand to further the cause of the war effort.

With the commencement of Second World War along with the military challenge emanating from the Third Reich and its partners in the Axis alliance, the beleaguered colonial state also had to grapple with the growing fervour of Indian nationalism. The imperial anxiety rose to a new level when Allied forces retreated from South-East Asia and Bengal braced for an imminent attack of Axis forces. As the war-time state anticipated assaults from different quarters, it ramped up its intelligence apparatus and frequently utilised the Defence of India Act to suppress perceived threats which could jeopardise the war-effort. The overwhelming dependence on coercive force by the imperial state to control mostly nondescript figures as revealed in preceding sections testified on the process of its alienation from Indian subjects as well as exposed the trepidation of a moribund regime.

Chapter Three

The Axis Network in Bengal

In the inter-war period the British state tolerated the rise of autocratic regimes as democratic institutions crumbled in Germany, Italy, Spain and Japan. Resonating international politics, inter-war India experienced the spread of totalitarian propaganda under the stoic gaze of colonial surveillance. After the defeat of Germany in First World War, the short-lived Weimar Republic was replaced by the Third Reich as Adolf Hitler pushed Germany to a path of rearmament, imperial annexation and eventual global war. Another war veteran Benito Mussolini captured the power in Italy and sought to reestablish Italy as an imperial power through territorial expansion. Internally violent xenophobia and outright repression of democratic institutions became the hallmark of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Italy and Germany coordinated with each other as they supported the military coup led by General Franco, when he waged a bloody civil war to topple the elected republican government in Spain. In Asia, Japan rose into prominence after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. A series of economic and social changes made Japan an important Asian power whose territorial ambition in East Asia was unhinged following its victory in First Sino-Japanese war in 1894-95. Bengalis exposed to international political currents observed the rise of German Nazism, Italian Fascism and Japanese militarism with enthusiasm. The spectacle of ultra-nationalism and military machismo impressed a segment of the urban elite and brought them into their fold. Archival documents revealed that intellectuals, Congress activists, revolutionary nationalists, and even former communists smarting under the indignity of colonial rule became sympathetic to these powers and their ideologies.

The Indian situation was combusive. Profound anti-colonial sentiment had touched almost every section of the subjugated populace. Indian Communists had emerged as a force to reckon with. They overcame state repression to establish pockets of influence amongst the toiling masses and educated middle classes as the nascent Soviet state and Bolshevism made a lasting impact on a growing number of revolutionaries. Within

INC, the younger generation of leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose were pressing the organization for a more confrontational course of action to hasten the Indian liberation. Archival documents testified that the colonial state apparatus was aware that a section of the Indian National Congress leadership was attempting to forge a warmer relationship with the German regime.¹ Ideological inroads made by the fascist forces were tolerated by the colonial state as their propaganda were mainly guided against egalitarian ideas emanating from the USSR. The looming Second World War prompted the British Raj for a course correction as it dawned to them that their ideological affinity with Axis powers could be used by the enemy to subvert British interests in India. In the wake of Second World War local authorities were instructed to identify individuals involved in various fascist networks. While attempting to reveal the characters who positioned themselves on the Axis side, the chapter highlights the nuances of Axis propaganda and its intelligence network in the inter-war period.

The Pan-Asiatic League

In the interwar period, Japanese expansionism paved the way for the emergence of political and military flashpoints in Asia. In order to create a 'new order in East Asia', imperial Japan promoted itself as an emancipator of the subjugated Asian nations and touted the idea of Pan-Asianism.² To mobilise the pro-Japanese sentiment in South Asia the Pan-Asiatic League was established under the tutelage of imperial ideologues. According to the IB dossier on the League, in 1920 an English daily in India 'Indian Daily News' covered the foundation of the league in a report entitled 'The Pan-Asiatic Peril'. In the report, it was alleged that the league was created to challenge the hegemony of the Western powers over 'India, Afghanistan, Persia and Siam' and 'the avowed object of the league was to raise millions of yellow races in Asia to win freedom'.³ However for the colonial intelligence apparatus the organisation stayed in relative obscurity for almost a decade till its name resurfaced again in 1929. In that year, a press release of the Pan-Asiatic League entitled

¹ WBSA IB 358/38.

² Shingoro Takaishi, "A Pan-Asiatic Union: A Japanese Conception." (The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1941), pp. 54–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1022598>.

³ WBSA IB 234/29.

'Declaration of the Pan-Asiatic League' came to the notice of the authorities. The letter made a sharp criticism of British expansionism and accused the colonial authorities for orchestrating the ouster of the reigning monarch in neighbouring Afghanistan. Oppressed Asians were urged to raise the banner of revolt supporting the ousted king, Amanullah. In the same year, IB had received an input from a British agent in Rangoon, highlighting the activity of the Pan-Asiatic League amongst the Indian anticolonial activists operating in the region. The agent had sent a copy of the 'Declaration of the Pan-Asiatic League' along with a note mentioning that copies of the same were distributed among the 'Anti-British conspirators' in Burma, by local Japanese operatives. In 1933, IB officials noted that the Calcutta based nationalist daily Amrita Bazar Patrika had published a report on the formation of the Pan-Asiatic Youngman's League in Tokyo.⁴ Archived documents revealed that in the inter-war period Japanese propaganda restricted itself in making symbolic gestures aimed at gaining a foothold specifically among the Bengali nationalists. Apart from indicating Japan's growing geo-political ambition, Pan-Asianism failed to gather much momentum amongst the Indian nationalists and the colonial state remained unperturbed. Only routine investigations were initiated to trace the network through which reports on Pan-Asiatic League occasionally appeared in Indian newspapers. Intelligence officials were convinced that it was the handiwork of the fugitive revolutionary Rash Behari Bose. In the 1940s, as Japan's imperialist ambition was unhinged and it made a dramatic entry into Second World War through the bombing raid of Pearl Harbour - a naval outpost of the American military, the shadowy Pan-Asiatic League would be resurrected again. Following the declaration of the war in September 1939, diplomatic activities of Germany and Italy had ceased to exist in British-India. Due to its late entry into the war, Japan with its consular presence in Calcutta played an important role in the dissemination of pro-Axis propaganda. In Calcutta, a Bengali named Ashit Krishna Mukherjee, would renew the publication of the mouthpiece of the League, '*The New Asia*'.⁵ In this context, following sections explore life stories of Asit Krishna and his wife Maximiani Portas aka Savitri Devi. Eventually both of them had emerged as important members of the Nazi clique which existed in wartime Calcutta.

⁴ WBSA IB 1109/03.

⁵ WBSA IB 45/32.

The Nazi Clique in Calcutta

The high-pitched Nazi propaganda machinery had managed to attract a small section of urban elites in late-colonial Bengal. During the war Ashit Krishna Mukherjee had played an important role in the pro-Axis network active in Calcutta. He came into prominence in 1925-26, as the editor of the prestigious Presidency College Magazine.⁶ Eventually his editorial skills would become useful in the late 1930s, as he was engaged in publishing numerous propaganda magazines by Axis nations. According to the IB dossier, Ashit became a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain while staying in London and befriended Sapurji Saklatvala, a politician of Indian Parsi heritage and one of the earliest communist members of the British Parliament. Though his adherence to the Communist ideology had alarmed the colonial state apparatus in India, it was his visit to Moscow, which prodded the Raj to put pressure on his elder brother Rai Bahadur Amal Krishna Mukherjee. Following his sojourn in the capital of the USSR, Amal Krishna reportedly ‘decided to take his younger brother in hand’,⁷ as he visited Ashit Krishna in London to escort him back to Calcutta. The silence of intelligence archives for almost a decade following his homecoming in 1931, indicated that Ashit remained aloof from anti-colonial political struggles of contemporary Bengal. By the time Ashit regained police attention almost a decade later in 1941, he had emerged as a self-proclaimed Nazi.

In his memoir, ‘*Fragments of Time*’, Subrata Banerjee presented an interesting account of his uncle Ashit’s life.⁸ According to Subrata, following his return to Calcutta Ashit was briefly involved in trade union movements before he began editing two Bengali journals *Dhruba* and *Bishan*. While *Dhruba* was for the children, *Bishan* catered to the adults and both of these journals published ‘very favourable articles on Mussolini and Hitler’ which ‘impressed’ the young-adult mind of Subrata. Later on, he began publishing an English journal- ‘The New Mercury’ where unabashed Fascist propaganda had found its space.⁹

⁶ ‘List of Editors’, *The Presidency College Magazine*, September 1961, p. 25.

⁷ WBSA IB 45/32.

⁸ Subrata Mukherjee, *Fragments*, p. 69.

⁹ Subrata Mukherjee, p. 150.

In the Nazi clique active in wartime Bengal, Ashit's wife Maximiani Portas, was another important figure. Hailing from Greece, she had left her home in her youth in quest of the mythical Aryan homeland, which subsequently had brought her to India. According to her biographer Nicholas Goorick-Clerke, Savitri Devi had 'presented herself to Srimat Swami Satyananda- the president of the Hindu Mission in Calcutta' in 1937 and eventually played an active role in spreading their propaganda in Bengal, Bihar and Assam. Through this organisation she came into contact with other communalist organisations such as *Hindu Mahasabha* and *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*.¹⁰ The way Maximiani chose Savitri -the solar goddess of Vedic pantheon as her pen name also registered her deep affection to Hinduism.¹¹ A booklet archived in the Centre for Marxian Studies, Jadavpur University showed that Maximiani actively took part in propagating the ideals of the Hindu Mission.¹² In the wake of the Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League in 1940, which envisaged the creation of a separate state for the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, the Hindu Mission published a booklet entitled 'The non-Hindu Indians and Indian Unity'. Author Savitri devi critiqued the ethos of 'pan-Islamism' and argued for the unity of all Indians, irrespective of caste and creed. According to her biographer, Maximiani idolised Hitler and was convinced that the Third Reich under the Nazi Party was the redeemer of human civilisation. Her devotion to Hitler and his monstrous ideals were such that following the defeat of the Axis forces in the war, Maximiani was reportedly arrested in occupied Germany for distributing pro-Nazi leaflets. Till her last days, she remained oblivious to genocides and atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. In the 1960s Savitri Devi became involved in white-supremacist and neo-Nazi movements in contemporary Europe. By the time of her death in 1982, she had emerged as a cult figure amongst the right-wing fanatics.

In the interwar period, Savitri Devi met Ashit Krishna Mukherjee in Bengal as Ashit was gaining popularity among the local Nazi clique. Their marriage took place in 1939, coinciding with the commencement of Second

¹⁰ Nicholas Goorick-Clerke, *Hitler's Priestess: Savitri Devi, the Hindu Aryan Myth and neo-Nazism*, (New York, New York University Press, 1998), p.45.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 40.

¹² Savitri Devi, *The non-Hindu Indians and Indian Unity*, Calcutta, Hindu Mission, 1940. (From the archive of Centre for Marxian Studies, Jadavpur University).

World War, purportedly to save Maximiani from the wrath of the colonial police.¹³ Though the couple was not imprisoned, they remained under tight surveillance during the wartime. As they managed to gather a small group of urban intellectuals and political activists in their fascist network, their group was effectively infiltrated by a police informer. IB reportedly took 'special caution to avoid exposure of the deponent.'¹⁴ The IB report highlighted that certain members of the pro-Axis group in Calcutta were quite influential. One of them was Ashutosh Lahiri. He was the Assistant Secretary of the Bengal chapter of Hindu Mahasabha as well as a Member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. Kalidas Nag -an eminent scholar and educationist was also in the coterie of Ashit Krishna and Maximiani. It was alleged in the IB report that Kalidas Nag was imprisoned for a short stint in December 1941 for his pro-Fascist inclination and remained under state surveillance for the rest of the war years.¹⁵ As the war raged on Europe and Asia, tracking potential enemy agents and exposing their clandestine network became essential for the sustenance of the Allied war effort in Bengal and beyond.

Ashit Krishna published *The New Mercury* with the financial help of the German Consulate in Bengal. After 1939, as Germany declared war on Britain, it became untenable and Ashit sought help from another Axis power, i.e. Japan. IB alleged that Tomotsu Kuruza, a Japanese professor of Calcutta University had helped Ashit to forge ties with the Japanese Consul in Calcutta. With their help Ashit resumed publishing the mouthpiece of the Pan-Asiatic League, *New Asia*. Following a short stint, his new venture in Fascist propaganda would also be stopped when Japan entered the war in late 1941. It was alleged that a large sum of Indian currency was transferred to Ashit by Japanese Consulate officials in Calcutta, on the eve of its closure.¹⁶ The ease with which Ashit had secured financial help from different Axis nations ostensibly to produce propaganda magazines, indicated that amongst the Axis nations which had consular presence in Calcutta, Ashit was a highly trusted individual. The fact that Ashit did not face persecution and continued his pro-Nazi activities throughout the war

¹³ Ibid, pp. 67, 71.

¹⁴ WBSA IB 45/32.

¹⁵ WBSA IB 1000/33.

¹⁶ WBSA IB 45/32.

years with ease, had prompted his nephew Subrata Mukherjee to speculate that his '*Kochi Mama*' acted as a 'double agent'.¹⁷ With the defeat of German *Wehrmacht* in Stalingrad as the tide of the war was decisively turned and Japanese onslaught was stopped before reaching Indian mainland, the activity of the group gradually ebbed. The silence of the IB dossier on Ashit following the Axis defeat in the war registered his withdrawal from active politics thereafter.

Agents of Netaji

Surendranath Neogi was a journalist and the owner of a printing press, named *Ajanta Printing Works* situated at Muralidhar Sen Lane in Calcutta.¹⁸ He came under the police radar in 1933 when he was 'warned by the Chief Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta' for publishing a nationalist journal *Sankalpa*. Thereafter *Ajanta Printing Works* constantly remained under the police surveillance for printing propaganda materials of BPSF- a student organisation having links with the underground Communist Party of India. In 1937 as a hunger-strike movement of political prisoners broke out at Cellular Jail in Andaman, it 'provoked a fiery political agitation' in Bengal.¹⁹ In August 1937, at the Town Hall in Calcutta a public gathering was organised in support of the strike. The doyen of contemporary Bengali intelligentsia, Rabindranath Tagore presided over it.²⁰ Police found that leaflets of Andaman Political Prisoner's Relief Committee- the organisation which spearheaded the movement were printed by none other than Surendranath. His dossier showed Surendranath was arrested in August 1937 in connection with this movement. According to IB in spite of being a *Jugantar* sympathiser, he had maintained wide-ranging connections including various left-wing groups, peasant organisers, *Anushilan* revolutionaries as well as with the leadership of *Kuo Min Tang*- the party of Chinese nationalists. Police alleged he gave 'lantern lectures' for the *Krishak Sabha*.²¹ In 1939, he rose into prominence in the professional field, to become the

¹⁷ Subrata Mukherjee, *Fragments*, p. 150.

¹⁸ NAI 44/52/43-Poll(I) 1943.

¹⁹ Pranab Kumar Chatterjee . "*THE HUNGER-STRIKE MOVEMENT OF THE ANDAMAN PRISONERS IN 1937 AND NATIONAL RESPONSE.*" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 40, 1979, pp. 662-69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Joint Secretary of the Indian Journalist Association. With the commencement of the war, his press began publishing anti-war literatures on behalf of the CPI, IB concluded that 'his connection with the Communist Party was apparently in pursuance of the policy of the *Jugantar Party* to which he belonged'.²² There was a gap of almost two years when Surendranath again came under police surveillance. By this time changing international scenarios shattered the united front of anti-colonial forces. German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, compelled the Soviets to renounce its neutrality. With the USSR joining the Allied powers, Communist groups in India including CPI chose to support the war effort to save the USSR from imminent obliteration. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, brought the war closer to Bengalis. The Imperial Japanese Army won quick victories in South-East Asia to reach Indian frontiers by 1942. Swayed by the prospect of British military defeat, a section of Bengalis established underground communication channels with Indian Independence League (IIL) - a nationalist organisation of Indian expatriates which had ties with Japan. An IB informer suggested that Surendranath emerged as one of the trusted contacts of IIL in Bengal. The police were alarmed when 'two Japanese trained agents' were captured in Chittagong and they revealed to a fellow *Jugantar* inmate in Chittagong Jail that they were asked to contact Surendranath in Calcutta for arranging a transmitting device which could be used to communicate with the Japanese. To expunge the imperial regime from the subcontinent INA made a concerted effort to plant its agents and Surendranath seemed to have played an important part in this endeavour. After keeping Surendranath under tight surveillance, the colonial police swung into action as another arrested Axis agent implicated him in his confessional statement. The unnamed prisoner confessed to his interrogators that he had met two 'fresh arrivals' from Punjab in Japanese occupied Rangoon.²³ As the new recruits came to know that he would infiltrate British-India, they requested him to convey the message to Surendranath that 'they had safely reached Burma, and arms were ready to be despatched

²² NAI 44/52/43-Poll(I) 1943.

²³ *Ibid.*

...'.²⁴ These revelations sealed the fate for Surendranath as he was swiftly arrested in March 1943 and remained imprisoned for the rest of the war.

Archival documents testified that INA made several infiltration attempts during the course of the war. From the coastline of Orissa to the hilly terrains of Sindh and North-West Frontier Province were used to plant spies inside British-Indian territory. In one such audacious attempt a Japanese submarine carried two agents, i.e. Pabitra Mohan Roy and Amrik Singh Gill who were eventually dropped near the Orissa coast in 1943.²⁵ They smuggled a transmitting device and managed to pass information to INA from a hide-out in Calcutta before being caught in December 1944 along with two of their compatriots namely Haridas Mitra and Jyotish Bose.²⁶ They were convicted under 'the Enemy Agents Act' and were condemned to death. However, they had to be released, along with other INA prisoners of war, as post-war India witnessed mass upheavals demanding unconditional release of INA soldiers.²⁷

The Axis Propaganda and Espionage Network

In the initial days of the war British policymakers were hopeful that the bonhomie of Axis nations would eventually disappear as the 'growing disillusionment' of Japan or Italy would lead them to renounce the Axis cause.²⁸ The hope for reconciliation with Japan was strong enough to forestall punitive actions against its propaganda machinery in India as details of the sudden spurt of pro-Japanese activities were revealed in October 1939. According to archival documents the Ministry of Information instructed government departments to take adequate steps so that, 'the feelings of Italy and Japan' could 'be carefully nursed'.²⁹

The report titled 'Japanese Intrigues in India' provided a rare glimpse into the world of pro-Japanese activities on the eve of Second World War. Colonial intelligence agencies anticipated that in the long run Japan hoped to

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ NAI 2/1/45-Poll(I).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ NAI 115/39-Poll(W) Home Department.

²⁹ Ibid.

emerge as the dominant power in Asia by replacing the prevailing British hegemony and gaining a foothold in India was central to that imperial ambition. According to the British surveillance report, Japan hoped to achieve that goal by nurturing contacts with Indian nationalists, as they could be utilised ‘as its source of strength’ at the opportune moment.³⁰ However its image of anti-colonial crusader had begun to crumble as Japan flexed its military muscle in the inter-war period. It was noted that the increasing criticism of Japanese imperialism in Indian print media had goaded its consular officials into initiating a propaganda onslaught. Allegedly certain newspapers such as Calcutta based English dailies *Star of India* and *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* along with Ranchi based weekly journal *Sentinel* received regular economic assistance in return for publishing ‘pro-Japanese articles’ justifying its invasion of China.³¹ As a hot-bed of anti-colonial upsurges Japan was concerned not to antagonise politically sensitive Bengalis and much effort had been given to influence the public opinion of the province. The Japanese Consulate in Calcutta emerged as an important hub for producing printed propaganda. Consular staff regularly made overtures to certain individuals to mobilise them as vocal supporters of Japanese expansionism. According to the surveillance report, a section of Bengali ‘extremists’ such as ‘P.K. Mukherji, S.N. Biswas’ wrote a number of pamphlets on behalf of the consulate explaining its attack on Shanghai- a Chinese port city.³²

With the battle of Shanghai in 1937, Second Sino-Japanese war commenced which would eventually integrate with Second World War when Japan bombed Pearl Harbour- an American military base in the Pacific Ocean in December 1941. Japanese military adventurism would end with its surrender in 1945. In India, Congress leadership univocally condemned the colonial aggression and arranged a medical mission to China under the leadership of Dwarakanath Kotnis. Archival documents showed that Congress also gave a call to boycott Japanese goods. The Japanese consulate in Calcutta retaliated by publishing a pamphlet deriding the Congress policies in the national liberation struggle. IB sources revealed that a printing house in the city published a book

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

entitled 'Cherry Blossoms in England' authored by the Japanese Vice-Consul T. Fukai, where a highly critical account of the 'the British administration in India' was produced.³³ For the articulation of propaganda materials, a Calcutta University lecturer identified in archival documents as Prof. Kurose was also roped in. It was alleged that he went to the extent of circulating pro-Japanese leaflets among his students in the university. He was also instrumental in establishing contacts with 'the only nationalist daily' in Orissa- *New Orissa*, which was eventually persuaded to publish Japanese news items once in a week in return for cash benefits.³⁴ From January 1939, the Japanese Foreign Office began publishing a journal titled *New Asia*. The IB report alleged that Kalidas Nag- an intellectual of repute in contemporary Calcutta received Rs. 600 for its publication and circulation. Overtures had also been made to sociologist Benoy Sirkar and Hindu communalist ideologue V D Savarkar, who contributed to the journal through written articles.³⁵

The IB report alleged that parallel to the effort to publish printed materials for gaining sympathies of Bengalis, Japan floated certain commercial associations to expand its economic footprint on the province. There were also social organisations in Bengal, which promoted Japanese culture and world-view, with the tacit support of its consular staff. Organisations such as the Indo-Japanese Commercial Association, Indo-Japanese Mercantile Association were created by the Japanese officials in Bengal to advocate closer economic ties between Japan and India. 'Japanese commercial concerns in Calcutta' allegedly played a key role in the disbursement of the money to its espionage network spread all over India.³⁶ With the help of Kalidas Nag, the Japanese Consul-General reportedly founded the 'Asia Club' where a small clique of Bengalis regularly met with Japanese industrialists visiting the city. IB suspected that the 'the Honorary Secretary of the Nippon Trade Agency' Prof. Kurose was an important linkage between Japanese commercial organisations and its cultural initiatives. The

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

intelligence department was alarmed to note the sudden growth of Japanese investments in 'chemical products and steel industries' in Bengal.³⁷

Months before Japan's entry into Second World War, the British intelligence seemed convinced that Japan was heading towards a military showdown aiming to hegemonise the Eastern hemisphere. To forestall Axis intrigues against its vast colonial empire, the Japanese Consulate and its officials in Calcutta came under intense scrutiny. British agents infiltrated the Consulate office. The tight surveillance seemed to have borne fruit in August 1941, as an agent tipped off IB about a spy network being run by a high-ranking Japanese diplomat involving two Bengali youths. The undercover agent alleged that Ohta Kazuo, the Chancellor of the Japanese Consul in Calcutta had met Jitendranath Chakravathy and B. Mukherji for multiple times.³⁸ Alarmed with the revelation, IB in coordination with the local police launched a broad-based investigation to expose the cohorts of the Japanese spy ring. Eventually B. Mukherjee was traced and was revealed to be one Bijay Madhab Mukherjee, an unemployed youth living at Bowbazar Street in Calcutta. As Bijay madhab was arrested, his deposition led the police to other members of the gang i.e. Gouridas Lahiri and Nani Gopal Bhowmick. Eventually Nani Gopal was released. Their interrogation revealed that Bijay Madhab had convinced his childhood friend Gouridas Lahiri to appear as Jitendranath Chakravathy- a leader of a non-existent revolutionary group. Bijay Madhab made a statement detailing his true motive. According to it, during his childhood at the village of Bhutsara in Rangpur district of erstwhile Bengal province, he befriended Sachin Ghosh, who eventually established a revolutionary group *Anandamath*- a minor offshoot of the famed *Jugantar* organisation. In 1936, under the leadership of Sachin, when the group eventually began procuring weapons by looting licensed firearms, local police were alerted and members of *Anandamath* including Bijay Madhab were put behind bars. Eventually Bijay Madhab became a paid informant of the local police and following his release he came to Calcutta and tried multiple ventures to eke out a living. But the extravagant lifestyle including his gambling habits made Bijay Madhab perpetually dependent on his uncle- Binay Madhab for economic assistance. By 1941, the cash

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ WBSA IB 129/35.

inflow from Binay Madhab dwindled. In despair Bijay Madhab chalked out a plan to swindle Japanese consulate officials. The prospect of a Japanese onslaught on South Asia which included Bengal led him to lure Japanese officials with strategic information vital for a ground attack on the province. To make it convincing he acted as an important member of a non-existent revolutionary organisation and roped in his childhood friend Gouridas Lahiri, who had posed as the leader of the group. They seemed to have convinced Japanese officials as they met Ohta and supplied fictitious maps mentioning locations of oil fields, bridges and produced fabricated numbers of Allied army-men deployed to guard the subcontinent from possible Axis incursions. In return the duo received cash benefits ostensibly for the preparation of the coming insurrection against the colonial regime. The ruse went on as planned and the duo continued to fleece Ohta till they were exposed by the informer planted inside the consular office. The silence of colonial archives on Ohta indicated that he was saved from persecution due to his diplomatic immunity for the time being, but Gouridas and Bijay Madhab were not that lucky. They were persecuted as enemy agents and languished in prison for the rest of the war years.³⁹

As Hitler rose to power in the 1930s, unabashed racism became the hallmark of the Nazi rule in Germany. Along with the Jews people from various ethnic and racial groups ie. Slavs, Asians and Africans were dehumanised in Nazi worldview. In the initial years of the German Reich, he viewed the British Empire with great admiration, to the extent that he issued press statements supporting the perpetuity of the colonial regime.⁴⁰ For Hitler - 'the loss of India by the British Empire would be a misfortune for the rest of the world, including Germany itself'.⁴¹ Third Reich's favourable standpoint towards colonial empires provided the ideal backdrop for the Imperial police to remain unperturbed when the first Nazi cell appeared in India in 1932.⁴² Though the initial organization of NSDAP in India consisted of Germans involved in various commercial enterprises in the subcontinent, within a decade a section of urban elites would eventually gravitate towards the totalitarian

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Milan Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy: Germany, Japan and Indian Nationalists in the Second World War*, (Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, Germany, 1981), pp.29-32.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.31.

⁴² Ibid.p. 64.

ideology. Among Axis powers, the Nazis had the most effective propaganda machinery.⁴³ In Bengal, the German Consulate in Calcutta played a major role in the dissemination of the Nazi propaganda.

The colonial bureaucracy became aware of the Nazi threat in India only after the Munich Pact in 1938, which dismembered Czechoslovakia and unhinged the prospect of an imminent military conflict. The state apparatus decided to compile surveillance reports gathered during the course of the 1930s on activities of Nazi agents in India. This report shed light on ways through which Nazi Germany tried to create its own sphere of influence by coordinating its commercial and political interests. Intelligence officers believed that Indian students who were inducted in German universities were used to further the cause of the Third Reich, as a sizable section of them eventually found employment in German firms and were suspected to be coaxed by German officials to write favourable reports on Nazi economic policies in Indian newspapers.⁴⁴ Funded by German business and corporate capital in India, pro-Nazi propaganda organisations such as the Indo-German News Exchange in Delhi and Indo-German Institute in Dhaka made their presence felt. The colonial intelligence apparatus identified that articles appeared in Indian newspapers, and magazines such as *The Princely India*, *Spirit of the Time*, *Salar-e-Hind*, *Lokhandi Morcha* etc. extolling policies of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.⁴⁵ The industrial town of Jamshedpur seemed to have a sizable section of Third Reich supporters, as the German Consulate in Calcutta reportedly organised several shows of a Nazi propaganda movie, 'The 1935 Nuremberg Rally', in 1936. In the next year, the German Consulate initiated a propaganda onslaught aiming to vilify the communists. The Consular officials were seen distributing a leaflet titled 'the truth about the communist conspiracy on the eve of the national revolution' (referring to the Reichstag Fire incident of 1933). The fact that by late 1930s, communists and socialists had become a force to reckon with in Calcutta- the hotbed of anti-imperialist struggles, might have prompted the German Consulate to jump on the bandwagon of anti-communist propaganda. The leaflet was aimed to placate British imperial interests while promoting Third Reich's own

⁴³ Eugene J. D'Souza, p 78.

⁴⁴ WBSA IB 358/38

⁴⁵ Eugene J. D'Souza, *Nazi Propaganda in India*, (Social Scientist, Vol. 28, No. 5/6, May- June 2000, pp 77-90), pp 82-87.

brand of ultra-nationalism. The presence of a small group of die-hard Nazis in Calcutta registered the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda amongst Bengali elites. In Dhaka, the Nazis roped in sociologist Benoy Sarkar, who reportedly trained youths on Pro-Nazi lines in his Indo-German Institute.

With the passage of time, as rival imperialist camps began to take shape in the international arena, Nazi propaganda became more and more anti-British. The signing of the treaty of Munich in 1938 through which Germany annexed a significant portion of Czechoslovakia, in agreement with Britain, France and Italy, seemed to have acted as the watershed moment of British policy towards the Third Reich. In the same year the colonial intelligence apparatus compiled a detailed report on the effectiveness of the Nazi network in India and was alarmed to observe a sudden change of track of the pro-Nazi press propaganda. The intelligence report alleged that the Pro-German reportage of the Indian press which 'until recently targeted Soviet Russia', had 'adopted a noticeably anti-British tone.'⁴⁶ By 1940, the German war machine seemed unstoppable in Europe as countries such as Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands and France capitulated in quick succession. The lightning progress of the Wehrmacht prompted the Intelligence Branch to prepare a 'secret note' entitled 'The Alien Danger in India'. The purpose of the note was to help the colonial law-enforcing authority identify 'the host of camouflaged helpers' of the Axis forces in India.⁴⁷ It was presumed that 'Germany's peace-time and Germany's war-time workers are two different sets of persons and that the latter still function under well thought out cover.'⁴⁸ To identify Third Reich's war-time agents in India, naturalised British citizens, Christian missionaries, Jews who fled Germany occupied Europe came under police surveillance. Branded as 'dangerous aliens' their lives in the war years were dotted with perpetual insecurity, police harassment and imprisonment in internment camps. A collage of their quotidian lives in wartime Bengal is sketched in the next chapter.

⁴⁶ WBSA IB 358/38

⁴⁷ WBSA IB 729/40

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion

This chapter shed light on long-forgotten individuals involved in supporting Axis powers in wartime Bengal and delved into the world of espionage and colonial surveillance. Amongst the Axis nations Germany had the most efficient propaganda machinery. However, Hitler's repetitive assertion of creating a colonial empire coupled with Third Reich's much publicised hatred towards non-German races effectively diminished the mass appeal of Nazism amongst colonised subjects. Devoid of any popular support, Ashit Krishna and his wife Maximiani Portas- a select network of Nazi die-hards emerged in the milieu. The fact that very few people were actually involved with the Nazi network in Bengal registered the unpopularity of the Third Reich and its monstrous worldview. Japan enjoyed a relatively wider support base. Its meteoric rise as an economic and military power in the first few decades of the twentieth century had swayed many of the educated Bengalis. For Bengal the cultural impact of Japan, as a rising power in Asia was greater than other Axis nations. Higher education institutes such as Calcutta University employed Japanese teachers to teach the language. Archival documents testified that one of the teachers, Prof. Kurose, played a crucial role in the dissemination of Japanese propaganda. Led by Okakura Kakuzo Tenshin, Japanese painters made a lasting impact on Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose- pioneers of the Bengal School of Art.⁴⁹ Though Japan lacked the resources of Germany, covert networks maintained by veteran revolutionary Rash Behari Bose had ensured that every bit of anti-British propaganda reached his far off homeland. The idea of a decolonised Asia under the aegis of the 'Co-prosperity Sphere' floated by the Japanese state, had captured the imagination of individuals like Surendranath Neogi- a reporter of some repute. Subhash Chandra Bose and his supporters in Forward Bloc were eager to use the war to further the cause of Indian liberation. In January 1941, he made a daring escape from house-arrest and made an audacious but abortive attempt to topple the British Raj by leading Indian National Army (INA), raised from Indian POW captured by the Japanese forces. Archival documents processed

⁴⁹ Shigemi Inaga. "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901-1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose." (Japan Review, no. 21, 2009), pp. 149–81. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25791333>.

in this chapter also revealed that organisations such as Indian Independence League (IIL), INA had made strenuous infiltration attempts as agents were sent to establish contacts with Bose loyalists in Bengal and elsewhere. Apart from the radical nationalists whose support to the Axis cause was purely circumstantial, there were opportunist tricksters who sought to help the Axis powers in exchange for cash benefits. Men like Bijay Madhab and Gouridas, perfectly assessed the international situation and used the impending Japanese onslaught to swindle money from them. The smoothness with which Japanese officials were deceived magnified the urgency of Imperial Japan to gather strategic information on the eve of the invasion. The fiasco also bared that Axis forces lacked the support of a trusted intelligence network in Bengal on the eve of the war. To counter-balance it, both Japan and Germany had used their diplomatic presence to prop up their respective regimes and used the local media to publish news favourable to them. The British intelligence was not sitting idle. Anticipating that the Japanese Consulate in Calcutta would emerge as a major hub of espionage for the Axis forces, following the closure of the German Consulate office in 1939, British agents had effectively infiltrated the Consulate and Japanese officials came under intense surveillance.

Archival sources discussed here testified that in wartime Bengal there was a minuscule presence of operatives who had connections with Axis forces, which hardly justified the colonial paranoia of fifth columnists and enemy agents. In hindsight it can be assumed that the unbridled coercion which became the hallmark of the beleaguered regime stemmed from its growing gulf with the colonised people. To sustain the war effort resource extraction grew manifold as it created unimaginable hardships for the people of Bengal and increased the infamy of the Raj. The sense of insecurity prodded the embattled regime to put into action a stifling surveillance mechanism ostensibly to identify every sign of disobedience.

Chapter Four

The 'Enemy Aliens' in Bengal: Professionals, Swindlers & Drifters

At the on-set of Second World War, the late-colonial state came down heavily on people whose obedience seemed doubtful. Jails, internment camps symbolised the anxious operations of a wartime surveillance state. The colonial bureaucracy depended on the ever-expanding intelligence network and brute force to weather the cumulative storm of the war and successive waves of nationalist uprisings. To document ramifications of the war at a microscopic level, this chapter portrays wartime experiences of a certain segment of people who have largely remained outside the historical works dealing with the last phase of colonialism in Bengal. In this chapter I depict life-stories of 'enemy aliens'- people of non-Allied and Axis nations.

On 22 February 1939 the Home Department of Government of India issued a circular.¹ This circular specifically asked the Police Superintendents of every district to report any 'enemy citizen, naturalised British citizen of enemy origin or British or British-Indian subject having connection with potentially hostile powers' residing within their territory.² On the eve of Second World War the colonial Government chalked out a plan for pre-emptive strikes against individuals or social or commercial organisations which 'either sympathised with hostile powers' or were 'obliged to support the enemy'.³ The colonial intelligence apparatus believed that hostile nations would activate previously dormant channels to serve their interest and concluded that 'Britain's wartime enemies are different from peacetime opponents'.⁴ In order to identify clandestine activities of enemy agents who were supposedly deeply embedded

¹WBSA IB 108/39 1939 Foreigners.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

within Indian society, the colonial regime needed an extensive surveillance network. The precarious position of an embattled colonial regime juxtaposed with the rising tide of anti-colonial movements and made the colonial officialdom more insecure than ever. Foreigners or naturalised British citizens came under intense scrutiny on the eve of Second World War.

Citizens of Hostile Nations

Foreign professionals, missionaries and wives of British or British-Indian subjects emerged as prime suspects. According to the Bengal Intelligence Branch, 6 German engineers working in the Burnpur Steel Factory since February 1938 came under scrutiny. Further probes revealed that the Germans were friendly with their Indian colleagues and four of them were staying together; another unidentified German occasionally joined them to listen to news on the radio. Their keen interest in international politics coupled with cordial relation with Indian workers alarmed the Police. Official paranoia against 'enemy aliens' was often used to settle personal scores. In the case of Doctor Alexander Ronald,⁵ a Jewish refugee from Austria, professional rivalry played a key role. He was interrogated by the police for installing a Radio fitted with an aerial at his residence in Darjeeling. The complainant was his fellow doctor named W A Garson who also protested in his complaint letter against Alexander Ronald for practising medicine in Darjeeling although he was not a registered doctor. Alexander Ronald survived the ordeal and migrated to Switzerland in 1947.⁶ With the German annexation of Czechoslovakia, employees of the Bata Shoe Company were included in the list of 'potentially hostile' subjects. Names of nearly sixty Czechoslovak employees residing in Batanagar along with their families were mentioned in the IB file dealing with 'enemy agents'.⁷ Police dossiers showed that the British intelligence apparatus anticipated the imminent clash with Japan; much before Japan's

⁵ NAI 72/3/72/40-Pol(EW) 1940.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

actual entry into the war, Japanese subjects were kept under close watch. In Panihati, the General Manager of a silk factory named K K Kida came under the police radar. Another Japanese subject whose name was mentioned in the Police file was J W Takeda. He was residing in Dhaka at the house of his Bengali wife Hariprabha Takeda. Eventually Hariprabha Takeda would play a major role in Netaji's INA as she translated and broadcasted Subhas Bose's speeches in Bengali on behalf of the Imperial Japanese Army.⁸

Alarmed by the looming war, the British intelligence network made sweeping generalisations and citizens of different European nations such as Yugoslavs, Lithuanians, and Norwegians were considered as potential enemy agents. Jews who faced persecution in the Third Reich and occupied Europe and escaped to India were also suspected. They were listed among 'persons whose sympathies would normally be expected to lie with the potentially hostile powers'.⁹ Another circular was issued by the Home Department which specifically instructed government agencies to 'improve their knowledge' of German wives of British and British-Indian subjects. Intelligence agencies were asked to obtain information on activities prior to their marriage. IB also compiled names of 'British Indian subjects' in Bengal who would be 'influenced by the hostile powers'. Prominent Bengalis were mentioned in the police dossier along with political non-entities. Veteran revolutionary Sachindranath Sanyal, Kalidas Nag the doyen of Bengali intelligentsia, nationalist stalwart Subhas Chandra Bose along with his fellow Congressman and the chairman of Behala municipality Biren Roy were included in the list of suspicious British-Indian subjects. This list also had a few names whose political antecedents remain unknown to us. Amongst them were a dismissed Sub Inspector of Calcutta Police of Garwalli

⁸ Hariprabha Takeda, *The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan and Other Essays*, Trans. Somdatta Mandal, (Jadavpur University Press, Kolkata, 2019).

⁹ NAI 72/3/72/40-Pol(EW) 1940.

descent A. Panthe, Sushil Ranjan Sen of Burdwan, Pramatha Nath Ray of Mymensingh and Ms Anila Banerji of Rawdon Street in Calcutta.¹⁰

The Jewish Refugees

Archival documents show that colonial India received a steady stream of Jewish refugees who were escaping the expanding death grip of Nazi Germany over Europe. Often their family members were left inside Nazi controlled territory. As Britain's wartime doctrine urged the colonial state to weed out 'Fifth Columnists', colonial intelligence agencies identified Jewish refugees as potential threats who could be coerced to do the bidding of hostile powers. There was also concern that enemy agents would use the cover of the refugee influx to enter India. For these reasons people with Jewish descent who took shelter in the subcontinent came under intense official scrutiny and had to go through arduous government checks to avoid imprisonment. The suicide of a dental surgeon in Quetta, even though this lay outside Bengal, may be cited to show the extent of trauma visiting asylum-seekers. Being a Hungarian Jew Peter Hoff was 'strongly suspected as a spy' although he was not restricted to any Parole settlements. On 16 May 1941 he took his life by using the surgical knife. In the suicide note he left behind he stated that his 'nerves had given way' under the pressure of constant suspicion.¹¹

This kind of stifling surveillance mechanism on the Jewish migrant population could be traced in the life-journeys of disparate individuals in wartime Bengal. Jewish refugees who took shelter in colonial India had first-hand experience of the official paranoia which drove many towards mental breakdown and broke apart congenial family environments. In order to escape the systematic persecution they often chose to serve the Allied war machine. This passage will deal with certain Jewish individuals who envisioned serving the British war effort as the best

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ NAI 43/14/41-Pol(EW).

route to survival. An Austrian Jew named Wilhelm Starkmann was employed as a recording engineer in Gramophone Co. since 1926. In March 1938 while working in Germany he was arrested by the Gestapo and was sent to the Dachau concentration camp. Following his release from Dachau he fled to India. At the beginning of the war he was sent to Katapahar Parole facility. Letters of the Gramophone Company showed that only after 'British employees of the company were called up for military duties' the company began to press for Starkmann's release by highlighting acute shortage of manpower for making 'war propaganda' records. The Gramophone Company's intervention proved fruitful; in May 1941 he was released from Katapahar.¹² Another victim of colonial paranoia against the Jewish refugees was Helmut Carl Ortheiler. Archival records indicate that his father Stefan Ortheiler owned an Enamel factory in Germany before it was confiscated by the Nazis and they were asked to leave Germany. After coming to Calcutta Stefan found employment at the Bengal Enamel Factory in Palta. At the beginning of the war Helmut was incarcerated in Katapahar, while his aging father Stefan avoided the ordeal of being sent there as his factory was involved in war production. Helmut would expire at Ripon Hospital in Simla in 1945.¹³ His heartbroken father would die in Bombay in 1953.¹⁴

Anti-Nazi political activism did not deter the beleaguered colonial state from persecuting Jewish migrants having definite links in their pasts with anti-fascist, left-wing politics. Maximilian Bernhard Bauer was an anti-Nazi political activist of Jewish descent. According to his deposition before Calcutta Police he was an office-bearer of the *Vaterlandische Front*- the all-party anti-Nazi Front. After Austria was annexed and incorporated into the Third Reich he fled from his Vienna home which was raided twice by the SS. Following his failure to enter

¹² NAI 72/3/26/40.

¹³ NAI 72/3/6-Pol(EW).

¹⁴ NAI 72/3/54/40-Pol(EW).

Hungary, he hid in the home of his father-in-law in Berlin. From Berlin he secured a visa for India by signing an undertaking that he would never return to Austria. Bernhard Bauer's daring escape story from the heart of the Third Reich failed to convince his interrogators and initially he was identified as an enemy agent. He was incarcerated in Katapahar Parole facility along with his distant cousin Doctor Hahndel who had fled with him from Berlin. Eventually Doctor Hahndel would gain the trust of Katapahar authorities and become the prison doctor. Bernhard Bauer would remain incarcerated till 1943 when intercepted letters of his father-in-law, who fled to the Latin American nation of Chile, convinced intelligence officials about the veracity of Bauer's testimony. His release from imprisonment coincided with the report of the prison official stating that 'Mr. Bauer is on the verge of a serious mental breakdown and his condition is rapidly deteriorating'.¹⁵

Fredrick Falkenstein was another victim of official paranoia against Jewish refugees. He was a German Jew who served as a Medical Officer in the German Army during First World War. In the inter-war period he became an active member of the Social Democratic Party and became an elected member in the city council of Cologne. The fact was corroborated when his house in Calcutta was searched by the Calcutta Police and documents were retrieved, proving his anti-Nazi political inclination. While fleeing from Germany his wife and son were left behind, which triggered official suspicion and he was imprisoned in Katapahar at the beginning of the war. In one of his letters to the Government, Falkenstein offered to serve the war effort in any Allied Army Medical Corps following which he was released from Katapahar.¹⁶ Another doctor of Jewish origin who escaped imprisonment by serving the army was Gedeon Ritterman. He worked in the Combined Military Hospital situated at Barrackpore. Ritterman repeatedly pleaded with colonial authorities to exempt his family members from travel restrictions; their

¹⁵ NAI 72/3/76/40-Pol(EW).

¹⁶ NAI 72/3/37/40-Pol(EW).

movements were continued to be restricted as 'enemy aliens' till 194. By then the outcome of the war was almost decided.¹⁷

Doctor Emily Sussman was not as fortunate as her fellow refugee medical practitioners. German annexation of Austria tore apart her family. While her husband found refuge in New Zealand and worked as a Ski instructor, she came to Calcutta and volunteered to serve the Red Cross. Emily Sussman was sent to Katapahar at the outbreak of the War, where she fell in love with a fellow inmate, Gustav Kars. After giving birth to an infant in 1941 she secured her passage to New Zealand to be reunited with her husband.¹⁸ Her lover Gustav Kars was also an Austrian refugee who was working as a private tutor of daughters of a Jute-Mill owner in Calcutta at the time of his imprisonment. Following his release from Katapahar Gustav remained in the hills and became a teacher-warden of the St. Paul's School.¹⁹ Emily Sussman would return to him in 1946 following the death of her husband in New Zealand and the couple eventually emigrated to the USA in 1947.²⁰

Emil Glass was an Austrian-Jewish refugee who was interned at Fort William in Calcutta along with his wife and brother following the outbreak of the war. During the course of interrogation he managed to convince Police officials about his potential as an arms-inventor. Following which he was released and found employment in Kanchrapara Railway Workshop which was then operating as an ammunition factory. During the course of war he won accolades from colonial officials for inventing armaments such as magnetic anti-tank mines and anti-aircraft shells. After the war he retained his Austrian citizenship and became a high-ranking official in the Hindusthan Development Corporation.²¹

¹⁷ NAI 72/3/70/40-Pol(EW).

¹⁸ NAI 72/3/7/40-Pol (EW).

¹⁹ NAI 72/3/13/40-Pol(EW).

²⁰ NAI 72/3/33/40- Pol(EW).

²¹ Ibid.

The Camp at Katapahar

Since First World War Bengal had an internment camp for non-combatant enemy subjects at Katapahar in Darjeeling hills. This was known as Katapahar Parole Settlement Camp, designed to house ‘enemy aliens’.²² At the beginning of Second World War, the camp at Katapahar was re-activated. Archival evidence shows that the colonial regime strictly followed a policy of racial segregation as Katapahar was restricted to European citizens and their families. Not just in Darjeeling hills, a network of internment camps came up in places such as Purandar, Hazaribagh, Yarcund, Kodaikanal, Nainital, Satara and other restful remote places and hill stations. Purandar was built for Jewish internees, whereas Yarcund accommodated mostly Italians. Apart from German and Italian subjects Katapahar housed a number of Italian Catholic missionaries. The missionaries were targeted during the later phase of the war. In January 1942, the embattled colonial regime ordered for restriction of Christian missionaries of enemy origins in Parole settlements. In Colonial India, a large number of Italian missionaries were based in Assam. Accommodating Italian and German missionaries inside internment settlements seemed to be a daunting task for the colonial bureaucracy as parole settlements were already overflowing with ‘enemy aliens’. Archival records show that the total number of missionaries of German or Italian origin was almost 120. As Burma came under Japanese occupation 39 missionaries of enemy origin were evacuated from there. After much deliberation, the colonial government decided to set up a ‘Quasi- Parole Centre’ in Shillong, specifically for the missionaries. The rest of the missionaries were distributed among Katapahar and Kodaikanal internment camps. Among the Italian missionaries who were evacuated from Burma 33 were interned in Katapahar.

²² NAI 72/3/33/40-Pol(EW).

According to the IB file on Katapahar Prisoner of War camp, this internment facility could imprison up to 120 people. The list of internees showed German or Italian prisoners of Jewish ancestry were accommodated here along with non-Jewish Europeans. Non-Jewish white prisoners were referred as 'Aryans' in official documents in conformity with Nazi terminology of racial categorisation. Apart from this distinction, the nationality of each internee was carefully documented. Documentation of non-Jewish Europeans as 'Aryans' reflected the prejudiced mind-set of the colonial bureaucracy and echoed racial theories of the Third Reich.

Archival records show that with the starting point of the world war, the colonial regime hurriedly imprisoned almost every national from Axis nations. As the war progressed, the British officialdom grudgingly acknowledged the fact that many of the incarcerated foreigners could serve the war effort and support the jeopardised colonial regime in the subcontinent. To deal with the situation, Aliens Advisory Committee was formed. It gathered information on incarcerated individuals. After interrogating them individually the committee assessed possibilities of their release and advised Home Department accordingly. The intelligence file on Katapahar Prisoner of War Camp revealed that they reviewed each case within one or two years, and suggested the release of the internees, only if they became convinced of their harmlessness or usefulness to the war effort. The colonial officialdom was eager to maintain the prestige of the white race at any cost and was mortified at the prospect of the emergence of a pauperised white refugee population. To save themselves from an eventual humiliation in front of the subject race, every released 'enemy alien' was made to furnish details of their future employment before the British authorities. Ironically, this was the time when the 1943 famine was ravaging the Bengal countryside and millions of famished people were dying in the streets of Calcutta. Even after their release, the internees remained under strict surveillance; their movements were restricted to their home districts. They were asked to report to the nearest police station periodically. The Jewish refugees who remained incarcerated due to their

inability to find employment were assisted by Jewish Relief Association and were given employment to facilitate their release. the Association arranged Austrian refugee Tibor Stary`s employment in the Great Eastern Hotel, Calcutta.²³

In certain circumstances, internees were permitted periods of brief release. M.B. Bauer was granted parole for three days and he was allowed to travel to Calcutta with a police escort to visit the Chief Secretary of Bengal on an official purpose. Similar permission was granted to Alfred Israel who was paroled for 13 days so that he could travel to Calcutta to settle his financial matters. Another internee, Frank Geiringe was paroled for 5 days so that he could visit his place at 18, Chowringhee Mansions in Calcutta. Personal/family matters or the purpose of treatment were recorded as causes of temporary release. Mrs M. Geisse was permitted to proceed to the internment camp at Dehradun to visit her ailing husband and stay there for as long as the commanding officer of Dehradun Camp permitted her to. In another instance, an ailing German woman, Katherine Klups and her two children who were incarcerated in Hazaribagh Camp were shifted to Katapahar as suggested by the attending doctor. After internee, Dr. Emilie Susmann gave birth to a child out of wedlock; she was promptly released and permitted to proceed to New Zealand with her new-born child to be united with her husband.

These internment camps were governed from a politically strategic, authoritarian and socially puritanical viewpoint. Amorous relationships were strictly prohibited inside the camps. While imprisoned in Satara, a German speaking priest named Father Ignatius fell in love with Mrs Dezani, a female co-prisoner. In order to punish the couple, the woman was sent to solitary confinement, while the priest was transferred to the Katapahar Camp along with four young priests. To stop any kind of intermixing between the internees, Government officials even

²³ NAI 72/3/22/40-Pol(E).

proposed to set up separate internment facilities for women. Official highhandedness and a parochial mind-set was displayed when a Bengali doctor named D.N. Maitra vainly tried to persuade colonial officialdom so that his 'lady love' and personal assistant Ms. Sorge, could be released briefly from the Katapahar Camp. Documents showed that E. Sorge who was interned for her 'German Aryan' descent wanted to 'proceed to Calcutta briefly' for an upcoming job interview. After D.N. Maitra failed in his endeavour, and Ms. Sorge was not allowed a short span of release, the doctor went to Katapahar to meet his lover, only to be refused entry by the authorities. Even though love was forbidden, relationships blossomed inside Katapahar. The dental surgeon Emily Susmann's affair with one of her fellow inmates, elaborated in the previous section, indicates this.²⁴ Tibor Stary's marriage with a non-internee Anglo-Indian lady could be cited as a standalone example where a relationship was allowed to grow with an outsider without official hindrances. Tibor Stary married Phillis Wayne Pereira on 18 December 1940 at the Deputy Commissioner's Court in Darjeeling. Immediately after the marriage, the news was given to his ex-wife, Mrs Stary who was also interned in Katapahar Camp along with her new-born baby, Ann. On that very day her movement was restricted by the Supervising Officer of the Camp. Other than an occasional mention that Tibor Stary's new father-in-law was an influential person, the background behind his first wife's cruel treatment by the camp authorities and their strange complicity in the Stary's new relationship remained unrevealed in the dossier.

The material on Katapahar highlighted the fact that the colonial intelligence agencies followed an incoherent policy as they depended on whims of local law-enforcement agencies while dealing with 'enemy aliens'. In 1939, rising cases of Jewish persecution forced the Reiser brothers to flee to India from Vienna along with their ailing 70 year old mother. While Leonard

²⁴ NAI 72/3/7/40-Pol (EW).

Reisner and his mother Ernestine Reisner were at liberty in Bombay, his younger brother Bernhard was incarcerated in Katapahar as he was staying in Calcutta when the war started. In 1941, Leonard requested the Government of India for permission to proceed to the USA for employment, which was eventually granted. As it would become impossible for Ernestine to sustain herself in an unknown city, she had no option but to join her younger son in Katapahar Camp.

Apart from Jewish refugees Katapahar also housed a few Nazi sympathisers. The Golnner couple were one of them. Josef Golnner was an Austrian interior designer who came to Calcutta in 1937, following his employment in the Vienna Decorating Company. In Calcutta he married an Anglo-Indian lady and began to stay at her house in Howrah. Police dossier indicates that Josef Golnner maintained a connection with the Third Reich even though he was not an active member of the Calcutta Nazi circle. During the interrogation he admitted that he voted for *Anschluss* (German annexation of Austria) and 'flirted with Nazis' in Austria, so that his father, a leading businessman in Vienna, remained 'safe from political troubles'.²⁵ According to the police report one of his brothers was reported to be an ardent Nazi while his father also held pro-Nazi political views. In 1939 Josef Golnner attended a 'Nazi film show' at the Globe Theatre in Calcutta. Documents show that the Golnner couple maintained their connection with the Third Reich even while incarcerated. The couple were expecting their second child in internment. Josef Golnner used diplomatic channels to receive monetary help from the Third Reich with the help of the Swiss Consulate in Calcutta. Intercepted letters of these internees proved their continuous support for the Third Reich. One of the women internees in Katapahar, Kay Klein complained to her husband who was interned in the Central Internment Camp at Deolali that the 'Golnners are ardent Nazis'.²⁶ It had been reported that Mrs. Golnner often

²⁵ NAI 72/3/64/40-Pol(EW).

²⁶ Ibid.

boasted that she ‘will get something from Germany after the war’. The Katapahar inmate Mrs. Bocker voiced disappointment in a letter to her husband about the way the couple secured money from the Nazi regime while remaining incarcerated in a prison of Germany’s arch enemy. The animosity against the Golnners among their co-prisoners alarmed the camp authorities. They were transferred to Satara internment camp, where they remained till their release in 1946.²⁷ The Golnner family represented the segment of Austrian population whose sheer opportunism propped up the Nazi regime and paved the way for their unbridled brutality against Jews and political opponents.

Refugees Adrift

To highlight the ramifications of the war at a microscopic level, the following sections portray certain refugee families and individuals whose lives were radically altered by the war.

The Stary Family

The Stary family was one the many Austrian Jewish families whose lives turned upside down when they had to flee Austria after it was occupied by Nazi Germany. Police records showed that Starys were accomplished musicians. In 1937 Tibor Stary, the eldest of Stary siblings first arrived in Calcutta along with his wife and found employment in Great Eastern Hotel as a musician. By February 1939 his younger siblings Siegfried and Elizabeth along with his mother Marie managed to flee Austria and joined him. His father was described by British authorities as a ‘highly distinguished musician’ who could not unite with them and remained separated in Belgium due to the outbreak of Second World War.²⁸ By 1940 all three siblings were interned in Katapahar along with Tibor Stary’s wife. It was during his internment that Tibor decided to marry again. His relationship with an outsider and ultimate marriage in captivity created a

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ NAI 30/18/41– Pol(EW) 1941.

furor amongst his fellow inmates.²⁹ A censored letter from the Medical Officer of Katapahar camp W A Garson to a German internee in Ahmadnagar divulged details of this murky affair. According to the letter Tibor Stary received privileged treatment from the prison officials. Other inmates of the camp objected about the way authorities allowed Tibor Stary's lover to stay with him while they needed prior permission to meet their partners who remained at liberty. Following his second marriage Tibor reportedly 'threatened and battered' a lady inmate named Mrs Klein after his newly married wife became suspicious of his proximity to the lady. The camp doctor was astonished about the fact that even though the incident took place in front of the Supervising Officer of the camp no judicial procedure was started against Tibor. Fearing harsh reprisals from the prison authorities Mrs Klein didn't complain to higher authorities. Outraged by the event, Doctor Garson decided to inform one of the German internees in Ahmadnagar camp who had been transferred from Katapahar. The Medical Officer hoped that through this person the news of Mrs Klein's mistreatment in Katapahar would ultimately reach her husband who was also incarcerated in Ahmadnagar. Dr Garson's letter failed to reach its destination as it was censored in Ahmadnagar camp. The Medical Officer's closeness to a German internee bred suspicions against the doctor who was swiftly removed for 'incompetence'.³⁰ Colonial authorities in charge of Katapahar remained tight-lipped on the reasons for which they remained oblivious to Tibor Stary's unjustifiable activities. Police records showed that his second wife's father was the chief engineer of Bengal Nagpur Railway and an influential person as he guaranteed Tibor's livelihood whenever he could be released. While recommending the release of Tibor, Alien Advisory Committee mentioned his effort for the release of his son-in-law. Finally it was the Jewish Relief Association which came to Tibor's relief as they found him employment at his earlier workplace- the Great Eastern Hotel

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid

in Calcutta. While Tibor Stary was released soon after, the fate of his first wife and his infant daughter Ann remain unknown to us.³¹

While Tibor was a violinist, his sister Elizabeth was reported to be a 'highly talented pianist'.³² Elizabeth Stary was released on 3 March 1941. Following her release she became a renowned figure in the Indian cultural arena. She released several recorded albums and established herself as a regular performer in the All India Radio. Apart from Bengal Elizabeth frequently performed in Simla, Punjab and Kashmir. By 1944 Allied Eastern Command began hiring her for musical concerts organised for the entertainment of the Allied troops at the Garrison Theatre Hall in Calcutta.³³ In a letter, she boasted that one of her solo performances in Delhi enthralled the wife of the Governor-General of India, Lord Linlithgow who complimented her personally. Her contacts in high places helped; she was barred from entering Bombay to perform there. Ultimately the Deputy Secretary of the Indian Government had to intervene so that she could be allowed to enter and perform in Bombay.³⁴

The Stary family's case history indicates the fluctuating fortunes of refugees varied widely and were dependent on the extent to which they had developed links with the colonial officialdom. Often, connections or prior pre-war social relationships prevented them from being completely cast out of privileges extended to European subjects in colonial India. Their integrated status in European public life came to their aid and saved them from the hardships of an interned existence.

Unlike the Stary siblings whose popularity as musicians had shielded them from much hardship, there were others who employed ingenious methods to circumvent the wartime

³¹ NAI 72/3/22/40-Pol(E).

³² NAI 73/3/24/40-Pol(EW).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

paranoia of colonial bureaucracy. Subsequent paragraphs will delve into the life-stories of such refugees.

Alexander Kovacs³⁵

The story of Alexander Kovacs was also far removed from helpless Jewish immigrants whose survival solely depended on whims of the colonial authorities. From the beginning of the war, the case of Alexander Kovacs baffled Intelligence officials. According to files archived in the Home Political department Kovacs was first arrested on 7 December 1941, as a Hungarian national after Hungary joined the war as an Axis power. Following the first round of interrogation Bengal intelligence officials were so intrigued by him that they decided to launch parallel investigations involving the local police, the foreign office and other intelligence apparatuses of the far-flung British Empire. The interrogation report concluded that he couldn't be 'left at liberty before the final review of the case is over'. Alexander's file showed that he was concurrently interrogated by different intelligence organisations which sometimes involved foreign intelligence officials. Through the course of these interrogations his life-story gradually unravelled. He revealed to one of his interrogators that before coming to Calcutta he was employed as an engineer in the Berlin-Baghdad Railway. This information raised eyebrows as a trusted British informant from Middle-Eastern Asia had already reported about the activity of an ardent pro-Nazi Hungarian named 'Sandor Kovacs'. According to this informant Sandor Kovacs 'gave several talks denouncing the treaty of Versailles and demanded restoration of the old Hungarian frontiers'.³⁶ It was reported that from Baghdad he went to Iran where he married a German lady. After returning to Baghdad Sandor Kovacs became close to the local Nazi circle and particularly to Dr. Fritz Grobba – the German diplomat stationed in Baghdad in charge of expanding the Third Reich's influence over Middle-Eastern Asia. The

³⁵ NAI 43/10/1/41-Pol(EW) 1941.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

unnamed informant also revealed that Sandor Kovacs suddenly disappeared from Baghdad and there was a rumour in the local Nazi circle that he came to India and founded a cycle making factory near Calcutta.

Apart from similarity of names, other descriptions also matched with the testimony of Alexander Kovacs, which increased suspicion. According to his confession, while in Baghdad he was employed as a construction engineer in the railway and consorted with a famous German exotic dancer named Clara Keleti. His circle of friends were ardent Nazis and the places he frequented were also controlled by the German diplomat Dr. Grobba. Dr. Grobba as a high ranking officer in the Nazi foreign ministry, had already earned infamy among the British officials as a recruiter of German informants. When questioned about the nature of his relationship with Dr. Grobba, Alexander brushed aside the link by claiming that it was only in connection with obtaining visas. The unusual ease with which Alexander gained access inside the Axis circles active in the middle-east 'drew suspicion upon him' and it was decided to probe the reality of his Hungarian Jewish ancestry. The police file revealed that after coming to Calcutta Alexander was involved in the business of pictures which were 'pornographic in nature'.³⁷ After much deliberation the intelligence officials concluded that even if he was not an enemy agent he was a 'business crook', with a background of 'highly suspicious activities'. It was also alleged that 'for personal gain' he could jeopardise the production of war materials 'prejudicially'.³⁸ Hence the report recommended for the removal of Alexander Kovacs from the Hind Machines Limited which was producing nut-bolts, telegraph fittings etc. along with his immediate internment in a parole settlement. But within a month of his imprisonment he was released, because the Military authorities vehemently opposed the proposal of Alexander's internment and portrayed him as indispensable for the production of war materials. Although

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Alexander was released, he remained under close watch of intelligence agencies, which submitted a detailed report on him in March 1943. The report was highly critical of Alexander's activities.

By this time the military establishment was also thoroughly disillusioned about his capabilities, as he was already dismissed from the Hind Machines Limited. A report regarding the background behind his dismissal indicated, 'shady business between him and some persons in ordnance factories which was hampering rather than aiding the war production'. Intriguing facts about Alexander's past life and proof of his corrupt practices in professional life, paved the way for the police to launch a renewed effort for his prosecution. As a result, on 19 July 1943 Government authorised the police to send Alexander Kovacs to Purandar Internment Camp. This time his saviour was Director of Industries in Bengal S C Mitter. He described Alexander as a man of 'exceptional engineering skills', whose ingenious methods were indispensable for the continuous supply of essential war materials. While intelligence agencies were adamant on prosecuting Alexander, the Supplies Department of the Bengal Government became his vocal supporter. One of the entries in the file dealing with Alexander Kovacs hinted at the prolonged bureaucratic tussle which broke out 'between the local security authorities and the Government of Bengal on the one hand and the Supply Department and its local officers on the other hand'. In order to end this impasse the Bengal government ordered an enquiry by the commercial attaché of the Crown. The commercial attaché personally interviewed Alexander and his report echoed the opinion of IB officials. He portrayed Alexander Kovacs as a 'typical Jewish entrepreneur, rather than an engineer', who seemed 'to have spent his time securing contracts for one thing after another'.

It was Japan's lightning advance in East Asia which dissuaded Britain from persecuting Alexander Kovacs. Prompted by the risk of dislocating the supply chain of essential

commodities vital for the war effort, the Government decided to leave Alexander at liberty. However a travel restriction was imposed on him. He was asked to report to the local police station every week. The dossier on Alexander revealed that even these restrictions would be gradually withdrawn after repeated interventions of the Director of Industries S C Mitter. By 1944 he became the Engineering Advisor of Mitter. Throughout the war years numerous security agencies including the Calcutta Police made continuous attempts to convince the Supply Department on the security risk involving him without any tangible results.

Alexander Kovacs survived the war as a free man. Police report suggested that S.C.Mitter had 'secured many lakhs for war supplies' with the help of Kovacs. After the conclusion of the war S.C.Mitter was charged for embezzlement, while Alexander Kovacs migrated to the United States of America. Ultimately it was wartime exigencies coupled with the systematic corruption deeply embedded within the body politic of the late-colonial state which saved Alexander Kovacs from the wrath of the intelligence officials.³⁹

Dmitry Pimenovitch Nedbailoff ⁴⁰

While Tibor Stary and Alexander Kovacs earned their freedom through sly manoeuvres, Dmitry P. Nedbailoff was a man of different mettle. He was an archetypal drifter and an adventurer who escaped from internment camps twice. His case would ultimately evolve into a diplomatic row between the princely state of Sikkim and the colonial Government. The row would continue even after India gained its freedom. Nedbailoff was a Russian subject who had escaped from Russia after the Bolshevik revolution and spent ten years in China, before entering Burma in 1934. From Burma he sailed to Calcutta. By the time he came under police surveillance, he was working as an employee of a German firm. Nedbailoff had a prior record

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ NAI 59/1/40.

of conviction for being involved in drunken brawls. In June 1936, he was arrested in Calcutta 'with two prostitutes for being drunk and disorderly'. In records of Calcutta Police Nedbailoff was described as an 'unprincipled, unbalanced adventurer, with low morals who drinks heavily and quarrels violently with his wife'.⁴¹ Before the completion of the police enquiry he was dismissed from the firm only to become a jobless vagrant and applied for a visa to Rangoon. The authority of Rangoon hesitated to have him back and demanded deposition of money which could cover Nedbailoff's return passage to India. When his attempts to relocate to Rangoon proved futile, he found employment in the on-going Howrah Bridge construction project.

As a Russian subject and an employee of a German firm Nedbailoff was kept under close watch; his every move was followed. Police informers gave conflicting reports on him. While one informant depicted him as a Nazi sympathiser, another one gave vivid descriptions of his ardent belief in communism and how he was planning to move to the Chinese city of Shanghai to join the communist guerrillas active there. While contemplating Nedbailoff's prosecution, conflicting reports puzzled the investigators. A section of intelligence officials believed he was a 'vagabond' whose 'proper place would be the work-house'.⁴² They argued that his dismissal from the German firm was not an exception as Nedbailoff's previous employers often removed him for his ineptness. For the investigators 'if these jobs were to cover his activities as a German agent Germany would either not dismiss him or would look after him by indirect ways'. After some deliberation police officials finally decided to prosecute him as a 'German agent'.⁴³ The local police were asked to send him to an internment camp along with his wife. At this moment Nedbailoff's marriage broke down as his wife, an Anglo-Indian from Calcutta

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

refused to move with him and applied for separation which was granted. From November 1941 Nedbailoff was imprisoned at the Dehradun internment facility. In 1942 he ran away from the internment camp but was apprehended after a month near Burdwan while fleeing to Burma. Following his daring escape he was transferred to Deoli Central Internment Camp and remained there till the end of the war.

After the conclusion of the war as the colonial regime was closing down its internment facilities, Nedbailoff's case resurfaced. His request to enter China was promptly rejected by the Chinese Consul General. British-Indian Government contacted Soviet embassy in London to repatriate him along with two other Russian internees. He decided to flee for the second time after the officials decided that he would be deported to Russia if he failed to secure an alternative destination by the end of April 1947. On 14 April, he fled from the internment camp and remained untraced for the next two months. Finally he was apprehended in Tibet and the Tibetan officials were asked to hand him over to the Darjeeling police. In an unexpected turn of events, when he was escorted through the principality of Sikkim, the Himalayan kingdom refused to deliver him to the British authority and decided to assert its independence by employing Nedbailoff in the Sikkim Durbar. British-Indian officials discovered this curious fact when Mr. Hopkins, the Political Officer posted there wrote a letter to the colonial government, in which he asked for Nedbailoff's belongings. This was happening in the backdrop of the imminent Indian independence and the yet-undecided status of Indian princely states. The colonial bureaucracy was clearly jolted by the assertiveness of a tiny Indian principality. After contemplating different measures it was decided to put pressure on the Sikkim Durbar. But the Sikkim Durbar did not budge and British informants close to the Sikkim Durbar reported that orders from the central government could not be put into effect as Mr. Hopkins, the Political Officer in Sikkim was unwilling to carry out any order from the central government. The defiance of a small kingdom and the compliance of the political

officer appointed by colonial authorities in India signalled the effective end of British Paramountcy. Within a month of Indian Independence Nedbailoff tried to obtain permission from Indian Government for migrating to Australia. In continuance of the colonial legacy a section of officials strongly argued for denial of travel permit, so that he would be forced to surrender to Indian authorities before proceeding to Australia. But the newly established Ministry of Home Affairs and Commonwealth Relations came to terms with the changed reality and concluded that 'Paramountcy having lapsed, we are no longer in a position to compel the Sikkim Durbar to hand over Nedbailoff'. Although Sikkim was not pressurised to submit the Russian fugitive, his request for an Indian visa was rejected citing his criminal background. In 1948, Nedbailoff again approached the Indian Government using diplomatic channels of the Sikkim Durbar. By this time it was clear to the Indian bureaucracy that Sikkim would not accede to India and would remain as an independent principality for the time being. The last few entries of the file dealing with Nedbailoff showed that the officials of the Indian Home Ministry viewed his case with a reconciliatory approach. The Home Ministry observed that 'continued severity so long after the end of the war might well be taken for persecution' and introspective whether this case was important enough to risk a full-blown diplomatic row with Sikkim. The changing posture of the Indian bureaucracy signalled that an entry visa would be given to Nedbailoff for his journey to Australia.⁴⁴ As a quintessential drifter, his sojourn in Australia concluded quickly, as he failed to integrate himself there. Purportedly to retrieve the passport from Indian authorities, Nedbailoff made several attempts to cross the Indian ocean using a self-made boat and faced repetitive imprisonments in India and East Pakistan, till Swiss authorities had granted him asylum in 1961.⁴⁵ Even after that, he continued to travel far and wide and remained a 'restless wanderer' till his death in 1980. An article appeared in *The Tibet*

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Bart Hetebrij, *Dmitri P. Nedbailoff, the Great Unknown* (The Tibet Journal, Vol. 41, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2016), pp. 3-8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/tibetjournal.41.1.3>.

Journal had described Nedbailoff as a ‘modern day Don Quixote, who was constantly battling against unfair and cold-hearted authorities’.⁴⁶

Alexander Aronson⁴⁷

Alexander Aronson was a teacher of English at the Santiniketan College (Visva Bharati University of present day) when he was incarcerated as an ‘enemy alien’. At first he was sent to Fort William and from there transferred to the Ahmendanagar camp. It was Rabindranath’s tireless effort which earned him early release. Alexander came from a Jewish family of Russian *émigrés*. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, his parents fled to Germany and eventually became German citizens in 1929. With the rise of Nazism and subsequent persecution of Jews, Alexander’s parents moved to Haifa in Palestine in 1936. He received his higher-education at Cambridge University. According to his deposition to the authorities, Alexander made several Indian friends there, and they led him to be acquainted with a person named Peter Krieger based on Lower Circular Road in Calcutta. Peter Krieger was already under surveillance for being ‘an active propagandist of Zionism’ and intelligence agencies believed that Alexander Aronson collaborated with Peter in several of his literary works. After he made several unsuccessful attempts to obtain employment in the United Kingdom, it was his Indian friends who influenced him to take up the appointment as a Professor of English at Santiniketan College. According to the police dossier, he arrived in India in 1937 and quickly established himself as an accomplished teacher, to the extent that Rabindranath Tagore confirmed his employment within a year of his appointment. Although he garnered favourable observations by local police officials, from time to time he came under police scrutiny for having ‘various

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ NAI 72/3/55/40-Pol(EW) 1940 Home Department.

contacts of a political nature'. Mr. Finley of Special Branch who interrogated Alexander Aronson made the following observation:

“Whatever he is he hates the Nazis but I do not know if he has any Communist connection. He was educated at a college in Cambridge which has a bad reputation, I believe, for turning out Communists and cranks. He might be useful to us in the Santiniketan but seems too much of a dreamer”.

Colonial officialdom's deep aversion to Communism and his Zionist connections prompted the police to arrest him as soon as the war was declared. As an unflinching champion of democratic ethos Rabindranath Tagore opposed Alexander's persecution and wrote a letter to Sir Reginald Maxwell, Home Member of the Government of India seeking his early release. Anil Chanda, an eminent educationist and the Principal of the Santiniketan College also intervened for his release. Following the intervention of Bengali intellectual stalwarts Alexander Aronson was released from the Ahmadnagar Parole Camp. After resuming his job in Santiniketan he expressed his interest in becoming a naturalised British subject. In 1944 Alexander again came under police scrutiny for delivering a lecture at Calcutta University entitled 'West looks at India'. By this time he had left the job at Santiniketan College and became a Professor at Dhaka University. In the lecture he criticised the 'deplorable attitude' of Europeans towards Indian masses and 'accused them of being interested in Indians only with a view to exploit'.⁴⁸ Police officials believed that Aronson was 'indulging in anti-West propaganda', for pleasing the audience mainly comprised of Bengali youths and university students.⁴⁹ Although he was not persecuted for this speech, the colonial establishment resolved to reject his application for British citizenship. After the conclusion of the war he was invited by All India Radio for a talk. The programme was named 'My Peace Terms to Germany' and it was planned to reflect viewpoints of 'different categories and nationalities' on a post-world war world. Aronson was

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

invited to represent the German-Jewish perspective. Here he gave a speech which police officials believed bore a striking resemblance to the ‘Jewish Hymn of Hate’. The ‘Hymn of Hate’ or more specifically ‘Hymn of Hate against England’ is a poem imbued with ultra-nationalistic fervour was written by the German-Jewish poet Ernst Lissauer on the eve of First World War which vigorously disseminated hatred against Britain. Throughout First World War this poem was extensively used by the German state for war propaganda and the poet was decorated for it by the Kaiser. But with the rise of the Nazism, Ernst Lissauer had to flee Germany and died in Austria in 1937. Invoking Ernst Leissauer`s controversial poem unsettled the colonial bureaucracy. It was suspected that Alexander Aronson expressed his Zionist inclinations along with his deep aversion to the British Empire by referring to the offending poem. His occasional anti-British ramblings paved the way for his expulsion from British-India. In 1946 when Alexander decided to visit his ailing parents in Haifa, his re-entry to India was promptly refused.⁵⁰

Conclusion

This chapter has traced life-stories of disparate European individuals who came under police surveillance on the eve of the war. For most of them it was sheer paranoia of the colonial bureaucracy which drove them under state surveillance and eventual persecution. Some of the characters meekly submitted to the bureaucratic whims while others such as Tibor Stary⁵¹ and his sister⁵² Alexander Kovacs⁵³ and Dmitry Nedbailoff⁵⁴ exploited loopholes of the colonial iron fist to escape internment. For the Jewish refugees their stay in Bengal meant living under

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ NAI 72/3/22/40-Pol(E).

⁵² NAI 73/3/24/40-Pol(EW).

⁵³ NAI 43/10/1/41-Pol(EW) 1941.

⁵⁴ NAI 59/1/40-Pol.

perpetual scrutiny. Many of them found that helping the war effort was their best chance of escaping state persecution. To save themselves from imprisonment individuals such as Alexander Kovacs⁵⁵, Stefan Ortheiler⁵⁶, Emil Glass⁵⁷, Gedeon Ritterman⁵⁸ etc. chose to serve the Allied war effort. Alexander Kovacs was employed in the Supply Department of Bengal. Stefan Ortheiler worked in the Bengal Enamel Factory in Palta. To escape persecution Emil Glass had to prove his utility as a weapon inventor. Gedeon Ritterman found employment as a doctor at the Combined Military Hospital situated in Barrackpore.

Threatened by the war and intensified anti-colonial struggle British state machinery followed incoherent policy while identifying 'potentially dangerous aliens'. Documents revealed though Leonard Reisner and her mother Ernestine Reisner stayed at liberty in Bombay, his younger brother Bernhard who was living in Calcutta was branded as an 'enemy alien' and was incarcerated in Katapahar.⁵⁹ Strict travel restrictions were imposed on family members of Gedeon Ritterman although he was hired as an army doctor and served the war effort. His repeated pleas for easing travel restrictions failed to budge police officials.⁶⁰ Archival records prove that interned persons were hounded even after their release. Elizabeth Stary gained popularity as a pianist after her release from Katapahar. Although she became a regular performer of the Allied Military Command organised programmes, the central government's intervention was needed when she was repeatedly barred from entering the city of Bombay.⁶¹ As 'enemy aliens' every movement of Alexander Aronson,⁶² and Alexander Kovacs⁶³ were

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ NAI 72/3/54/40- Pol (EW).

⁵⁷ NAI 72/3/33/40- Pol(EW).

⁵⁸ NAI 72/3/70/40- Pol(EW).

⁵⁹ WBSA IB 401-A/40, Sl.I No. 51.

⁶⁰ NAI 72/3/70/40- Pol(EW).

⁶¹ NAI 73/3/24/40-Pol(EW).

⁶² NAI 72/3/55/40-Pol(EW) 1940.

⁶³ NAI 43/10/1/41-Pol(EW) 1941.

closely scrutinised till they left India. Another feature of the late-colonial regime was the omnipresence of the stifling surveillance mechanism. The anguish which induced Dr Peter Hoff to kill himself in Quetta found resonance in the lives of Jewish refugees in Bengal.⁶⁴ Maximilian Bernhard Bauer who actively opposed Nazi invasion of Austria was reported 'to be on the verge of a serious breakdown' when he was finally released from Katapahar.⁶⁵

Internal administration of internment camps epitomised parochialism of different shades. Racial segregation was practised. In official documents prisoners were broadly divided into Aryan and non-Aryan Jewish groups. In Katapahar male prisoners such as Joseph Gollner⁶⁶, Tibor Stary⁶⁷ enjoyed free rein while women like Mrs Klein⁶⁸, Ms Sorge⁶⁹ were victimised by the prison authority. Prison authorities were particularly harsh to 'German-Aryan' women prisoners. Die-hard Nazis such as Joseph Gollner were allowed to use diplomatic channels to secure money from the Third Reich for his new-born. Jewish prisoner Tibor Stary was permitted to stay and marry an outsider. He was not prosecuted for his assault on Mrs Klein, though it took place in the presence of the Supervising Officer of the camp. According to the testimony of the camp doctor Mrs Klein did not report her assault to higher authorities, because she believed as a 'German Aryan' they were determined to harm her. Mrs Klein's reaction proved that though individuals like Mrs Klein and Tibor Stary lived far from their homeland, they were touched by the ferocity of the war. Another 'German-Aryan' woman Ms. Sorge was not allowed to meet her Bengali lover or to proceed to Calcutta for a job interview.⁷⁰ In contrast, her male counterparts such as M B Bauer, Alfred Israel, and Frank

⁶⁴ NAI 43/14/41-Pol(EW).

⁶⁵ NAI 72/3/76/40-Pol(EW).

⁶⁶ WBSA IB 401-A/40, SI No. 51.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ NAI 30/18/41 – Pol(EW) 1941.

⁶⁹ WBSA IB 401-A/40, Serial No. 51.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Geringe were permitted for a brief span of release to pursue their personal or professional interests.⁷¹

It was the racial prejudice of the colonial ruling class which prodded them to consider the sustainability of incarcerated ‘enemy aliens’ whenever there was a prospect of their release. Earning decently was set as one of the main pre-conditions for their liberty. This was happening when Bengal was experiencing deaths of a million people due to the state-induced starvation. Britain’s keen interest in the well-being of its white refugee population was in stark contrast with the way it dealt with 1943 famine victims. For colonial authorities Europeans were members of the master race even if they were engaged in fierce battle. Maintaining superiority of the white race played a key role in shaping the government policy towards ‘enemy aliens’. Russian émigré Dmitry Nedbailoff’s⁷² daring escape to Tibet represents a watershed moment in the history of British Paramountcy in the Indian subcontinent. On the eve of Indian independence principalities large and small reclaimed sovereign powers from the colonial authority. Sikkim’s refusal to submit Dmitry Nedbailoff, a fugitive to British authorities and later to the Indian republic signalled its assertion of independence and indicated a critical juncture of time when the nascent Indian state was evolving.

The varied official responses to refugees and hostile subjects had one unifying thread. This was the strengthening of the late colonial surveillance state at wartime. While the personal lives of the internees were jeopardised by the war, the colonial state itself displayed the vagaries of racial attitudes by both privileging their status as Europeans while simultaneously criminalising them.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² NAI 59/1/40-Pol(EW).

Chapter Five

Allied Army-men, Deserters, Prostitutes

and the Criminal Underworld in Wartime Bengal

Since time immemorial prevailing economic conditions marshalled by socio-political realities cradled a section of people, who guided by their narrow social or economic ambitions chose to defy the authority of and state. Rather than aiming to subvert the state apparatus through collective actions they tend to eke out living through violations of law. Patterns of crime differ radically from time to time, area to area, and society to society. The qualitative difference between the crimes committed in a feudal rural society and a capitalist metropolis or at a time of relative social stability and at a time of upheavals underline the fact that the sense of deprivation is a relative term rather than an absolute and fixed term. For Sumanta Banerjee 'the lure of superfluities' often catapulted a section of ambitious people to the world of crime and criminality.¹ He also identified that 'the rising expectations, which were fuelled by the display of wealth..., and the unusual opportunities to earn it'² played a key role behind crimes committed in an urban space.

Late-colonial Bengal was scarred by social tumults, communal polarisation and growing economic uncertainty. Society and economy always left their imprints on the masses by moulding a sense of expectation, the experience of deprivation and large-scale social alienation. The underworld of Bengal was shaped by the backdrop of World War, famine and

¹ Sumanta Banerjee, *The Wicked City: Crime and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009), p.12.

² Ibid. p 9.

communal clashes which kept gnawing away at society with disastrous consequences during the 1940s. For the foreign troops deployed in Bengal, the imminent prospect of demobilisation right after the conclusion of the war proved to be a major catalyst for their involvement in the criminal underworld. It was the tumultuous times which shaped the world of deserters, racketeers as well as prostitutes. Beyond immediate economic needs, the glitter of urban lifestyle under the aegis of colonial capital and a thriving black market generated unattainable expectations among individuals and social class-segments. Janam Mukherjee has pointed out:

When the war was declared against Germany on India's behalf in September 1939 this sharply exacerbated existing resentments of British rule in India. Shortly thereafter the Indian national Congress, unwilling to concede war-time cooperation without representation, withdrew from governmental participation and all political alignments in the country became increasingly entangled with the rhetoric of "defence".³

The draconian Defence of India act of 1915 was re-imposed to stamp out any kind of opposition which could hamper the smooth functioning of the war-time imperial state. The provisions of this Act allowed extra-judicial detentions, the levy of collective fines, and using the army to quell mass movements.⁴ This overtly coercive manifestation of late-colonial power signified the deepening crisis of the British Raj. Mass movements which engulfed the city after the war were often confronted with the army opening fire on unarmed protesters

With Japan's entry into the war in Asia during late 1941, Britain's empire in South-East Asia quickly crumbled under the onslaught of the advancing Japanese troops.⁵ Gathering war-clouds over the city spelt doom for general inhabitants of Calcutta. Most of them regarded the war as a predominantly European affair and their direct connection with Britain's military aims were restricted to occasional 'Air Raid Protection' drills in the city. For almost two years, they

³ Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of Empire*, (Noida, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2015), p.7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8

⁵ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War*, (Gurgaon, Haryana: Penguin Books, 2015), p.93.

remained mostly untouched by the war raging in Europe, Africa, and the Middle-East. With Japan's advances, they suddenly became aware that the front was approaching closer to their homes.⁶ The British empire's hasty retreat from Burma, the sheer apathy of the colonial authorities towards millions of Indians living in Rangoon who were left at the mercy of the Japanese forces, while safely evacuating American and British citizens, tremendously undermined the power and prestige of the British authority in Bengal.⁷ While many refugees perished on their way, those who survived the desperate journey brought stories of impending Japanese invasion of Bengal which could result in the capitulation of the colonial regime. The colonial state initiated 'Denial Policy'. This entailed a forceful collection of surplus rice and destruction of country-made boats, two lifelines of the people living in riverine areas of the Bengal delta. This 'scorched earth policy' was set in motion against the backdrop of war rumours and people losing faith in the longevity of the empire. Both of these factors would eventually combine in the coming years to produce a fertile ground for wartime and post-war uncertainties in Calcutta and its hinterland. People whose subsistence had already been reduced to a bare minimum even before the initiation of the 'scorched earth' policy, now flocked to the city to make a last-ditch attempt at survival. The ghastly images of famine-stricken people dying on the city streets left a lasting impact on the collective psyche of its inhabitants and set in motion a process of dehumanisation, destitution and alienation, which would set the tone for the mass violence unleashed on the streets during the communal civil-war of 1946-47. Illegal hoarding and black-marketing of essential goods in the city became rampant at war-time as scarcity sky-rocketed. A sense of insecurity encapsulated the masses, ultimately fuelling a desperate stocking of essential goods, especially rice. The price of food-grains quickly spiralled out of bound for most of the rural population, who were driven to the city to escape hunger.

⁶ Amit Kumar Gupta, *Crises and Creativities Middle-Class Bhadrolok in Bengal c. 1939-1952*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009), p.43.

⁷ Ibid.111.

The criminal indifference of the state left almost three million dead in 1943.⁸ From 1942 onward on-going Japanese air-raids and apprehension of an imminent ground invasion made Calcutta wear a deserted look. A large number of people migrated to their ancestral homes relatively untouched by the war-fever. As the war concluded in 1945, industries related with the war effort had to scale back their production to pre-war days. Decrease in industrial production paved the way for large scale retrenchment of workers. Sporadic strikes, labour upsurges gripped industrial belts of lower Gangetic Bengal. The large number of young men inducted in the military of Allied powers during the war years, became redundant, following the Japanese surrender in 1945. Imminent demobilisation coupled with the prospect of economic uncertainty had pushed a section of the army-men deployed in Bengal to contemplate desertion. The smuggling of arms would add a lethal touch to the burgeoning underworld of Bengal as the British regime resolved to withdraw from the Indian subcontinent. The communal polarisation dotted with sporadic violence had threatened the social fabric of Bengal for quite some time before it evolved into a full-blown riot as the Muslim League gave the call of 'Direct Action' in 16th August 1946. The orgy of violence coupled with the influx of refugees would continue unabated as Bengal was partitioned in 1947. This was the backdrop which cradled shadowy characters to be revealed in following paragraphs.

Apart from military deserters who survived in the city of Calcutta through looting, black marketing, opium selling, and arms smuggling, there was a section of the Allied forces who had created a trans-national network for money laundering and smuggling of gold, diamonds etc. Their tryst with the underworld will be highlighted in the chapter. In this connection the contours of the relationship of Allied military personnel with the civilian population of Bengal will also be probed. On the other end of the social spectrum there were many uprooted women

⁸ Sakjukta Ghosh, 'Famine, Food and the Politics of Survival in Calcutta 1943-1950' in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited Calcutta: *The Stormy Decades* (New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015), p.204.

in late-colonial Bengal who had to eke out living through prostitution. The marginality of their profession forced the prostitutes to remain entangled with the criminal underworld. Fragments of their life-stories would also be revealed through this chapter.

Allied troops and ordinary inhabitants of Bengal

The inter-linked world of foreign troops and the civilian populace forms the focus of this section. According to Janam Mukherjee 'the spotlight of war was nowhere in India as bright as it was in Bengal'.⁹ The city of Calcutta was the epicentre of the Allied war effort against the impending Japanese invasion. From 1942 onwards British, American and Australian troops poured into the city. They became one of the sources of growing insecurity among the urban inhabitants, along with the Japanese air-raids and price rise. The middle-classes were hard hit when their homes were requisitioned to accommodate the growing ranks of the Allied forces. According to Srimanjari an English daily 'The Star of India took up the cause of the middle-class citizens of Calcutta, who feared that they would be dislodged' as military authorities began to occupy houses in 'Ballygunge, Theatre Road and the Dum Dum area'.¹⁰ The military authorities also took over jute mills and other factories in suburban Calcutta, throwing a sizeable section of the workers out of work, which resulted in a series of labour strikes against the requisition.¹¹ Apart from measures like controlling the selling of petrol, lives of office-goers and wage-earners were adversely affected when prices of rail tickets rose sharply and some passenger routes remained out of bound for general passenger altogether. A growing chasm between the army and the population which remained overtly visible throughout the war years, goaded a section of British soldiers to introspect and question the very rationale on which the

⁹ Janam Mukherjee, 'Japan Attacks' in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited '*Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*', (New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015), p 93.

¹⁰ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine: Bengal 1939-45*, (New Delhi, ORIENT BLACKSWAN PRIVATE LIMITED, 2009), p.72.

¹¹ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at war: A People's History of India's Second World War*, (Gurgaon, Penguin Random House India, 2015), p.165.

British Raj thrived. A British soldier and seasoned communist, Clive Branson while deployed at a base near Poona in 1942, wrote letters to his wife at home which reflected the spirit of the times vividly. One of his letters highlighted the scepticism about the choice of the primary enemy of the Raj which was prevalent among the rank and file of the British army men in India:

‘Among the fellows there is extraordinary confusion, especially brought out over the Congress business. Discussions go on night and day with views expressed ranging from two extremes- ‘(a) I came to fight the Japs not Indians, (b) It would be all right to have a go at Gandhi and his Hindus. We should get some practice like the Japs got in China....’¹²

While another of his letters rued about the general apathy of the Indian masses towards the war effort- ‘...there is one thing that is quite definite; the Indian masses are completely apathetic about our war effort. The British are loathed and only an Indian National Government will make this India's war.’¹³

The daily encounters with army-men only increased the popular disdain for the war effort. Calcutta had a long history of facing the wrath of disbanded and serving army and navy personnel. During the Revolt of 1857, a large number of British men were recruited in the East India Company's army and navy, who were eventually discharged after the suppression of the revolt and proclamation of direct rule by the British Government. These disbanded soldiers swelled the ranks of the destitute and tried their hands in the underworld to eke out a living. The theatre actor and playwright, Amritalal Bose complained about the ‘drunken escapades of the soldiers once the Mutiny of 1857 had cooled down a little’ in his autobiography.¹⁴ The picture of Calcutta depicted by Amritalal Bose recurred in the course of the next 90 years.

¹² *British Soldier in India: The Letters of Clive Branson*, (London, Published by the Communist Party, 1944) [Part of Centre for Marxian Studies Archive] p 18.

¹³ *Ibid.* p 32.

¹⁴ Sarmistha De, *Marginal Europeans in Colonial India: 1860-1920*, (Kolkata, Thema, 2008), p. 44, 77.

Calcutta always had a large concentration of British soldiers. During Second World War, the size of the foreign military personnel was further enlarged. The deteriorating law and order situation, because of the concentration of foreign soldiers, was mentioned by members of the law enforcement authority in the late-colonial city. The Calcutta Police Sergeant, Peter R. Moore recollected scenes from the war-time city in the following terms:

‘During the Second World War, Calcutta was a huge military transit camp for the Allied forces massing to engage the Japanese Army in Burma. Numerous temporary military camps were dotted in and around the city.....Soldiers, sailors and airmen from all the Allied nations wandered the streets in search of “rest & recreation” which usually consisted of a feed, a fight and sex (in any order) inevitably necessitating much police intervention..... Street brawls were common and it was an unsafe age for women on their own.’¹⁵

Archival sources reiterated the image of war-time Calcutta as etched in the memory of the veteran police officer. In the night of 8 March 1944, a clash broke out at the Chowringhee Road Crossing in the city.¹⁶ Onlookers were horrified when one of the man in civilian cloth was stabbed repeatedly in the abdomen, as two drunk army-men fled the scene. It turned out that the wounded man was a plain-clothed police-man from IB, who was returning to his barrack in Lord Sinha Road after his duties. Injured Suraj Narayan Pandey was rushed to the Calcutta Police Hospital, where he succumbed to his injuries in the following morning. It was reported that the fracas broke out when the IB constable was ‘accosted by the army-men’ for the supply of women and he refused to entertain their demand.¹⁷ Dying Suraj Narayan as well as witnesses failed to ascertain the identity of his assailants. The complaint to the Military Police also failed to make any breakthrough as the case file was closed hurriedly.¹⁸

¹⁵ Janam Mukherjee, ‘Japan Attacks’ in *Stormy Decades*, pp 98-99.

¹⁶ NAI 7/29/44-Police.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The situation in the vast countryside of Bengal was very similar. Intelligence files were replete with incidents where civilians were targeted at will and with almost total impunity. A report by a police inspector, posted in the district of Birbhum showed that villagers living near the Pandaveshwar Aerodrome were in 'state of constant dread' as American soldiers had formed roving bands to 'hunt for women'.¹⁹ In October 1944, a group of American soldiers while travelling in a train, began firing purportedly to hunt birds, as it halted at a station near Brahmanbaria, in modern day Bangladesh. A stray bullet killed a passer-by named Jagabandhu Sen. Ensuing investigation showed that indiscriminate firing of soldiers occurred 'almost every day'. However police failed to ascertain the culprit and amongst the group of 4 accused soldiers, 3 were acquitted, while Sgt. Frank was 'found guilty' but was ordered to pay a paltry sum of 50 Dollars as penalty in the military tribunal.²⁰

International smuggling racket

In the Allied effort to forestall Japanese advances two airports i.e. DumDum in Bengal and Dinjan in Assam played pivotal roles by providing essential military supplies to the Chinese forces through the Kunming airport. In course of the war, both of these airports reportedly emerged as important nodal points in an expansive international smuggling racket involving high-ranking members of the U S Army as well as their Chinese counterparts. The curtain over the smuggling racket was raised in October 1942, when the Collector of Customs in Calcutta had forwarded a letter to the Commissioner of Police comprising the statement of a deponent-Mr. Pecorini.²¹ In the letter, the collector requested the intervention of Military Police, while rueing the fact that even they would be 'powerless' to deal with the high-ranking 'offenders' enjoying 'diplomatic immunity'. The deponent seemed to have been involved with this racket

¹⁹ NAI 7/40/44-Police 1944.

²⁰ NAI 264-F.E./45 1945.

²¹ NAI 124(2)-x/1943.

as an additional note mentioned that Mr. Pecorini was 'anxious' to hide his identity 'in connection with this information'.²² According to the vivid description provided in the letter, the main objects of the smuggling were 'gold bars, diamonds, precious stones and watches'. Gold and precious stones were procured from far-flung cities such as Kolombo, Delhi or Bombay to be sold in the black market in Kunming. Additional intelligence input showed that once a U S Army transport plane smuggled so much gold in Kunming, that the price of gold fell sharply in the Chinese black market. 'Two operators at Dumdum Airport' were responsible for loading the gold bars on the plane 'whilst on night duty at the radio office'.²³ For the supply of diamonds, the racket depended on a Calcutta shop owned by *Tulsidas and Company*. 'Chinese co-pilots' of American transport planes were alleged to be the 'biggest carriers of diamonds'. It was also revealed that custom officials of Dinjan and Calcutta were also on the payroll of the smugglers. 'Medical supplies for Burma evacuees and Imphal road-making project' were also stolen and sold in Kunming at high price. Indian quinine reportedly inundated the medical stores of Kunming. At that time Indian Rupee enjoyed a favourable exchange rate against the Chinese currency. This paved the way for the Indian currency to become another item of the multifarious smuggling racket. With the connivance of high-ranking Chinese officials Indian Rupee notes were exchanged through the Bank of China to make a huge profit. The report identified an American officer Captain J.A. Porter as an important figure of the smuggling network. It was suspected that Captain Porter had wide-ranging connections which included Chinese Ministry of Finance. Alec and Jimmy Yuan, two confidants of the son of the Chinese Governor of Yunan province were also came under scrutiny. It was alleged that using the cover of diplomatic immunity they carried on the illegal trade of gold smuggling. The intensity of the corruption was such that it was assumed 'all

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

freights covered by diplomatic immunity most certainly contained a fortune'. In connection with the fledging network of black-market, the report also highlighted that a section of Army officials accumulated huge wealth by utilising the chaotic retreat from Burma. All norms were flouted to sell plane tickets to highest bidders as panic-stricken foreigners relied on army aircrafts for evacuation. Captain Hansley reportedly 'passed through Calcutta en route to the States with a considerable amount of money'. The report summed up the situation by concluding that the ingrained corruption had wrecked 'the esprit de corps of the line' as 'each man being out for himself'.²⁴

The involvement of high-ranking officials of Allied forces stymied the investigation from the very beginning. It seemed stakes involved in such investigation had been too high to initiate actions with tangible results, specifically at the time when a series of military defeats had seriously dented the morale of Allied forces in South-East Asia. Though primary investigation commenced right after the deposition of Mr. Pecorini in October 1942, the archival documents testified that the progress of the case was such that the lack of prosecution astonished a section of colonial officials. As no information was forthcoming, DIB was ordered to close the case in June 1943. The laxity to proceed against an institutional corruption involving Allied officials, was a stark contrast to the pro-activeness of the imperial regime while dealing with colonial subjects under suspicion. It also highlighted ingrained duplicity of the colonial regime, traces of which could be found from its very inception. Early administrators of East India Company found multiple back-channels to accumulate huge amount of wealth, while peasantry of Bengal was fleeced for revenue to the extent that the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 wiped out a significant section of the population. The legacy of colonial rapacity continued till the very end. During Second World War, to prop up the 'war effort' the beleaguered regime rolled out

²⁴ Ibid.

a slew of stringent austerity measures and initiated 'denial policy' with a catastrophic effect as Famine of 1943 ravaged the province.

Allied Deserters in Calcutta

An estimated 50,000 American and 1, 00,000 British army-men deserted during Second World War. A substantial portion of the deserters came from the army who were constantly deployed in the frontline before their mind and body could no longer bear the conflict and they eventually 'chose a life of disgrace over the grave'.²⁵ A small section of deserters chose flight from their regiments because they wanted to eke out their living through the avenues that had emerged out of war-induced uncertainties. In Europe, the notorious 'Lane gang'²⁶ which terrorised the streets of Naples and acted in tandem with the Italian Mafia before they were captured in 1945, emerged from a group of American deserters. In France, American deserters reportedly collaborated with the pre-existing underworld network for the theft and sale of cigarettes, petrol or other contrabands. In Paris, people like Alfred T. Whitehead, a decorated American soldier, transformed himself into a notorious gangster after its liberation from the Nazi occupation.²⁷

Archival evidence suggests that for most of the war years the Chinese army maintained a major base at Ramgarh in Jharkhand. As Calcutta already had a sizeable immigrant Chinese population, many of the Chinese army deserters flocked to the city in search of shelter and livelihood. Their favourite haunts were frequently raided by the Calcutta police. A file of the Home Political Department showed that during the last week of March 1943, 27 suspected Chinese deserters were detained by the Calcutta police.²⁸ Interrogation of them revealed barring 5 men all were deserters. From the police custody two men managed to escape while the

²⁵ Charles Glass, *The Deserters: A History of World War 2*, (New York, The Penguin Press, 2013), p. 9, 17.

²⁶ Named after the pseudonym 'Robert Lane', used by their twenty-three year old gang-leader, a Private from Pennsylvania named Werner Schmeidel.(Charles Glass, p 17).

²⁷ Charles Glass, pp. 18-19.

²⁸NAI 75/43-Poll(E) Home Political.

remaining 20 were escorted to Ramgarh.²⁹ However there were others who refused to submit meekly and tried their best to circumvent imperial rules as long as possible. Chen Ching Lin was one of them.³⁰ As a 1st Lieutenant in the Chinese Army he was injured in a battle against Japanese invaders and was sent to Ramgarh for his treatment. In November 1943 he appeared before the Chinese Consul in Bombay and produced a letter from the Chinese army discharging him from the military for his 'ill health'.³¹ The Chinese Consul then sought permission from the imperial government so that Chen Ching Lin could proceed to Bangalore 'to recoup his health'. By this time with the help of the Consul he had already secured 'employment in the Victory Chinese Restaurant' in Bangalore. Instead of permitting Chen to proceed to Bangalore the Consul was asked by the Government to clarify his alacrity in allowing Chen to remain in India without any valid paperwork. The 'apparent connivance of the Chinese authorities to secure the presence in India of a Chinese military officer in a civilian capacity', raised the suspicion level on him.³² As Chen Ching Lin disappeared from Bombay, a wider search operation was initiated but Chen evaded the police for more than a year. In November 1944 a tip off came from the Madras police that he was en-route to Assam through Calcutta. Another informant of the Poona police reported that Chen Ching Lin had already reached Calcutta and found employment in a restaurant owned by a Chinese lady. By the time police managed to pinpoint the restaurant situated in Kyd Street, Chen had already resigned from his post and evaded the arrest for the last time. Next entry in the dossier of Chen indicated that the life of a fugitive seemed to have taken a toll on his health. In August 1945 when he was finally traced, he was a sickly man undergoing treatment in the Presidency General Hospital in Calcutta. The police suspected that he was actually a deserter from the Chinese army and the letter of his

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ NAI 85/44-Poll(E) Home Political.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

discharge from the army was forged. Chen Ching Lin had to undergo a month long rigorous imprisonment before being arrested again for desertion from the Chinese army. His dossier documented that by December 1945 Chen became restive and began petitioning the British-Indian government for his release and repatriation. However his case dragged on as Chinese army removed its bases from India with the conclusion of Second World War. Finally in January 1946 the Chinese government instructed its Consul-General in Calcutta to arrange the deportation of army deserters. With the boarding of a Chinese ship from the Calcutta port in February 1946, Chen Ching Lin`s tryst with late-colonial law enforcing authorities came to an end.³³

Apart from deserters of the Chinese army, a sizeable section of British and American deserters were found to be living in and around Calcutta even after Indian independence. A secret report of the District Intelligence Branch dated October 1947 estimated that approximately 150 members of British servicemen were hiding in the city and were engaged in ‘nefarious activities’ to eke out living.³⁴ They were believed to be hardened criminals, before being inducted in the British Army. The number of American deserters were assumed to be the same. Their growing notoriety had pushed the law-enforcing authorities to take initiatives for ascertaining their identities. In this context, Special Branch suggested issuing ‘a circular’ to police stations of Calcutta and 24 *Parganas*.³⁵ In the following segment the fateful life of a British deserter would be revealed to delve deeper into the criminal underworld of late-colonial Calcutta.

The death of a deserter

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kolkata Police Museum SB 01625/05.

³⁵ Ibid.

On the morning of 3 January 1947, the bullet-riddled body of an unknown European man was found floating in Auckland Square tank at Loudon Street in Calcutta.³⁶ The corpse gained little attention in the newspaper as the value of human life had been considerably lowered by the starvation deaths of 1943 during the Great Bengal Famine and the communal riots, which had ravaged the city from August 1946. The military authorities identified the body as that of Private Rutherford of East Yorkshire Regiment. The police were already seeking Rutherford from December 1946 for his desertion from the army and subsequent discovery of the theft of arms and ammunition from the Barrackpore Military Transit Camp. Investigators arrested two deserters along with their mistresses from a rented apartment at 220 Lower Circular Road on the charge of murdering Rutherford. Though they would eventually fail to convince the Jurors, the ensuing investigation threw a spotlight on the murky world of urban crime. Here, arms smuggling, opium peddling, and black marketing thrived side by side while maintaining an interdependent network. The following segment seeks to discover glimpses of the Calcutta underworld at the closing years of the colonial empire with the help of the police files on Rutherford.

The police failed to fully uncover the trail of the stolen arms and Rutherford's stolen revolvers resurfaced when one of the weapons was recovered from a group of bank robbers in 1950. Through the worm-eaten pages of the voluminous Rutherford files, we can also trace the journey of a lower ranking British soldier, a 'subaltern' who came to India in 1944. Twice infected by venereal diseases, his brief life in Calcutta was chequered with a multitude of criminal activities. They ranged from robbery and drug peddling to arms theft even before his desertion from the army. The case of Rutherford represented a picture of the British army which was starkly opposed to the image of a self-righteous British soldier, full of virtuous qualities

³⁶ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.)- Desertion of no.7259615 Pte. J. Rutherford, East Yorkshire Regiment, Barrackpore Transit Camp, 24-Parganas and subsequent discovery of the loss of 22 Revolvers and 856 rounds of ammunition from the above camp store between 1.12.146. and 3.12.46.

and strictly adherent to the rules of moral conduct as propagated by the imperial authorities. The files on him unquestionably prove that the saga of Rutherford was not an aberration; rather, a sizeable section of the army deployed in Calcutta indulged in criminal activities of different degrees. The simmering tension between the foreign army and inhabitants of the city which would eventually become a recurrent theme during the last phase of the colonial rule corroborated its internal fragility.³⁷ Through the obscure history of the doomed Private, several submerged histories of the people whose marginal lives became intertwined in a context of post-war upheaval and violence may be explored. In order to assemble the crime and criminality of the times in bits and pieces and portray marginal lives in the city, we will first examine the crisis-ridden social and political environment which formed the urban backdrop. As people like Private Rutherford and his gang of fellow deserters who robbed city shops, or tea-seller Jadu Shaw, a tea-seller who played the role of a broker in the stolen arms deal, emerged in a particular milieu, it is crucial to situate them historically within certain conditions of urban life at war-time and immediate post-war period. The focus of this chapter will be on the intertwined nature of urban crime and marginality in a climate of heightened social and political anxiety in a city where formal conclusion of Second World War did not usher in peace.

Scrutinising the Crime

Acting on a tip-off, the Calcutta Police seized a revolver (bearing the Number Y1518) along with other firearms on 28 March 1950 from a group of armed robbers near Strand Road. This was in connection with an attempted robbery at the Burrabazar Branch of Central Bank of India.³⁸ While searching the source of this weapon, the investigators stumbled upon the Rutherford case files and the weapon number matched with that of a revolver stolen by Private

³⁷ Peter Moore, 'Policing war-time Calcutta,' at <http://www.oildmartiniansassociation.co.uk/memories.html>.

³⁸ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.).

Rutherford in December 1946 from Barrackpore Transit Camp. This discovery would become one of the last entries of the voluminous Rutherford files, spanning more than three years and painstakingly maintained by the Intelligence Branch of Bengal Police since 1946. Calcutta went through radical changes, both demographically and institutionally, while the files on Rutherford had kept growing in size. They guide us through certain dark corners of the city. These files revealed unknown faces of men and women who were despised by wider society and preferred to be overlooked by their wealthier and respectable counterparts and had been pushed to the margins of the urban social hierarchy. The curtain over these hidden corners of Calcutta was lifted with Rutherford's desertion and murder, committed at the fag-end of the colonial rule and the footnote to the Rutherford case was enacted on a Calcutta road by a botched bank robbery when the era of truncated independence was still in its early years. Though separated by the distinctiveness of the people involved and the specific aim of the criminal activities, Rutherford and the bank robbers who used his ill-gotten revolver remained unified by the ignominious ending of their aims. The Rutherford files also revealed the violent legacy of late-colonial rule. This legacy refused to die down with the transfer of power and persisted in haunting Calcutta and its suburbs.

Rutherford's story began to unfold when the cases of desertion and theft of arms were launched against him at Barrackpore Police Station on 15 December 1946. The police investigation failed to ascertain precisely when Private Rutherford went missing from the camp. Banking on the testimony of the Quarter Master of the Camp, the investigators assumed that Rutherford went missing between 1st to 3 December of 1946.³⁹ The Army's Eastern Command drew flak from different law-enforcement authorities because of their lackadaisical approach in maintaining a duty roster and almost a fortnightly delay in confirming the incidence of theft and desertion. It was revealed that the permanent staff of the Barrackpore Transit Camp did

³⁹WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.).

not attend roll call with the wings to which they were attached. Theft of 22 revolvers and 856 rounds of ammunition clearly rattled the army and police alike. Both of these institutions swung into action and initiated an elaborate manhunt to catch the deserter and to expose the trail of weapon smuggling. By 24 December Intelligence Branch (henceforth I.B.) officials were dispatching teams along with `Military Identifiers` for places like Bandel, Chandannagar and Shillong which were thought to be favourite haunts of military deserters. Excerpts from one such IB report showed the level of urgency and seriousness with which the authorities tried to trace Rutherford. In Shillong `suburban villages of Khasis` were `searched thoroughly` along with the posting of `watchers in cinema halls` in search of the missing person. All of them returned empty handed. While searching on distant places like Shillong, the IB officials did not lose the hope to trace him nearer to his base. An IB report included in the Rutherford dossier highlighted the effort to trace Rutherford by scrutinizing his social periphery:

`In continuation of the previous report the undersigned begs to submit that with the help of Miss Lila, the girlfriend of Rutherford was traced to be one Sheila, living at Park Circus..... We, assisted by the military, checked up all the NightClubs and Restaurants to trace Rutherford but in vain.'⁴⁰

The police traced the favourite haunts of foreign army personnel in the city such as V.Club, Winter Garden, Temple Bar, Central Hotel, Olympia café etc. They also came to know about the absconding Private`s close acquaintances such as army men Private G. Carr, Corporal Welsh and L S Bushell. Along with the army-men several women named Sally, Rosy, Iris, and Sheila etc. were spotted. They had frequently socialised with the above-mentioned army-men. The name of Sheila Barnet appeared for the first time as Rutherford's girlfriend. On 3 January of 1947, the discovery of a body floating in a tank in Auckland square, by the Darwan Sukhdeo Missar goaded the investigators to change their course of investigation.⁴¹ Within a day it was ascertained as the body of Private Rutherford. The slain Private`s Anglo-Indian mistress Sheila

⁴⁰WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.) Report no. 3 dated 13.01.47.

⁴¹ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.) GD. Entry No. 151, dated 03.01.47.

Barnet was picked up again and interrogated thoroughly in connection with the murder. In the course of interrogation, she revealed that she suspected Freddie, another army deserter, and his mistress Sheila Ghose⁴² were involved in the crime as they were living in a building in Lower Circular Road which was very close to the Auckland Square Tank. A report providing details of the second interrogation of Sheila Barnet is quoted here :

‘Freddie and his mistress shifted from this address near Auckland Square to a place at Ballygunj Circular Road on third January evening. She thought that movement was suspicious.....we then moved with Sheila in the vicinity of Auckland Square. She pointed out that house and we found that the address was 220 Lower Circular Road. We then moved about in the Ballygunj Circular Road and Sheila pointed out the present address of Freddie and his mistress. This address is 8 Ballygunj Circular Road’⁴³

On 5 January, the apartment where Freddie was staying was raided and all residents namely, Frederick Copley Stead and Arthur Lear, Sheila (No.2 and mistress of Stead), Kanchi (a girl from Darjeeling of Nepalese descent) and Suma Naik (a boy from the Ganjam district of Orissa, who in all probability acted as a domestic help and who is not mentioned after this) were arrested. Stead and Lear were army deserters. Subsequent search operations in the apartment revealed two of the revolvers stolen by Rutherford along with a number of ivory articles and costly clothing material. With the death of Private Rutherford, the prime suspect for the arms theft vanished from the investigation. I.B. officials pressed the arrested persons and the slain Private's acquaintances to divulge the trail of the stolen weapons. Broken by the fear of the gallows, the suspects started to reveal murkier details of their lives along with that of Rutherford. It was the violent death of the Private which opened a veritable Pandora's Box, offering glimpses into the transgressions of the European soldiers deployed in the city during Second World War. Excerpts from one of the reports on Rutherford's misdeeds prior to his

⁴²In IB files Sheila Ghose was mentioned as Sheila No.2 and she should not be confused with Sheila Barnet who was Rutherford's girlfriend.

⁴³ WBSA IB 1127-46 (M.F.)- Quoted from a Report on the interrogation of Rutherford's Mistress Sheila Barnet.

desertion indicated this:

*'Private Bushel gave out some of the activities of Rutherford in course of which he said that Rutherford confided to him that he had committed a robbery at a place in Calcutta in November last year in which they robbed Rs. 25,000 out of which he get Rs. 2000.'*⁴⁴

Private G. Carr of Burma Rifles was found to be one of the closest accomplices of Rutherford. He broke down under interrogation and yielded a barrage of additional information. He admitted that he had been approached by Private Rutherford and asked to sell opium. Carr engaged a camp sweeper called Munna who produced a buyer who offered to pay Rs. 300 for the contraband opium. This offer was rejected as Rutherford asked for a higher price and later the opium was sold through Sheila Barnet, one of Rutherford's girlfriends. Carr admitted he got Rs.200 for his assistance in the opium deal.⁴⁵ The second round of interrogation of Private Carr exposed that he helped Rutherford to sell off 6 of the stolen weapons, and received money from Rutherford in return. He also admitted that he had kept one of the stolen revolvers hidden inside Barrackpore Transit Camp which he then produced 'from the earth near the wash-house'.⁴⁶ With his help, police identified Dosh or Abdul Hamid, a driver of Rickshaw no.77. This Rickshaw-puller had procured a buyer of 6 revolvers. Private Carr eventually identified the house of this buyer of stolen weapons. A tea-stall owner, Kishore Prasad Shaw was found to be the buyer of the weapons. His house on Pipe Road, Barrackpore was raided on 7 January, and altogether eight persons were arrested including his parents. Some portions of the stolen ammunition were recovered although no weapons were found. With the help of Kishore Shaw investigators ultimately managed to reach the end of the trail and searched the house of Sailen Das, a fourth year B.Sc. student of the Scottish Church College. He was an important functionary of the Student Federation in the college and also known to the police as a Congress

⁴⁴WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.) Report no. 3, dated 13.01.47.

⁴⁵ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.)- Preliminary Interrogation Report of No. 3681 Pte. G. Carr, Burma Rifles, Dated-06/01/1947.

⁴⁶ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.)- Further Interrogation of Pte. G. Carr, Dated 07/01/1947.

Socialist Party activist. With the arrest of Sailen, along with his brother, and the recovery of four revolvers and ammunitions, a chapter of the police investigation was finally closed, even though a large portion of Rutherford's stolen cache of arms remained untraced.

Parallel to this investigation, incriminating details surfaced from the investigation related to the lives of Freddie Stead and his mistress Sheila Ghose. 35 ivory goods recovered from their flat in Ballygunj were found to be articles looted from two Curio shops in the city, plundered on the night of 7 December, 1946. The police report hinted that both Lear and Stead were actively involved in a series of robberies committed by B.O.R. s (British Other Rank-an acronym for non-commissioned officers) towards the end of 1946. Costly Clothes recovered from the apartment were also the handiwork of the same gang of British Army deserters. They had broken into two Park Street clothing shops during the Calcutta riots of 1946. Freddie Stead later divulged during his interrogation that he had sold some of these clothes to a black-marketeer. Further incriminating details were found in a diary recovered from Freddie Stead. It pointed out his connection with two known black-marketeers of the city. The diary also mentioned a Royal Air Force (henceforth RAF) personnel, Terry Simpson by name. Terry Simpson, was under detention at Dum Dum having been arrested on 17th November 1946, when he with two other RAF men named Riggs and Major had been caught, while trying to dispose of an army lorry which they had stolen in Calcutta.⁴⁷ Terry Simpson and Riggs were found to be seasoned culprits. Additional IB notes mentioned that they had served a sentence from July to November in 1946 for selling 5000 Gallons of Royal Air Force petrol to various individuals in Calcutta. Apart from learning incriminating details about the methods through which the deserters tried to earn their bread and butter, investigators hardly made any progress in their aim of exposing the trail of and recovering the remaining stolen weapons. Although

⁴⁷ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.).

various possible leads were thoroughly checked, and associates of prime suspects interrogated twice or thrice, the search for stolen weapons remained futile. The pages of Rutherford files reflected the growing disappointment of the IB officials. After 5 months of investigation without making any breakthrough, the IB came to terms with its failure and realised that the investigation had hit a dead end. Sensing that the trail of the stolen weapons would remain unsolved, on 14 May 1947 `the submission of Final Report and close up the case` were ordered.⁴⁸

The investigation into the motive behind the murder of Rutherford remained unfruitful as sufficient proof to implicate Freddie Stead was missing. Although Sheila Ghose and Kanchi's statement separately implicated Stead as the murderer, he could not be convicted. The Investigating Officers made scathing attacks on the Jurors for intimidating witnesses of the crime in their correspondence. A confidential IB note showed that the white Jurors of the Coroner's Council saved Freddie Stead from the gallows, stating that the evidence against him was inconclusive. The imperial policy of dealing leniently with white criminals became evident when IB files suddenly went silent on the looted articles recovered from Stead's apartment. The police even indicated that Rutherford and Stead might have been involved in a series of armed robberies committed by a gang of BORs (British Other Rank). The final police charge sheet did not divulge these illegal activities of the deserters through which they chose to sustain themselves in the city. Finally, Stead was convicted on a relatively light charge of possessing illegal arms which were recovered from his flat. Freddie Stead was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment of four years, while his mistress Sheila Ghose was sentenced to a rigorous imprisonment of three years. The other accused in the Rutherford murder case, Private Lear and his mistress Kanchi were acquitted of all charges. The Rutherford dossiers did not end

⁴⁸ Ibid.

here. In 1948, Freddie Stead was making pleas to the Court to claim certain properties, including three suitcases containing costly clothes and Rs. 6000 in cash. These were seized by the Police from his apartment at the time of his arrest. The British Consul-general in Calcutta also made numerous pleas on his behalf, to repatriate him as quickly as possible. Stead's claim remained largely unsuccessful as the local police thought the money belonged to Sheila Ghose. Correspondence within the judiciary, the police and the British Consul of Calcutta highlighted a pressing need, born of a sense of racial solidarity, within the British officialdom to shift British-born convicts in the ex-colonies back to Britain. However Stead's fate remained unknown. There was no Government order to establish conclusively that he was shifted to Britain before his sentence was completed. The broad outline of the Rutherford case revealed the interactions between marginal white soldiers and the Calcutta underworld. The post-war climate added depth and complexity to their actions. It was the passage of illegal arms which linked them to robbery in a riot-hit city.

A closer look at the activities of Private Rutherford or Freddie Stead revealed that they followed a similar pattern in Calcutta like their counterparts in Europe. The gang of deserters interacted with the existing network of black-market operatives for selling contraband or looted material. A diary seized by the police listing the names of different acquaintances of Freddie Stead signified the same mode of petty criminal operations by the deserters in Calcutta. In the diary, the police found names of two known black-marketeers of the city along with army-men, some of whom were known to the authorities for their criminal activities. The investigators believed that they were used by the gang members of Freddie Stead to sell looted clothes.⁴⁹ A brief overview of Rutherford's life in the army revealed that Rutherford was enlisted in the East Yorkshire Regiment on 5 December 1939, 6 six years before his desertion from the army. The

⁴⁹ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.)

regimental history of the East Yorkshire Regiment showed that this military unit was used extensively in several European fronts.⁵⁰ We can assume that Rutherford also took part in some of the battles which permanently changed the course of history. In November 1944, he came to India. His postings in India revealed that he was not involved in any active combat operations against the Japanese Army or Subhash Bose's Indian National Army. After spending a few months, respectively in Deolali and Bombay, he had to spend one and half months in the military prison and detention barrack in Trimulgherry near Hyderabad for a reason not revealed in his I.B. dossier. After his release, he was posted in Poona, Bombay and Kalyan. He was then sent back to his homeland in England and after returning from Southampton he was sent to the Barrackpore Military Transit Camp in October 1946 and given charge of maintaining the armoury of the Barrack.⁵¹ Rutherford knew that he was going to be demobilised within the next few days. This was when he decided to leave the camp along with a huge cache of arms and ammunition. Rutherford's personal dossier mentioned that between 17-21 October 1946, he had to stay in a hospital, for the second time in his army career, as he was suffering from venereal disease.

The locus of Rutherford's individual life was set against the background of his unattainable life goals. During interrogation, Private L S Bushell divulged that Rutherford had impersonated as a Lieutenant Colonel and encouraged his companions to address him as "The colonel".⁵² The primary interrogation of Sheila Barnet exposed similar traits displayed by Rutherford. Sheila Barnet had revealed to the interrogators that Rutherford had depicted himself as a rich man's son who was receiving a monthly allowance of thousand rupees from his father. To Sheila, he appeared to be a wealthy patron who had plenty of money. His impersonation of a senior army official and his self-projection as a man of many riches to woo women pointed out the

⁵⁰<http://www.wartimememoriesproject.com/ww2/allied/regiment.php?pid=1499>.

⁵¹ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.).

⁵² WBSA IB 1127-46 (M.F.)- Interrogation of L S Bushell.

compulsions to rise above his status. They revealed the pathetic desperation of the real Private Rutherford. From the dossiers, emerged a marginal man of 37 years, who had faced death day and night for almost five years and may have personified death to the anonymous enemies in the battlefield who fell to his bullets. After experiencing days of relative calm in a foreign land he had wanted to taste all those things which he could not think of achieving in the course of his life. To bridge the gap between his lifestyle and his modest income as a low-ranking army-man, he had tried his hand at different activities deemed unlawful by the state. As he got to know about his imminent demobilisation, his yearning to lead a luxurious life had faced a serious setback. His unsatisfied ambition had urged him to make a last-ditch attempt to gain wealth by stealing a huge cache of arms and ammunitions from the armoury. The bloody communal strife which had engulfed the city streets in September 1946 and the simmering social tensions of the city had convinced Rutherford that there existed a thriving market for articles of violence. He had absconded from the army barrack before the discovery of his misdeeds. The aim of gaining wealth by any means and to circumvent his social status or economic reality acted as the missing link which connected the different shades of criminal endeavours he was engaged in. He sold opium with the help of Sheila Barnet. Sergeant Bushell testified that Rutherford was involved in an armed robbery during 1946. Police investigators indicated his possible involvement in a series of robberies committed by BORs (British Other Rank- an acronym for non-commissioned officers) when a large portion of looted material was recovered from the apartment of Freddie Stead, another deserter and one of the chief acquaintances of Rutherford. An unquenchable thirst for wealth, sculpted by the glitter of the metropolis, attracted army-men and civilians alike. Not just soldiers such as Rutherford or Freddie Stead but also common people drawn from the lower classes of society like Jadu Shaw, a tea-stall owner in Barrackpore or Abdul Hamid, a rickshaw-puller indicated this. Their tryst with the underworld began with the prospect of making money quickly. These two men by

playing the role of middlemen and arranging the sale of stolen arms to political radicals such as Sailen Das, created a link between the alienated European deserters, the lumpen working class and the derooted young intelligentsia in search of revolution.

Prostitutes in a war-time City

The Rutherford files throw light on another section of marginalised inhabitants of the city whose lives were entwined with those of the deserters. The social periphery of the soldiers often centred on the women engaged in prostitution. In the twilight zone of the colonial era, the foreign army-men's vulnerability as military labour and as cannon-fodder perpetually surrounded by the grim prospect of death at wartime were compensated by their sense of being superior male subjects. This identity formation as a superior male subject paved the way for the commodification of women. Prevalent military culture widely promoted the privileging of male sexuality. Women were reduced to the status of objectified flesh. In the time of war, the commodification of women was promoted more aggressively as a policy to increase the morale of the army. This became evident through the pages of officially published army magazines like *Roundup*, an American military publication, where pictures of scantily clad women regularly appeared along with news articles concerning everyday life of US troops.⁵³ Apart from offering voyeuristic pleasure to the army personnel, these pictures were aimed at normalising the process of objectification of the female body. Overtly sexualised depiction of the women in the lives of foreign soldiers deployed in war-time Calcutta, created a wider ramification for urban society. Many women in and around the city were attacked or assaulted by army-men. As mentioned by the Calcutta Police Sergeant Peter R. Moore, who worked in

⁵³ *Roundup* was a free newspaper published by and for the men of the United States Forces in the China-Burma-India Theatre of World War II. Captain Fred Eldridge, a former reporter for the Los Angeles *Times* and Public Relations officer on General Stilwell's staff, was founder and first editor. The first issue of *Roundup* was published on September 17, 1942. Over the following three and one-half years, a total of 188 issues were published, culminating with *The Last Roundup*, on April 11, 1946. A smaller newspaper, *Chota Roundup*, continued until the end of Theatre operations.' see <http://www.cbi-theater.com/roundup/roundup.html>.

the city during Second World War recollected `.. it was an unsafe age for women..`⁵⁴ Foreign soldiers preying on women created much furore on the national level and further dented the image of the colonial regime.⁵⁵ Incidentally, the Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, while pestering local police officials to repatriate Frederic Stead, of West Kent Regiment in 1948, also mentioned the case of Stoker Cousins of Royal Navy, another British military prisoner who was serving a sentence in Alipore Jail from 1944,` under section 375 of Indian Penal Code or its military equivalent` and stating that he had `only two and half months service to do`.⁵⁶ Section 375 of Indian Penal Code dealt specifically with the charges of rape and aggravated sexual assault against women. During the war years, the city registered a booming sex trade in the service of foreign troops. Famine and war-related economic dislocation had torn apart the traditional social structures and kinship groups, creating a huge number of destitute women, many of whom eventually found their way into the thriving world of prostitution. In Calcutta, many of them operated through mushrooming clubs or hotels. A wartime survey showed a direct connection between the large-scale destitution of women and the expanded market for prostitution in the city.⁵⁷

The British Raj had never followed a coherent policy when dealing with prostitutes. At first, they had been criminalised. Gradually, colonial policy makers came to terms with the continued presence of prostitutes in the lives of soldiers. The primary aim of the state was to safeguard the military labour from venereal diseases. In the 19th Century, the colonial regime started maintaining semi-official regimental brothels, where prostitutes had to undergo medical examinations from time to time in order to prevent venereal diseases from affecting the

⁵⁴ Peter R. Moore, *'Policing War-time Calcutta'*, see <http://www.oldmartiniansassociation.co.uk>, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Yasmin Khan, pp. 150-151.

⁵⁶ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.). From D.J.C. Crawley on behalf of Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, 1, Harrington Street, Calcutta to S.N. Chatterjee, Commissioner of Police, Lalbazar, Calcutta .

⁵⁷ Yasmin Khan, pp. 242-243.

soldiers.⁵⁸ This system was maintained till the end of colonial rule. Clive Branson remarked on the visit to a brothel by the men of his regiment which was `under official patronage`.⁵⁹ Through the Rutherford files, fragments on the disparate lives of certain segments of city prostitutes can be collected. These women were drawn into the sex trade from different social classes and represented varied ethnic groups. A Tibetan woman named Anne living in the Talpukur area was mentioned in the files as she had spent three nights with Rutherford inside the Transit Camp. Ram Piyari, a 25 year old sex-worker, who originally hailed from Rajnandgaon, in Central Provinces was also engaged by Rutherford. She had left her husband Puranram and came to Calcutta in search of work 10 years before and found her way into prostitution. The police report also mentioned that she used different names to attract prospective customers. While one of her names was the anglicised Sally, her other name was Asia Khatun, carrying a clear Islamic fervour. Her testimony also revealed that she did not possess the means to find her own rented place and used the house of Peara Miyan in Ghaspatti to entertain her customers. The widows of slain army-men also entered prostitution. Deo Kumari alias Rosy was a 22 year old woman, daughter of Kabiraj Chattri of Rampore, in Mitkynia at Burma. She was married to a soldier named Harkha Bahadur who was killed during Second World War. Deo Kumari went back to live with her parents, but left home with George, an American soldier and then shifted with him to Calcutta. After three months, the soldier abandoned her and returned to America. She became destitute with no chance of returning to her ancestral home. To survive in the city, she became a prostitute. She was arrested by the police for storing looted material for a fortnight. From January 1947 she started living with Enayat Shah at 9, Masdan Street. According to the police, this man was `a noted bad character`

⁵⁸ Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, (Calcutta, Seagull Books Private Limited, 1998), pp. 59-63.

⁵⁹ *British Soldier in India*, p. 34.

and he was once arrested for stabbing a Head Constable of Beniapur Police Station.⁶⁰ Criminalised by law and despised by society, the prostitute's place was therefore firmly fixed in the underworld.

Women like Sally or Rosy clearly belonged to the bottom of the hierarchical structure existing within sex-trade in the city. They did not have a root, a living space in the city and were migrants fighting for survival. Their testimonies make it evident that destitution was the central cause which pushed them to this trade. In the market of commercial sex, they could not operate independently. To this general pattern, there were exceptions also. They too were driven by material pressures but represented a different class of prostitutes. For instance, Sheila Barnett's file showed that she was well versed in English and belonged to a middle-class Anglo-Indian family. She had married Mr. D. William in 1939 and had a child with him. William was an engineer by profession and worked for Bird and Co., a leading British managing agency house, until 1930. After that he worked as an insurance agent. Sheila had a rented room at 168, Dhurmtolla Street, which was used as a brothel. Although she was implicated by Sergeant Carr of dealing in opium, she refused to acknowledge this before her interrogators. She employed two domestic servants named Gobinda and Habib. Anxious to appear respectable, she was irritated when the police approached her in her house. As her husband clearly had no permanent source of earning, Sheila might have used her income from prostitution to supplement the family income.

Sheila Ghose however presented a different portrait of social destitution. Her violent childhood played a key role in her escape from home when she was a child. As she faced the interrogators after her arrest in the Rutherford murder case, she refused to divulge any details about her childhood or her family. The stubbornness with which she faced them was to be repeatedly

⁶⁰ WBSA IB 1127-46 (M.F.)- Interrogation of Rosy @ Deo Kumari.

recorded. She challenged Stead's claim over the sum of Rs.6000 in court almost two years after her arrest. Her ambition was to start a club under her ownership and she was saving the money for this purpose. Gradually the police investigators managed to collect details of her personal life through Susanah, one of her acquaintances. They got to know that she hailed from a place near Asansol and fled her home when she was a child of 12 years. She had stabbed a man with a knife, a crime for which her father was convicted. She had a mother, brother and sister and also owned some land along with two houses close to her ancestral home. However, her address or other particulars could not be ascertained. One of her acquaintances Mrs. V. Rozario revealed that Sheila Ghose owned a safe-deposit box where she had placed about one and half thousand rupees and some jewellery. The money and jewellery had been taken out sometime ago when Sheila became friendly with Dutch, an American soldier.⁶¹ Sheila Ghose's relationship with the American soldier took a tragic turn when he returned to his homeland after the war ended, taking with him all the money which Sheila had saved so far. After his departure, Sheila became destitute. When the police opened the safe-deposit box owned by Sheila, more details of her life came to light. Documents from the box established that she hailed from the Manbhum area. They also revealed that Sheila had repeatedly sent money to her family by money order always amounting to a few hundred rupees. The last money order traced by the police was sent on 11 January 1945. The fact that the annual rent of the safe-deposit box had not been paid for one year, indicated that Sheila had fallen into hard times. The contrasts in the lives and living conditions of women who took to prostitution in war-time Calcutta, had one feature in common. It was desperation that drove them into prostitution and each of them devised certain safeguards and security measures in uncertain times as lesser

⁶¹ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.)- Report on Sheila @ Bina of Ballygunj and of 220 Lower Circular Road, Calcutta.

members of society and denizens of the underworld.

Conclusion

The post-war city was going through a transitional phase, a time of violent rupture with old institutions marked by colonialism. Calcutta was at crossroads. The colonial state was in retreat and new dimensions of power formations were coming to the fore. To provide sufficient cover to the collapsing colonial order, British imperialism unleashed a regime exclusively based on coercive authority, since it could not fall back on any form of public legitimacy, acceptance, consent or support. The colonial state had given sweeping powers to the army at war-time. This practice was continued in post-war period as overwhelming force was used to crack-down on various mass movements which came in waves at the end of the Raj.⁶²

The way Calcutta airport had emerged as an epicentre of an international smuggling network pointed to the fact that systematic corruption became the hallmark of the late-colonial state. Sheer laxity to prosecute Allied army commanders, involved in the racket was in stark contrast to the alacrity with which intelligence agencies swung into action to track stolen revolvers from an army camp at Barrackpore. Private Rutherford had unintentionally challenged the colonial state's monopoly over armed violence by stealing arms and ammunition. The rapidity with which the establishment initiated a widespread manhunt and expanded the zone of investigation further following the death of the deserter, underlined the ever-present threat of accidental subversions which his act represented. It is also significant that Freddie Stead was convicted for a relatively light charge of keeping illegal arms, as the law enforcement authorities chose to ignore his other criminal activities including the murder of Private Rutherford. This was because deserters as marginal Europeans were a liability. They were useful as canon-fodder

⁶² Yasmin Khan, p. 191.

but also heaped 'disgrace' on colonial authority. They represented the internal crisis of a beleaguered and retreating late-colonial order. While Rutherford and his fellow gang members were making their inroads into the underworld of the city by robbing shops, the simmering rage of the inhabitants against the colonial regime was also pouring into the city streets. Rutherford as a representative of a disposable military labour used this climate to fight, without success, a bleak future of joblessness and possible destitution. For a while, he thought he could rise above his status. This individual war cost him his life. He had survived the world war, only to die in a strange city, his body floating ingloriously in a tank. He had been killed by a fellow army-man and not by those officially designated as the enemy. His road had crossed that of a political extremist Sailen Das, who had purchased revolvers from him to prepare for a possible collective social confrontation with state authority. But race, language, location and absence of any political dialogue had separated them. They had never talked. Rutherford's single-minded pursuit of making money out of market relations had pushed him deeper and deeper into a world from which he ultimately could not escape. His murder represented a 'micro-event' in a climate of large-scale tragedy brought by post-war violence, culminating in Partition and a truncated Independence at the end of empire. A foot-soldier of a retreating structure, he remained a marginal figure, unnoticed in life and insignificant even when stamped by death.

Conclusion

This research stands at the crossroads of people`s history, the history of late-colonial surveillance and Bengal during Second World War. This is a study of wartime surveillance on obscure lives and opens up a window into the intermeshing of race, class, gender and radical political positions during the last days of the Raj. In Bengal, Second World War had produced a cataclysmic effect to shake every social segment and unleashed forces which eventually changed the social fabric of Bengal permanently. This dissertation is an effort to document the ravages at a microscopic level. As the late-colonial regime clung to power without semblances of popular support, fragmented life-stories of subjects under perpetual suspicion of the wartime state provided the ideal background to explore trepidations of a moribund regime. Individual stories of devastation and persecution recollected through the chapters of the thesis reveal a critical juncture of the subcontinent and its people. As creatures of a fractured time, the characters explored here had been rife with angst and apprehension. They reflect a bygone era seething with latent tension. The thesis is an attempt to recover and rearticulate obscure life-stories of men and women who had earned the wrath of the belligerent regime, yet remained outside the ambit of historical narratives.

As the late-colonial regime grappled with its existential crisis, narratives on contemporary Bengal mostly dealt with social and political movements, the Famine of 1943 and the Partition. Though the province with its industries and entrenched communication channels catapulted as a major base of operation for the Allied forces following the British capitulation in Burma, the social churning of the war in Bengal was mostly left unaddressed. By recording the neglected and the insignificant individuals and circuits within which they operated, this research has attempted to introduce an

understanding of the war from the margins. Amongst the historians who had dealt with India's role in the war Yasmin Khan made a sincere effort to include previously unheard voices i.e. peasant turned soldiers of the British-Indian Army deputed far off from home, doomed Indian seamen who died in the Atlantic ocean, police officials in charge of guarding Calcutta roads during the black-out, British administrators overseeing the war effort etc. in her widely popular narrative.¹ Still, certain gaps and methods of studying late-colonialism were left to fill in. Traumatic experiences of colonial subjects hounded as fifth columnists, the angst of Jewish migrants who were branded as 'enemy aliens' and their survival tactics did not find due importance. The famished people who died in absolute ignominy in 1943-44 Bengal or the emaciated refugees who trudged through inhospitable terrains to reach the Indian mainland after the fall of Burma were forgotten. Groups and individuals who supported the Axis cause in Bengal and elsewhere were not mentioned either. Stories of systematic corruption during the wartime and individuals who used the uncertainties of the turbulent years to amass wealth were neglected. Moreover the colonial iron fist which pounded quotidian lives of subjugated masses was almost glossed over. Hence, the unfolding of the war on Bengal, the epicentre of the Allied war effort to forestall Axis advances in South-East Asia demands fresh endeavours. To salvage the voice of common people from historical obscurity, the present research attempts to explore overlooked social segments, minor political networks and individuals while the war was turning their world upside down.

Internationally it was a period of seismic changes. From the late 1920s Europe was in ferment. Social dislocation as a result of the Great Depression of 1929 coupled with the ultra-nationalism peddled by ruling regimes paved the way for fascist dictatorships, as they swept to power in

¹ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War*, (Penguin Random House India, Haryana, 2015).

Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Germany and Italy came to the aid of General Franco when he engineered a military coup in Spain to oust the elected republican government from power. In addition with the glorification of military machismo and colonial empire, xenophobia became the hallmark of autocratic regimes. Europe witnessed the persecution of Jews as the German Reich expanded its clout over the continent. Threatened with annihilation they left Nazi occupied areas in search of a safer place. Colonial archives suggest that their quest for a safe refuge would lead a section of Jewish people to British-India. In Asia following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan quickly emerged as an industrialised nation and imitated contemporary imperialist powers to achieve economic prosperity through territorial annexations. As a new entrant of the imperial race, Japan's bid for the control of East Asia had pitted it against traditional colonial powers such as Britain, France and USA. Following the capitulation of the Indian subcontinent, China had emerged as one of their main targets of aggression. Apart from foreign invasions, social turmoil, internecine feudal clashes also uprooted a section of Chinese population who flocked to the cities of British India specifically to Calcutta in search of social security and economic prosperity. As Japan invaded China in 1937, Second Sino-Japanese war commenced. By 1941 the war would merge into Second World War with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

As hostilities began in 1939, the colonial regime used the bogey of war to reinforce 'the white-dominated central government and bureaucracy' and to regain 'the ground it had lost to the Congress from 1937 or earlier'.² According to Sumit Sarkar 'a Defence of India Ordinance was enacted on the day the war was declared which restricted civil liberties and by May 1940 the Government had prepared a draft Revolutionary Movements Ordinance aimed at a crippling pre-

² Sunit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, (New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd., 2004), p.376.

emptive strike at the Congress at the first opportunity'.³ In the labour sector also, existing laws were changed to make the retrenchment of workers easier. Working hours were also increased significantly.⁴ In industries deemed essential for the war effort, trade unions were severely curbed, if not banned altogether. Though for most of the Bengalis, the beginning of the war in 1939 did not usher a decisive change. The front was far from home. For a section of Bengali literati, the news of far-off battles had become a source of almost sinister curiosity, to the extent that books were being published with lurid details of new weapons and their destructive capacities.⁵ An editorial in the Bengali daily *Jugantar* had made an appeal to the colonial government for the introduction of the mandatory martial training at higher-education institutes with immediate effect.⁶ In January, 1941 the newspaper extolled the martial prowess of the British-Indian Army, as they reportedly captured a large number of enemy combatants in Sudan.⁷ Owing to the growing demand of war materials, the industrial sector of Bengal was experiencing an upward swing in the production of cotton, jute, iron and industrial products.⁸ Politically the decade was more charged than ever. While shades of nationalist fervour had touched almost all social segments, intense communal hatred had also gripped a significant section of Bengali society. These mutually opposing trends would crystallise in Bengal at the end of the war, to produce a series of anti-colonial upsurges primarily focusing on the release of INA prisoners and ghastly communal

³ Ibid.

⁴ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine: Bengal 1939-45*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009), p.86.

⁵ *Jugantar*, 5th January, 1941, p.5.

<http://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/document/WEZqMXdPbDBVQ0tSZHdvYWnDa1g0WVZGQWprSzBjQ1hjZ0s4OFRJbWJpdz0>

⁶ *Jugantar*, 4th January, 1939, p.8

<http://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/document/RHRvQU9IOXZoWUdBRURUa3RZSszFEVkJNczBocVJEZGt5YjltL2IGNG1KTT0>

⁷ *Jugantar*, 7th January, 1941, p.4

<http://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/document/WEZqMXdPbDBVQ0tSZHdvYWnDa1g0UVZsSWE0ZksZrNVoR2kzNkU2RU1xST0>

⁸ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine : Bengal 1939-45*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009), p.80.

killings of September 1946 that would culminate in the partition of the province on the eve of Indian independence.

With the beginning of the war in 1939, Bengal witnessed the formation of an anti-war united front of major anti-colonial forces. However, the situation changed radically within two years of the war. With the aerial bombing of Pearl Harbour, an American naval base, Japan made a dramatic entry on the Axis side to bring the war nearer to home. In Europe, German attack on Soviet Russia created deep fissures within the united front of anti-imperialist forces in Bengal. As the USSR was goaded to renounce its neutrality, to protect the nascent Soviet state from annihilation, left parties changed their course of action and began to support the Allied war effort. On the Eastern front Japan made lightning gains in South-East Asia, which culminated in the occupation of Rangoon by March 1942. Both of these factors created a ripple effect on Bengal. With the Imperial Japanese Army closing in, the province was propelled as the staging ground for the Allied forces in their effort to forestall Japanese advances in South-East Asia. Calcutta, with its extensive industrial base, became a target of multiple air-raids by the Imperial Japanese Army. Ensuing uncertainty coupled with price rise of essential items, rampant black-marketing, illegal hoarding made the war increasingly unpopular among the masses. Following the British retreat from South-East Asia, Indian refugees fearing retribution from the invading Japanese army were compelled to make a harrowing journey on foot. As they entered Bengal, the narrative of chaotic British retreat had spread like wildfire and shattered the myth of imperial invincibility among the masses. For the time being the British collapse in Bengal seemed a foregone conclusion. Japanese air-raids, illegal hoarding of essential items, rampant black marketing, repressive state machinery, atrocities committed by foreign army-men came together to replace the enthusiasm with fear and despair. The sense of impending gloom was also reflected in the reportage of *Jugantar*, as it published

details of various kinds of projectiles and issued instructions for survival during air-raids.⁹ To forestall Japanese advance, the British government initiated the ‘denial policy’. Country-boats were destroyed and stored paddies were confiscated in several East Bengal districts with a cataclysmic effect as the resultant food crisis would snowball to a full-blown famine in 1943-44. Many of the famine victims would desperately flock to Calcutta, only to die from hunger on city streets. Death would haunt the cityscape again in 1946 as the ‘Direct Action’ of the Muslim League paved the way for an orgy of communal violence.

With the culmination of the war, demand for industrial products decreased to its pre-war level. A large number of people inducted in war-time industries became jobless. Movement against the abrupt retrenchment of workers gained traction in the industrial heartland of Bengal. A significant number of foreign army-men inducted during the war also became redundant. Some of them made forays into the thriving criminal underworld of Calcutta. In Bengal, CPI led *Tebhaga* movement targeted the entrenched feudal elements in the countryside. Calcutta also witnessed mass upsurges and sporadic violence demanding the release of INA prisoners.

In the din of the war it was sheer anxiety, which prodded the colonial state to employ brute force against subjects whose subservience seemed inadequate. Colonial paranoia of Fifth Columnists, saboteurs and spies had driven Indians from all walks of life under the intense scrutiny of vast and expansive surveillance mechanisms employed by the beleaguered regime to wither the storm of Second World War. Engineers, students, trade unionists, ex-revolutionaries had been rampantly marked as ‘undesirable subjects’. Very often they had to experience arduous imprisonment before being expelled from respective provinces to satisfy the whims of colonial masters. During the war

⁹Jugantar, 11th January, 1942,
p.10,<http://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/document/WFZHdDAXekIxaERyUWo1YmpVYWI2TFJQdklCelVieUk4VnkrMVR3YVA3OD0>

Bengal received a host of political activists, trade union leaders as they faced expulsion from different parts of the colonial empire. As explored in the first chapter, the ‘undesirable subjects’ were mostly lower rung activists, foot-soldiers of mass movements erupting in nook and crannies of Bengal and beyond. Barring a few exceptions, such as Renu Roy,¹⁰ Lilabati Nag¹¹ or Harnam Singh Malli¹² who continued to be active in anti-colonial politics, state repression proved to be a successful deterrent in most cases. The closing of their files following the sentences was a clear indication. The fact that ‘undesirables’ hailed from a multitude of social strata and ethnic groups, testified that the appeal of egalitarian ideas and anti-colonialism had reverberated through the length and breadth of the vast Indian subcontinent in the closing years of the British Raj. Activists earnestly tried to overcome language barriers, financial constraints as well as cultural differences. The police dossier of Haridas Chatterjee¹³ showed that hailing from a village named Hridaypur in 24 *Parganas*, he led a strike of scavengers in far off Bannu- a town in modern day Pakistan and was later imprisoned in Makran for his involvement in a ‘socialist agitation’. Following his release, he became a key member of Forward Bloc before being expelled from North West Frontier Province in 1941.¹⁴ Benoy Bhusan Chakraborty¹⁵ was a doctor from the Faridpur district of pre-partition Bengal who had transformed into a trade union activist of Assam tea gardens, following his employment as the Sub-Assistant Surgeon of the Assam Railways and Trading Company. In the same vein the involvement of Kundan Lal Sain¹⁶, a student of Krishna Nath College in Berhampore town of Murshidabad district, in left wing politics could be referred here. According

¹⁰ NAI 75/4/41-Poll(I) 1941.

¹¹ NAI 43/42/35-Political.

¹² NAI 94/12/45-Poll(I) 1941.

¹³ NAI 75/1/41-Poll(I).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) 1940.

¹⁶ NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

to the police dossier his homeland was in Hazara district of the erstwhile North West Frontier Province. It was the employment of Kundan`s father at a railway station in Bihar which brought Kundan to neighbouring Murshidabad district of Bengal for higher studies. In college he emerged as a key member of BPSF Amongst the Sikh diaspora of Calcutta, Harnam Singh Malli ¹⁷ was an exceptional figure. His dossier testified that joblessness, economic constraints or repetitive persecutions failed to dampen his spirit, for Harnam remained active in the political scene of Calcutta from 1930s till his final expulsion in 1941. Women activists such as Lilabati Nag, Renu Roy remained unfazed in the face of state repression. Lilabati Nag was involved in the revolutionary movement in Bengal as well as played a key role as an educationist aiming to end women illiteracy. Following her release from jail, Lilabati had emerged as an important functionary of Forward Bloc in post-partition Bengal.¹⁸ Facing interment in Bengal for her communist affiliation, Renu Roy remained steadfast in her belief till her last.¹⁹ In war-torn Calcutta, she galvanised support for the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti on behalf of CPI and emerged as a successful parliamentarian in independent India.

Obscure characters explored in the dissertation testified that the crumbling edifice of the colonial regime had electrified the high and the low, the men as well as the women of the subjugated society to unhinge raw emotion, latent tension that were brewing since the advent of the British supremacy. Surendranath Sarkhel²⁰ was a member of the HSRA and was imprisoned in the notorious Cellular Jail for his alleged involvement in the abortive attempt to blow up the ‘Viceregal Special’ train carrying Lord Irwin in 1929.²¹ Following his release in the late 1930s, deteriorating health

¹⁷ NAI 94/12/45-Poll(I) 1941.

¹⁸ NAI 43/42/35-Political.

¹⁹ NAI 75/4/41-Poll(I) 1941.

²⁰ NAI 45/1/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

²¹ NAI 45/1/40-Poll(I).

conditions had forced him to seek shelter in Gandhi's Sevagram Ashram. With the beginning of Second World War he was ordered to remove himself to Bengal. As Gandhi personally vouched for his 'good behaviour', the colonial government relented to restrain Surendranath within the boundaries of the Ashram. Almost a year had passed before Surendranath fled Sevagram and wandered for three more months as a fugitive before being apprehended from Gonda- a nondescript town in erstwhile United Provinces. The local police indicated the expulsion of a girl named Abha from Sevagram had triggered his flight. In his letter to Gandhi, though a remorseful Surendranath remained tight-lipped on the cause of his sudden departure, he expressed that he was on the throes of a mental breakdown and was contemplating suicide. Archival materials suggested that days before his escape he vainly appealed to the colonial government for the removal of his restriction order. The stifling surveillance regime was already getting into his nerves and the expulsion of Abha probably acted as the last straw. The defiance of the colonial writ was also noticeable in the character of sickly ex-revolutionary turned homoeopathy doctor of Kalimpong, Jagadish Ghosh.²² Nepalese authorities alleged that he supplied explosives to *Praja Parishad* activists for a failed plot to liquidate the Rana. Ensuing investigation revealed that Jagadish was also imprisoned in Cellular Jail for his revolutionary activities. Following his release Jagadish had come to Kalimpong ostensibly to recuperate from his falling health. Prolonged illness for which he remained bed-ridden for most of the time failed to dampen his spirit of rebellion.²³ The ferment of subversion had often reached at the familial level. As the British regime crumbled in South-East Asia, Ruth Naidu, the daughter of a senior functionary of the Indian Independence League in Hong Kong, fled from her home and followed the trail of Indian refugees, who were escaping the

²² NAI 59/60/40-Poll(EX) 1940.

²³ Ibid.

Japanese onslaught.²⁴ An increasing demand of medical care-givers due to the war in the South-East Asia also moulded her life choice as she was inducted in the fledgling retinue of nurses within a year in Calcutta. The fragmentary life-story of Ruth Naidu also exemplified that the destruction of the colonial regime in South-East Asia had created a ripple effect to rupture societal, familial bonds and also infused the youth with the spirit of rebellion. In sleepy hamlets of North Bengal, Nepalese fugitives had hatched a plot to topple the Ranas in coordination with Indian revolutionaries.²⁵ In Calcutta, preparations were made by underground AIFB activists to take over the rein of administration of Bengal, as the collapse of the colonial regime seemed forthcoming.²⁶ In the immediate aftermath of the war, Sailen Das a BPSF activist as well as a student of the prestigious Scottish Church College had procured revolvers from a military deserter ostensibly to prepare for the imminent revolution.²⁷ Notwithstanding regional barriers or ethnic differences the strong current of anti-colonialism seemed to have touched South Asian subjects who had endured imperial depredations at various levels. The bonhomie between Jagadish and a forthright Chinese teacher in Kalimpong which eventually attracted the police suspicion pointed towards the increasing convergence struggles envisioning a just world.²⁸ They had anticipated that the subcontinent was at the cusp of a transformative change.

In the inter-war period, the military muscle-flexing of imperial Japan and Nazi Germany had attracted a section of nationalists, who had sought the help of Axis powers to counterbalance the global dominance of British imperialism. With the commencement of Second World War, people from different walks of life were swayed by rapid Japanese advances against Allied forces in the

²⁴ NAI 39/34/43 1943 Home Political.

²⁵ NAI 59/60/40-Poll(EX) 1940.

²⁶ NAI 29/1/42-Poll(I) 1942.

²⁷ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F).

²⁸ NAI 59/60/40-Poll(EX) 1940.

initial phases of the war. Journalist Surendranath Neogi,²⁹ youth activist Karuna Mitra,³⁰ veteran revolutionary Amarendranath Bose,³¹ Sikh migrant Harnam Singh Malli³² and many more chose to support Subhas Bose, as he made an audacious attempt to topple the British regime with the help of the Imperial Japanese Army. There were infiltration attempts by trained INA agents. Pabitra Mohan Roy and Amrik Singh Gill successfully infiltrated Bengal through the coast of Orissa in 1943.³³ Eventually they were captured from their hide-out in Calcutta in 1944. Apart from disgruntled nationalists whose support to the Axis cause were purely circumstantial, a select group of urban elites were also enamoured by the Nazi ideology. The clique of Maximiani Portas alias Savitri Devi and his partner Asit Krishna Mukherjee became foot-soldiers of the Axis cause.³⁴ Also, there were tricksters who used the opportunity to amass wealth as paid agents of Axis powers. Bijay Madhab Mukherjee and Gouridas Lahiri tricked Japanese Consular staffs into believing that they were important operatives of a revolutionary group.³⁵ Due to their short stint in the revolutionary movement, they were quite convincing in their act, as they sold real or fictitious information to Japanese consular officials in exchange for money.

Apart from Indian subjects, the fear of saboteurs, fifth columnists had driven the belligerent regime to bring the foreigners under the ambit of a rigorous surveillance mechanism. Since the advent of the East India Company, the land had attracted European adventurers, sailors, soldiers as well as vagabonds. Their quest for economic prosperity in a foreign land often proved to be elusive as they had to depend on the government dole or on the charity of Christian missionary

²⁹ NAI 44/52/43-Poll(I) 1943.

³⁰ NAI 29/1/42-Poll(I) 1942.

³¹ NAI 44/28/44-Poll(I).

³² NAI 94/12/45-Poll(I) 1941.

³³ NAI 2/1/45-Poll(I).

³⁴ WBSA IB 45/32.

³⁵ WBSA IB 129/35.

networks for survival. There were also a host of foreign professionals who came to serve private or public enterprises in India and had fallen on hard times following the termination of their duties. Influenced by entrenched racism, colonial bureaucracy tended to view the ‘mean whites’ with great disdain as they were blamed for lowering the prestige of the white ruling class.³⁶ With the resumption of armed conflict in 1939, along with existing prejudices, fear of enemy agents led the imperial bureaucracy to persecute the foreigners based on their nationality or ethnicity. Though subjects belonging to Axis powers had been their primary target, the Raj was heavily suspicious of European vagabonds, Christian missionaries along with Jewish refugees and Russians as well as Burmese evacuees. Archival documents testified that Jews who took refuge in Bengal while fleeing from the growing clout of the Third Reich over Europe were not spared. The Colonial intelligence apparatus was convinced that a significant number of the Jews could be coerced to do the bidding of the Nazis. In Bengal, the ‘enemy aliens’ were interned at Katapahar in Darjeeling hills. Echoing the Nazi racial doctrine the colonial administration practised strict policy of racial segregation inside internment camps, as internees were divided into two groups i.e. ‘Aryan and non-Aryan’. The paranoia against the Jews was such that even avowed anti-Nazi activists such as Maximilian Bernhard Bauer was treated as ‘enemy alien’.³⁷ Professionals established in different fields were not spared either. Wilhelm Starkmann, the ‘recording engineer’ of the Gramophone Co. was interned in Katapahar notwithstanding the fact he was staying in Calcutta since 1926, i.e. years before Adolf Hitler captured power in Germany.³⁸ The pressure of constant suspicion often drove individuals on the verge of mental collapse. The suicide of a Jewish dental surgeon suspected of being a German spy in far-off Quetta³⁹ or the statement of the police that Maximilian Bernhard

³⁶ Sarmistha De, *Marginal European in Colonial India: 1860-1920*, (Kolkata, Thema, 2008) p.133.

³⁷ NAI 72/3/76/40-Pol(EW).

³⁸ NAI 72/3/26/40.

³⁹ NAI 43/14/41-Pol(EW).

Bauer had reached on the threshold 'of a serious mental breakdown' prior to his release, were stark reminders of the stifling surveillance regime that encapsulated the Jews in Bengal.

In the inter-war period the imperial intelligence apparatus observed the rise of Japanese militarism with great caution. Aware of its growing territorial ambition Britain deployed agents to watch over Japanese citizens much before Japan's actual entry into the war. The fear that Japan would use the waves of Burma evacuees to plant spies prodded the beleaguered regime to interrogate and persecute seemingly innocuous characters. It was the desperate search of livelihood that led Phul Chand, a young man hailing from Dinajpur to Rangoon as he found employment as a sweeper at the house of a Burmese judge.⁴⁰ Following the collapse of the British regime in 1942, the judge was safely relocated to India, though Phul Chand had to fend for himself. En-route to India his capture by the INA and subsequent release made Phul Chand a suspect of espionage. For more than a year he continued to languish at a prison in Delhi though repetitive interrogations failed to produce any tangible result. Phul Chand earned his freedom in 1944, only after he agreed to serve as the sweeper of an army medical facility in Arakan.⁴¹ Apart from the official paranoia against the foreigners, the case of Phul Chand had also elucidated that the belligerent regime was hard-pressed for the complete mobilisation of available resources.

In 'Myth and Reality' author Amit Kumar Gupta had argued that the British position had been significantly weakened at the end of Second World War, which was reflected in the absence of an adequate 'channel of communication between the government and the people'.⁴² Though the complete rupture between the people and bureaucracy had left its mark in post-war colonial polity,

⁴⁰ NAI 39/01/43-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Amit Gupta, Myth and Reality, p.8.

the process of divergence aggravated with the commencement of Second World War. To counterbalance the lack of popular support behind its war effort, the imperial state initiated a vast and intrusive surveillance mechanism, where Indians as well as foreigners were targeted at large. On the other side of the narrative, victims of state repression made desperate attempts to escape arduous internment orders. Archival documents showed that Jewish refugees often chose to serve the Allied war effort in India to escape imprisonment. Wilhelm Starkmann regained his freedom when his former employer *Gramophone Co.* managed to convince intelligence agencies that he was indispensable for the recording of 'war propaganda'.⁴³ Following his internment in Katapahar, Fredrick Falkenstein offered to serve in the Allied Army Medical Corps, as he was a trained doctor and was released.⁴⁴ Austrian-Jewish refugee Emil Glass successfully convinced his interrogators at Fort William in Calcutta that he was an arms inventor to regain his freedom.⁴⁵ Phul Chand also used the window of opportunity and served the war in his capacity.⁴⁶ In the case of Starry siblings, social networks prior to their internment in Katapahar had shielded them from much of hardships inside the internment camp and also paved the way for their rehabilitation once they were released.⁴⁷ Flouting the rules Tibor Starry stayed with his non-internee lover inside the camp, and battered another inmate Mrs. Klein, but remained unscathed as the father of his lover was an influential person. Jewish Relief Association in Calcutta also came to his relief, as they found employment for Tibor to facilitate his release.⁴⁸ His sister Elizabeth had become a renowned pianist following her release. When she was barred from entering the city of Bombay by intelligence agencies citing security issues, it was none other than the Deputy Secretary of the

⁴³ NAI 72/3/26/40.

⁴⁴ NAI 72/3/37/40-Pol(EW).

⁴⁵ NAI 72/3/33/40- Pol(EW).

⁴⁶ NAI 39/01/43-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁴⁷ NAI 72/3/22/40-Pol(E) Home Political.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Indian Government who intervened on her behalf.⁴⁹ Hungarian Jew Alexander Kovacs depended on his wit and used the institutionalised corruption ingrained in the imperial war effort to evade the detention. At first it was the military authorities of Bengal who had shielded him from the arrest citing his indispensability in the 'production of war materials'. Eventually IB would make a renewed effort to put Kovacs behind the bars, when he would be dismissed ostensibly for 'shady business between him and some persons in ordnance factories'.⁵⁰ But the concerted effort for his persecution was thwarted by the timely intervention of the Director of Industries in Bengal and Alexander ended the war as a free man. Following the war, subsequent investigation revealed that Alexander was instrumental in helping the Director of Industries to amass huge wealth through corruption.⁵¹

Wayward methods employed by Alexander Kovacs to survive in wartime Bengal was not an aberration. In the backdrop of wartime uncertainties, economic dislocation and social turmoil, the disintegration of the colonial empire had generated several back channels for the accumulation of wealth. Apart from locally entrenched crooked businessmen and brokers, a section of foreigners including the army men became an integral part of the burgeoning underworld. Chinese and Tibetan criminals had used the hilly terrains of north Bengal to smuggle cloth, gold, firearms as well as humans. During the war, the airport at Dum Dum acted as a key link between Allied forces in Bengal and their Chinese counterparts based in Kunming aerodrome. The deposition of a high ranking Allied official revealed that the airport had become the focal point of a gold smuggling and money laundering racket that involved American army-men enjoying 'diplomatic immunity'

⁴⁹ NAI 73/3/24/40-Pol(EW) Home Political.

⁵⁰ NAI 43/10/1/41-Pol(EW) 1941.

⁵¹ Ibid.

in India as well as in China.⁵² Reportedly medical supplies and other essential products designated for the Burma evacuees were syphoned to be sold in the Chinese black market. It was suspected that custom officials were also ‘on their payroll’.⁵³ Emulating European cities, army deserters formed roving bands and depended on criminal endeavours to survive in the metropolis. Their involvement in arms smuggling added a lethal touch to the deteriorating law and order situation in Bengal.⁵⁴ The desertion of Private Rutherford of East Yorkshire Regiment, following the news of his demobilisation from the army magnified the chasms within the colonial coercive machinery in the immediate aftermath of the war. As Rutherford would be eventually killed by a fellow deserter, the police investigation unravelled glimpses of the murky world the deserters chose to live.

To cater to the growing number of army-men pouring in the city, Calcutta had emerged as a lucrative spot for prostitution, where criminal gangs had used their far-flung networks to procure hapless women. Fragmentary life-stories of foreign army-men as revealed in my dissertation proved that local prostitutes had constituted an integral part of their quotidian life in a foreign land. Cutting across the social, economic or regional divide the colonised women had to bear the brunt of the colonial war machine. The impunity enjoyed by the Allied army-men was testified by the fact that in rural Birbhum, American soldiers reportedly ‘hunted for the women’ in the locality.⁵⁵ The insecurity of the women was also revealed when a retired police sergeant in wartime Calcutta lamented that ‘it was an unsafe age for women on their own’.⁵⁶ The pervading economic and social

⁵²NAI 124(2)-x/1943.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ WBSA IB 1127-46(M.F.).

⁵⁵ NAI 7/40/44-Police 1944.

⁵⁶ Janam Mukherjee, ‘Japan Attacks’ in *Stormy Decades*, pp. 98-99.

insecurity unleashed on womenfolk in Bengal provided the background for the Communist Party to launch *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* in 1942.

The urge to drain more and more resources for the war, led the late-colonial regime to become overly dependent on raw coercion. It manifested through the overcrowding of Bengal jails, and endless persecutions of seemingly innocuous individuals as well as the hounding of the Jews or aimless wanderers. This was happening as the bureaucratic nonchalance annihilated a million of Bengalis during the Famine of 1943. The process of brutalisation had percolated down to the subject society, and created deep fissures which continued to haunt the masses of post-partition Bengal.

The collage of disparate characters explored through the dissertation shared different geographical locations. However, they originated from Bengal or came to Bengal as war-clouds gathered over the province. Apart from the search for livelihood, fear of persecution played a substantial role in bringing them to the province. Threatened with absolute annihilation the Jewish migrants were compelled to seek shelter far from their homeland. Archival documents proved that most of them who took shelter in Bengal had secured employment prior to their persecution. The case of Nazi fanatic Maximiani Portas was qualitatively different. Though she was born in Greece, her search for the imagined Aryan homeland led Maximiani to India and eventually to Bengal, where she would marry Ashit Krishna Mukherjee - also a hardcore Nazi. In the case of Nepalese and Tibetan migrants, traditional business networks through the Himalayan ranges which subsequently thrived due to the war, played an important role in increasing their numbers in Bengal. A number of the Nepalese diaspora in Bengal were political dissidents who had irked the monarchy. With the expansion of the war in South-East Asia millions of Allied troops were deployed to the province. It was their professional demand and sheer chance, which located military deserters such as Private

Rutherford or Chen Ching Lin of the Chinese army in the province. Amongst the migrant population of Bengal, there were politically active elements such as Harnam Singh Malli and Kundan Lal Sain. Similarly, Bengalis such as Bimalendu Sengupta⁵⁷ and Haridas Chatterjee⁵⁸ participated in anti-colonial struggles far from their homes. Hailing from the Mymensingh district of pre-Partition Bengal, Bimalendu was instrumental in organising youths of Khasi and Jayantiya hills in Assam. As a trade unionist, Haridas was active in North West Frontier Province though he was born at a village in 24 Parganas of south Bengal.

In this research, the lives of obscure people under suspicion are probed to study the surveillance and policing of the late-imperial state. Since the dawn of civilisation, common people have made up the majority, though their varied responses to larger events have been seldom analysed in the Indian context. By recording the neglected and insignificant individuals and their social relational circuits, this research has attempted to introduce an understanding of the war from the margins. These obscure characters represented a tumultuous time, rife with ‘hope and despair’ as the subcontinent stood on the verge of an epochal change.⁵⁹ Subjects under suspicion used their wit or grit to wither the stifling surveillance of the beleaguered Raj. Their deeds as well as misdeeds divulged nuances of colonised lives under the constant threat of persecution and provided us rare glimpses of marginal figures, obscure networks which largely remained outside the ambit of historical narratives.

⁵⁷ NAI 15/3/40-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁵⁸ NAI 75/1/41-Poll(I) Home Political.

⁵⁹ Anirudh Despande shows this in detail in his unique study of the RIN uprising of 1946 and the popular participation in the related mass upheaval. Anirudh Despande, *Hope and Despair: Mutiny, Rebellion and Death in India, 1946*, (Delhi, Primus Books, 2016).

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