CHAPTER - V
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TITU MIR AND HIS RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT IN BENGAL

While Shari'atullah and Dudu Miyan were enrolling disciples in Eastern Bengal, other reformers were exciting up in other districts of Bengal and the wave passing over the plains of Faridpur received a fresh impulse in West Bengal, from other sources. Here again, the movement started as one of religious reform, got itself entangled in agrarian insurrection and subsequently defied the Government. The principal man in this insurrection of the peasants and artisans in West Bengal was one Nasr Ali alias Titu Mir.

Titu Mir, an inhabitant of Chandpur, a few miles to the south west of Narkulbaria in the district of Barasat, "was of no family though above the class of ordinary villages". He was, however, connected by marriage with one Munshi Amir, a respectable landed proprietor of the locality. It is said that during his youth he was known to be a "bad and desperate character" who lived a life of a professional wrestler in Calcutta. He subsequently, it is reported took service under Hindu Zamindars of Nadia, who required a determined Character

1. Board's Collection, 54222, p. 401, Colvin to Barwell 8 March 1832, para. 6.
either to create disturbances or to extract dues from their ryots, and being implicated in an affray was imprisoned.

After his release, accident brought him to the notice of member of the Delhi Royal family" whom he attended on a pilgrimage to Makka, where it is said, he met Sayyed Ahmad who had preceded him there a year, and became his disciple. On return from pilgrimage, sometime in the year 1827, he settled down at Haidarpur near Narkulbaria and began to preach his doctrines as religious reformer, in which capacity he is reported to have regularly received stipends from Delhi. Within a short time he collected around him three or four hundred followers "who became separated from the bulk of the Mohamedan inhabitants of the country by distinction of dress and appearance and by their refusing to eat or join on occasions of society generally with any but those of their own members as well as by the peculiarity and superior strictness of their doctrines".

1. Bengal Cr. Jud. Cons., 3 April 1832, Magistrate of Barasat to commissioner of Circuit, 18 Div. 28, November 1831, para. 35.
2. Board's collection, 54222, pp. 401-402, Colvin to Barwell, 8 March, 1832, para. 6.
The reformation which he desired in existing faith was almost similar to that which Shari'atullah had earlier started or which Sayyed Ahmad was successfully introducing at the time almost all over India. Like Sayyed Ahmad, he inveighed against honouring pirs, objected to the erection of Shrines, denied the efficacy of offerings to the deceased, directed his followers to grow beards and to wear dress in a peculiar manner so as to be clearly distinguishable from the Hindus and keep off from those Muslims who were not of the same sects. In short, he aimed at purging the faith of various idolatrous and superstitious practices, which time and long contact with Hinduism had resulted in furtherance of this aim of reverting the Muslims of Bengal to their original faith, he attacked the most cherished observances like the ceremony of Muharram and summarily denounced the most common custom, the worship at the tombs of the saints. The practice of inter-dining only among the followers of the reformed faith, invariably led to their forming into a distinct and exclusive caste. Although their conduct in this regard was but an instance of the imitation of Hindu custom which their tenets professed particularly to

to avoid, "they adhered to it so rigidly, as to separate themselves from their nearest relatives, a circumstance which operated doubtless to prevent many from joining them". These causes undoubtedly restricted the number of his followers. Nevertheless, the tract running across Jamuna and Ichamaty rivers, varying from 18 to 20 miles by 12 or 14 broad, was greatly influenced by the movement and became its recruiting ground¹. Like the followers of shariatullah in East Bengal, the peculiarities of the sect involved them first in differences with their neighbours². Here in West Bengal, however, disputes for some time did not go beyond words nor did they proceed to any length except in very few cases when complaints unfortunately were brought before Hindu Zamindars. The progress of the sect was looked on already with great displeasure by

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1. Board's Collection, 54222, pp. 401-403, Colvin to Barwells, Para. 8.

2. In his report colvin wrongly indentifies same rioters in East Bengal with the followers of Titu Mir. (Enclosure No. 1, to colvin report 8 March 1832) That riot was started by shariatullah's follower, attempting forcibe conversion of their neighbours and there is no proof to show that it was in any way connected with the followers of Titu Mir.
some Muslim peasantry especially Hanafis and by Hindu Zamindars. The former resented the irreverent manner in which the men of the new sect spoke of their most venerated rites and customs; the latter, naturally conservative, listened readily to their complaints and exerted all their power to check the growth of an association which treated them with disrespect, and exhibited a power of combination which might hereafter seriously affect their interests. There was besides this, "The more certain inducements to interference" furnished by the hope of profiting by it. Accordingly one Zamindar Ram Narayana of Taragoonia and after him at different times two or three others (Gaur Prasad Chowdhury of Nagarpur, agents of the Zamindar of Koorgatchy, Kisen Deb Roy of Purwa) immediately "interfered to discourage the sect by imposing fines on some of its followers living within their estates and by subjecting them to other petty kinds of maltreatment".

The first case of this nature was brought before the joint Magistrate of Barasat on 7 August 1830 by one of the sect against Zamindar Narayana and others in which one of the witnesses stated that the Zamindar

had fined the complainant twenty five rupees and "ordered his beards to be plucked off"\(^1\). The charge was not, however, proceeded with by the plaintiff to conviction against the parties, "to whom it really might have been brought home" and it was dismissed in default on 13 July 1831\(^2\).

The exactions of other zamindars then followed, particularly in the estates of there zamindars those of Nagarpur, Koorgatchy and purwa. In the first two there were cases of interferences in the disputes arising between two sections of Muslim tenants and in the last it was a case of direct taxation on the new sect of Kishen Dev Ray, zamindars of the place. He imposed a tax of Rs. 2/8/- on each of the tenants belonging to the new and aggravated the irritation caused by such a proceeding by describing the tax as a fine upon beards. He actually realised this tax successfully in Purwa but met with resistance in Sarfarazpur; some servants of the zamindar were beaten and one seized and detained. The zamindar then

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1. Ibid., No. 6.

entered the village with armed men and a riot ensued in which a mosque was burnt.

It appears from the abstract proceedings of this case, that it was admitted on the part of the Zamindar that several of the Muslim weavers belonging to the sect were sent for by him, the reason for doing so being that some doubtful characters had assembled in their houses, which, however, was only a pretext as persons assembled, had not until then been found to be of bad character or improper conduct. The weavers on the other hand had alleged that zamindar's men were sent to realise the illegal beard tax. Again, the first charge preferred by the zamindar was the detention of his servant but complaint had immediately been made by the sect of the subsequent assault and the burning of the mosque by the zamindar's people; in this they were supported by evidence taken originally by the clerk of the thana, who started enquiry into the case before it was taken up by the Darogah.

About 18 days after, the zamindar got up a case against these complainants for assaults

1. Ibid., Paras. 9 & 10 of Colvin's Report.
maltreatment of his people and for having burnt the mosque themselves to implicate him in the case.

It is unfortunate that the case of illegal exactions which was the cause of the affray escaped the attention of the Government and the Zamindar out of the case victorious and his right of exaction indirectly recognised. The order passed by the Joint Magistrate, says the Commissioner of the Division "was neither calculated to check the illegal and arbitrary practices of the zamindars on the one hand, nor to allay the feelings of irritation excited in the minds of the opposite, and I am inclined to believe, primarily aggrieved party on the other".

As a result, when he defendants, i.e., the followers of Titu Mir returned home "a dishonest and oppressive use was made by the Zamindar of the power of summary arrest for arrears of rent authorised under the provision of the Regulation 7,1799". Person who gave evidence in the last case against the Zamindar, even though not his tenants, were seized on alleged arrears of 38 rupees, "confined and maltreated and compelled to pay a portion and give agreement for the remainder of

Commissioner to Dy. Secy. 28 Nov. 1831, para. 3.
the sum demanded from them" a course which they preferred to the alternative going up to contest the demand in the civil courts.

A copy of the decision on the case of affray was taken act on 25 September to file an appeal before the Commissioner and some of the effected went to Calcutta for the purpose, but as the Commissioner was then out on Circuit, they come back disappointed.

Meanwhile, Titu Mir had taken up the cause of the sufferers and his lieutenant Ghulam Ma'sum went up to Calcutta as his agent to represent the case of the oppressed ryots. There series of disappointments in procuring redress of their grievances by legal means, must have told upon the patience of the sect and goaded them to take law in their own hands and seek revenge by force of arms. Although the actual reason for going to extremities, which they did soon after, were difficult to find out, yet colvin was of opinion that "they saw reason from whatever cause to be disappointed in their object of appealing the cause and to this disappointment acting on irritated and fanatical feelings"

1. Board's Collection. 59222, Enclosure No. 4 to Colvin, Report; see also Beng., Cr. Jud., 3 April 1832 No. 6.
must be attributed "the design suddenly formed and carried into execution of proceeding to extremities by revenge on only one Hindu Zamindar with whom there was the immediate quarrel: but by acts of outrage towards the Hindu community generally"\(^1\).

The intolerance of other creeds and the open violence to which the sect now resorted, is ascribed by some, to the success which Sayyed Ahmad's arms achieved at this hour against the Sikhs in the Frontier which according to these writers encouraged the sect to take action against the Government as well\(^2\). The facts of the case, as will be seen, do not warrant such a conclusion.

The resolution to take revenge was acted upon as soon as entertained. The people who had been to calcutta for appeal returned towards the end of September and by the early part of October Titu's followers were gathering up at Narkulbaria in the house of one Muizuddin, a wealthy former and one of the earliest converts to the sect. Titu at this time was joined by one Faqir Miskin Shah who took up his abode at his house. Contributions were now levied on

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all members of the sect with which they purchased and laid in supplies of rice and other provision at Mu'izuddins house, which now became their headquarters.

By 23 October their intention to create a tumult at Purwa by killing cows and insulting Hindus was proclaimed. The party waited for a chance till 6 November, in the morning of which they entered Purwa, killed a cow in the market place, scattered its blood over the walls of a temple and hung up four quarter of the animal before it. They committed no plunder beyond carrying away articles which were lying in the shops before them but they wounded a Brahmin and attacked and ill-treated an assistant to local Indigo factory. Emboldened by the success achieved, they proclaimed themselves master of the country, asserting, we are told, "that the period of the British Rule had expired and that the Mohamedans from whom the English usurped it were rightful owners of the empire". The introduction of something like martial order in their ranks was attempted under Ghulam Ma'sum, now appointed to lead the insurgents.

3. Board's Collection 61232 p. 12, Barwell to Reid, 14 Sept. 1832.
The village lawghatta in Nadia became the next target in which they committed the same kind of excesses as in Purwa. Here, being opposed by the Hindus headed by Hara Dev Ray, an affray ensued in which one Dev Nath Ray was killed and others wounded. They now became more determined and confident and their success increased their number every day. From the 8th to the 15th they were killing cows in different places, plundering villages, seizing ryots, forcing them to give agreement to furnish grains, compelling them to profess their tenets, and sending out parties in search of the Darogah, who had previously ruined their case. At this stage they showed practically an open contempt for all authority. The only serious outrage which they committed after the murder at Lawghatta was at Sherpur, where they plundered the house of a Muslim Faqir with whom they had a private quarrel and affected forced marriage with two of his daughter.

On 23 October Kishen Dev Ray, aware of the intentions of Titu Mir had applied for assistance to Basirhat Thana and also made representation to Barasat Court. He had also forwarded a letter written

to one of his na'ibs by a gomashata of Barguria Indigo Factory, wherein information was given that the party had eaten maut ka khana last dinner, and warning to the effect that matters should not be neglected. The Thana took it slightly and thought two Barkundazes and a warning to both parties would be enough to maintain peace. The next information from Basirhat Thana to Barasat reached on 10 November giving particulars of happenings at Purwa. This was followed by two reports from the same Thana detailing circumstances of the murder at Lawghatta and the open search for the Darogah. The same day also came information about the happening from Piron Superintendent of Barguira Factory, suggesting interference of armed force to quell the insurrections.

Under the circumstances, reinforcement of a Jamadar and ten Barkundazes from neighbouring Thanas were ordered to the assistance of the Darogah of Basirhat. On the 13th storm, proprietor of some factories in the area, addressed the Government on the subject and on the following afternoon, Alexander the Joint Magistrate of Barasat moved out to apprehend the rioters.¹

¹. Ibid., pp. 428-429.
Allexander proceeded by way of Baugundee, the station of Jassore Salt Agent, from home he obtained a party of Calcutta Provincial Guards consisting of one Jamadar, one Havilder and twenty Sepoys in aid of the police force at Basirhat all totalled 125 men. On reaching Narkulbaria the insurgents were found "drawn up on the plain before it" in a body of between five and six hundred men armed with clubs, swords, spears etc., and "prepared to make every possible resistance". Alexandar immediately ordered the sepoys to load with balls instead of blank cartridges which they had previously been ordered to do to avoid bloodshed and under an impression that the insurgents would be carried out in that confusion and hurry is yet a mystery; the discharge of musketry caused no casualty on the other side and the Government force was assailed on all sides, the insurgents being led by Ghulam Ma'sum on horseback. Finding every one at his side running for life. Alexandar was compelled to fly away with his own, holty pursued by the enemy for a long distance. The jamadar, Havildar, 10 Sepoys and 3 Barkundazes fell in action and the rest


including Darogah of Basirhat were severely injured and carried off by the insurgents to their bamboo stockade where subsequently the Darogah was barbarously murdered.

Alexander, after conferring with the Government Salt Agent on the gravity of the situation, hurried to Calcutta with Government Treasure via Sundarbans and reached there on 16 November to report to Government. A regiment of Native Infantry with two guns was ordered out at once with directions to proceed to extremities if necessary.

Meanwhile, elated by success, their number daily increasing, the insurgents proceeded to destroy and plunder the Barguria Factory in revenge for information given by the Superintendent to the Joint Magistrate of Basirhat. The Superintendent piron escaped to Hooghly but his house and property along with those of the dependent ryots were destroyed and plundered. Another factory belonging to the same concern was next attacked and its Superintendent with his wife and child ren brought before Titu Mir and Miskin Shah. The prisoner showed considerable self possession at this trying hour and saved his family and factory "by his entire submission to the
pretensions of these fanatics for whom he immediately offered to make Indigo as the Rulers of the Country" and was on those conditions allowed to return to his factory.

Before the troops from Calcutta could arrive, a second attempt to suppress the insurgents, made by the Magistrate of Kishnaghar, had also failed. On getting the intelligence of the disorder he had moved to Barguria in the evening of the 16th with a large body of Police, accompanied by an Indigo Planter and other Europeans and armed men at his employ. On hearing of the successful resistance offered by the insurgents the previous day, he at first determined to defer attack till reinforcements had arrived from Calcutta. But depending on false information he moved on to Narkulbaria on the 17th with a party of 300 in number. But finding that he had been misled and that he would have to encounter a more formidable opposition than he had expected, he had "to make a precipitate retreat" leaving behind some killed and wounded including his Nazir.

Further atrocities were committed by the insurgent after this second successful resistance to

1. Beng. Cr. Jud., Cons., 22 Nov. 1831, Nos. 81-83. See also Judicial letter to Court to April (No. 3) 1832 Para. 4.

Government authority, including levying of money contributions from one Shilling ford Indigo Plants, Muslims, who were not of their persuasion, they placed under restraint and compelled to wear their beards in a manner peculiar to their own. Some of the Hindus were deprived of their caste and the whole countryside was devastated for miles round Narkulbaria, so that all the peace loving inhabitants fled in towns.

The detachment consisting of a Regiment of Native Infantry, a troop of House Artillery, with a couple of guns and some troops of Body Guard under Major Scott having joined him at Barasat. Alexander proceeded to reconnoitre the position. A slight fight followed and one of the European troopers was killed. The attack was then delayed till the 19th when the Infantry arrived. The insurgents drew up in battle array with the mangled body of the European, killed the previous day, exposed in front of the line. After a few rounds of fire they were dispersed, the bamboo stockade taken and the flag, symbolical of sovereignty, seized. About 50 were killed including the leader Titu Mir and some 350 arrested.  

The dead bodies of those who fell in action, including

the leader's were burnt. The houses and property of the followers of Titu Mir were deserted by the inmates and became subject to prey and pillage for a few days and for sometime indiscriminate seizure of all those suspected of sympathy with the sect followed.

Subsequently, 197 person from among those arrested were committed in five trials under Nizamat. The court sentenced Ghulam Ma'sum, the lieutenant of Titu Mir, to death, transported for life 11, and convicted 128 others to various terms of imprisonment. Of the rest 4 died while on trial and 53 acquitted or released.

One of Titu Mir's son, Torab 'Ali, in consideration of his youth and untimely loss of his father, was sentenced to two years R.I., while another having lost one of his legs in action was released. The fatwa of law officers had convicted Ghulam Ma'sum of having been associated with Titu Mir in his attack on Joint Magistrate but declared that as the chief was dead, Ghulam Ma'sum was entitled to release according to chapter

2. Ibid., 436 Colvins Report para 38.
on Rebellion in the Hidaya. But the court differed found Ghulam Ma'sum guilty of capital offence sentenced him to death and ordered his dead body to be "exposed upon a Gibbet, at, or near to the spot where the murderers were committed"¹.

J.R. Colvin who was appointed to make enquiry into the causes and nature of the disturbance at Barasat expressed satisfaction in being able to say with confidence that "the disturbance was entirely of a local and as far as regards the inhabitants principally or subordinately concerned in it, of a very unimportant character". With scarcely an exception all of them", he stated, "were inhabitants of the Northern portion of the Barasat, and of a few of the adjoining villages of the Nadia district and were merely Ryots, weavers and others of the most ordinary class of the Muhammadan population"². The Government on this report took the movement to be thus an insignificant one, and took little notice of it as such.

Some forty years later, this attitude of the Government was severely criticised by an anonymous writer of the Calcutta Review, who expressed astonishment at the

1. Board's Collection, 61232, p. 83.
2. Board's Collection, 54222, p. 400 Colvin to Barwell 8 March 1832, Para. 4.
apathy displayed by Government over a movement which
according to him aimed at political power and
therefore deserved the serious notice of the British
authorities¹. The sect according to him "openly
proclaimed the extinction of the company's rule and
claimed the sovereign power as the hereditary right of
Muhammadans which had been unjustly usurped by
Europeans". He ascribes to the movement a deliberate
character everything being done "in pursuance of a
settled design"² W.W. Hunter almost passed the same
opinion about the character of the movement giving it a
political colour more or less³.

A careful perusal of the History of the movement
makes it impossible to warrant such a conclusion. It is
clear that the movement originally started as one of
reform, which no other aim than that of purging Indian
Islam of the existing corrupt and unIslamic practices.
The peculiar tenets of the sect denouncing openly the
commonly read opinions and prejudices and its exclusive
character could not but involve its followers in
altercation with their neighbours. These differences
existing among the Muslim tenants were readily taken
advantage of by Hindu zaminders, who because of their

2. Ibid., p. 179.
vested interests, looked upon with suspicion any attempt at combination, on the part of their tenants. The extensive powers which the zamindar enjoyed made it easy for him, in cooperation with non-Fara'idi Muslim tenants, to harass the followers of the sect and that was obviously done.

The affray which was caused by the imposition of the illegal and irritating tax by one party and the refusal of the other to pay, intensified the hatred; the wealth and influence of the Zamindar and the questionable conduct of the zamindar and the questionable conduct of the Hindu Darogah made it impossible for the European magistrate to get at the truth and redress thereby the genuine grievances of the Fara'idis and left them once more to the mercy of their oppressive and now enimical landlords. The aggrieved party, after their failure to file an appeal before the Commissioner seemed to realize the futility of expecting Justice by legal means.

This feeling doubtless irritated them and led to a determination to take the law into their own hands and retaliate on the oppressor. Colvin diagnosed the root of the mischief as lying in the powers possessed by the Zamindars to harass the ryots on all pretenees and the influence which he would exercise in any case in which
he was a party. It was almost impossible under existing circumstances, according to him, to arrive at the truth in a case, the guilty person in which was often likely to be a man of wealth and position\(^1\).

The statement of evidences collected from the people immediately after the incident proved that attack upon purwa was dictated by the spirit of revenge. That revenge against the zamindar was the first object of their sudden assemblage is evident from the protracted period from 23 October to 6 November during which they waited for a convenient opportunity of carrying their known intention into effect and the kind of revenge which they took is the surest evidence of the kind and reality of the injury which they had suffered\(^2\).

The slaughtering of cows, defiling Hindu Temple and plundering Hindu villages are but the counterpart of the injury they received that the hands of the Hindu landlords illegal taxation on the sect, oppression and harassment and burning of the mosque etc. The cruel murder of the Darogah of Basirhat, the man who had been bribed off by the zamindar during the investigation of the first affray, in the bamboo stockade, when all other

\(^1\) Board., Collection., 54222, Colvin's Report, para. 36.
\(^2\) Ibid., Para 7 of Colvins Report.
prisoners were released by the insurgents, go to strengthen the above conviction.

As the zamindars and their employees and agents were all Hindus. it is but natural that the sect would took upon the whole community of Hindus as their enemies. Thus starting as a religious movement, it soon took the colour of an intensely communal organisation aimed at oppressing the numbers of the other community at whose door they laid the cause of all their sufferings in the past.

After successfully defying the civil authorities of Barasat and Nadia on 15 and 17 November, with their numbers considerably increased, they seemed to have gained confidence in their power and strength. It was at this time they were reported to have proclaimed the desirability of extinguishing British rule in India. The evidence that such a declaration was made, it must not be forgotten, was gathered from those members of the Hindu community who had suffered at their hands and hence liable to exaggeration. The probability of such a declaration lay perhaps in the initial success, which roused their hopes and gave incentive to the use of extravagant language. The leaders were ignorant fanatics themselves and they held out perhaps such inducement as
were most calculated to keep together their ignorant followers. Arguing from such extravagant utterances, or even from their subsequent defiance to Government, it would be a mistake to ascribe political motives to the sect. These acts were, it appears, the result of circumstances and more a matter of necessity than of choice. They must have been apprehensive of the consequences of Lawlessness which they had committed in retaliating on the Hindus. The defiance to Government authority was dictated, it seem, by a feeling of despair and by an instinct of self preservation under discouraging circumstances.

It might as well be, that the attempt of the Government to suppress lawlessness was interpreted by them as support given to a class of people at whose hands they had suffered so much in the past.

J.R. Colvin positively asserts that he could secure no information showing that there was anything in the proceedings of the party beyond the result "of a sudden fanatical impulse". Their actions from the first were guided by mere accident and caprice and were not the result of cool calculation.
Indeed, the view that the sect was goaded to action against government through political motives is the consequence of wrongly identifying the followers of Titu Mir with those of Sayyed Ahmad known as "Muhammadis"\(^1\). The declaration and commencement of Jihad by Sayyed Ahmad against the Sikhs in 1826-27 and the facts of the "Muhammadi" Trials in 1864 and 1865, revealing a conspiracy in which Bengal and Bihar Muslims took a leading part, must have led these writers to assume forty years after the incident that the Fara'idis were Muhammadis. The political motive ascribed to the followers of Titu Mir might have gained currency as well from the official report drawn up by Ravenshaw after the Trial of 1865, wherein he too erroneously states in a summary way that the sect of the Fara'idis "were generally reported to entertain ideas of subverting the British Government"\(^2\).

1. See for such wrong identification Calcutta Review, No. C1., pp. 177, 184. Hunter states that the capture of Peshawar in 1830 by Sayyed Ahmad 'emboldened Titu Miyan to throw off all disguise' and he thus connects the sect and its leader with the "Muhammadis" see Hunter op. Cit., p. 45.

2. S.R.B.G., XLII, Trial of Ahmadullah, p. 140, It is however significant to note that Ravenshaw rightly makes a distinction between Muhammadis and Fara'idis in religious matters.