The Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 constituted an important part in the history of nationalism in India. Sisirkumar was groomed as a nationalist by this Revolt. Therefore, a review of this phase may provide an excellent prelude to further study of Indian nationalism and Sisirkumar Ghosh.

This chapter is designed to discuss Sisirkumar’s connection with the rising of the indigo ryots against the European planters as well as to indicate its political significance as a background of his political views.

In the political history of India the indigo revolt was a landmark. What distinguished it from other uprisings in India was the active and powerful support which it received from the educated middle class, animated by a modern consciousness. The intelligentsia of Calcutta was well trained in the Western political forms. So their support of the cause of the indigo ryots elevated it to the plane of a full-fledged political struggle between two races, Indians and Europeans.

The basic issue in this conflict was the principle of justice. The meek and poor indigo ryots were denied justice by the European planters who treated the former literally as
slaves. It was to vindicate the cause of justice in the sense in which it is defined in the Western political tradition — an altogether new concept in the East—that the English educated sections of Calcutta made a common cause with their rural brethren. Thus, politically, the indigo episode of 1859-60 may be said to be no less important than the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. The educated middle class of Bengal who backed this event gave expression to the early impulses of Indian nationalism through it and set a pattern for India's future national movement against the British India. Government. In contrast, those who provided leadership to the rising of 1857 — the princes and feudal chiefs — were not imbued with any such modern consciousness and thus had nothing to contribute to the democratic tradition of modern India.

The cause of the indigo struggle was economic in origin. In Lower Bengal the cultivation of indigo was never profitable so far as the ryots were concerned. Consequently, they were very much dissatisfied with the system. The cultivation of rice in place of indigo would have certainly brought them some profit. But the European planters, for their own profit, forced them to cultivate indigo by coercion and intimidation, and without any adequate remuneration. Through fraud and trickery, they exploited the innocent and illiterate ryots.  

* The administrative name of the geographical areas coterminous with West Bengal, the newly emergent Bangladesh and Assam.
With the Government remaining a passive witness, the planters continued to exploit the indigo ryots ruthlessly with the connivance of high district officials of Nadia and Jessore, which turned out half the amount of indigo produced in Lower Bengal. 4

There were two kinds of indigo cultivation in Lower Bengal. 5 One was nijabad, in which the factory-owners, that is, the planters themselves, would supply the land and seed. The cultivators were hired usually along with their ploughs and bullocks. The other was raiyati, in which the ryots sowed indigo on lands belonging to the Indian zemindars or the planters who were also zemindars. The ryots had some tenancy rights on raiyati lands. It was in a raiyati land that the indigo conflicted with the interests of ryots and Indian zemindars. 6

The ryot would take an advance on the basis of a contract between him and the planter. Under the terms of contract, the former would agree to undertake all the works starting from ploughing the land and ending with carting the plant to the factory at his own expense. 7 On one pretext or another, the cash advance was seldom repeated, though occasionally a planter would pay an instalment to placate the ryot.

Two factors, which were rather correlative, made the ryots extremely aggrieved against the system. First, they
were always paid less than their due for the cultivation of indigo. Second, the cultivation was, by itself, unprofitable for them. Thus it would involve them into recurring loss. Indeed, under the circumstances, the ryot lost 7 rupees per bigha by cultivating indigo in place of another crop, namely, rice. 8

One can easily understand the plight of the ryots under such an oppressive system. The ryots would run into heavy debt to the planters to support their families. The shrewd planters used the debt as a threat to force them to cultivate indigo.9 Thus the increasing impoverishment of the ryots was an advantage which planters exploited to the fullest extent to further their selfish and vile interest.

The Royal Indigo Commission, appointed by the Government on May 10, 1860 observed:

"All the defects of the system ... may be traced originally to one bare fact, the want of adequate remuneration." 10 About the system of advance, it commented: "It matters little whether the ryot took his original advance with reluctance or cheerfulness, the result in either case is the same; he is never afterwards a free man." 11 Again, referring to the industry as a whole, it reported: "Violent individuals can only work such a system by oppression and ill-usage." 12

The planters were not unaware of the smouldering discontent among the ryots. This fact, in stead of relaxing
their death-grip upon the ryots, made them revengeful and vindictive. They applied various forms of tyranny to suppress any possible voice of protest. In fact, they let loose a regular reign of terror which was graphically recorded by Sisirkumar Ghosh.

Incidentally, Sisirkumar was still in his teens when the indigo disturbances broke out. It was an age which was too early for any other man to have anything to do with such an event. But there is positive evidence which affirms that he played a definite role in this great upheaval. As Jessore correspondent of the Hindoo Patriot, edited by Harish Chandra Mukherjee, he focussed the attention of the educated public and the Government on the plight of the miserable ryots, and brought a serious indictment on the selfish and cruel planters responsible for it. Moreover, he took an active part in the agitations in so far as he dissuaded the ryots to cultivate indigo and encouraged them to defy the planters.

The planters had established a rule of their own in the indigo districts of Lower Bengal, of which he had a first hand experience as a reporter. He stated:

"They (planters) held courts, criminal and civil, and awarded all sorts of punishment. They confined men in their jails, and sometimes did much worse. They were not respectors of persons; and zemindars and ryots trembled before them. In short, they were the absolute masters of the persons and properties of the people, and they never failed to exercise,
to the fullest extent, the despotic powers they possessed. The ryots meekly suffered, for they had no help. If they resisted, their villages were plundered, and sometimes burnt down and some of them murdered. The Magistrates punished, not the planters, but the injured ryots.  

Some of the tyrannies as detailed above, were corroborated by the Royal Indigo Commission. It confirmed cases of kidnapping, carrying of cattle, and rooting up of gardens of recalcitrant ryots. According to its findings, such cases were numerous and "well-authenticated". Furthermore, imprisonment of individuals in factory godowns was "common occurrence".

The economic exploitation of the poor and helpless ryots became a central political issue between the Bengali intelligentsia of Calcutta and entire British commercial community which blindly defended the planters. In fact, the indigo conflict kindled a bitter racial antagonism between these two communities. It quickened in the mind of the politically conscious Bengali intelligentsia emotions characteristic of national sentiment.

It was, however, an impartial English official who indirectly encouraged the ryots to defy the planters. Ashley Eden, Joint Magistrate of Barasat, issued a statement (rubakari) which has become simply famous. It removed the legal ambiguity in the relations between the planters and the ryots.
It asserted that the ryots were free agents and could not be forced to cultivate indigo against their will.

The rubakari had taken the planters by surprise. One of the planters, Larmour by name, requested Eden, in a personal letter, to modify his order and take such action as would compel the ryots to fulfil their existing contracts. Eden refused to do anything in the matter. Larmour then appealed to Grote, Commissioner of Nadia, to intervene. Grote instructed Eden to protect the interests of the planters. But Eden stood firmly by his non-interference policy. Rebuffed by his inferior, the Commissioner forwarded the correspondence that passed between them to J.P. Grant, the second Lieutenant Governor of Bengal.19

Grant was a man of liberal conviction. He went into the very heart of the problem and handled it with sympathy and understanding. He endorsed the stand taken by Eden.20

The knowledge of the rubakari spread far and wide and the ryots from Jessore and Nadia rushed to Barasat to obtain the authenticated copy of the rubakari. They thought that the time for action was ripe, and that there was hope for the support of the Government.

In the early months of 1860 the district of Nadia witnessed some indigo disturbances. The ryots saw in the changing role of the Government an opportune moment to strike at the hated system. The planters became apprehensive of wide-spread disturbances. Sensing danger, they were quick to
seek the intervention of Grant so that the rebellious spirit of the ryots might be nipped in the bud. On March 13, 1860 Grant was visited by a delegation from the Indigo Planters' Association at Calcutta. The members of the delegation brought pressure upon the Lieutenant Governor to take two immediate measures: (i) to issue a notification enjoining the ryots to fulfil the existing contracts and (ii) to enact a law making a breach of contract punishable summarily by a Magistrate. Grant had to yield against his conscience. 21 A new law (Act XI) came into being in April, 1860, and was to remain in force for a period not exceeding six months. The enactment of this law served as a deterrent on the rebellious spirit of the ryots, and they had to fulfil their contractual obligation. The sowing season passed off peacefully barring some sporadic incidents.

The termination of Act XI after the stipulated period (October, 1860) set the stage for a great event which was a fitting prelude to the future freedom struggle of India. The ryots seized the opportunity to free themselves from the clutches of the European planters.

The planters had to fall back on their own resources. They took the law in their own hand in a desperate bid to keep the oppressive system going. They made all out efforts to coerce the ryots into subservience by violent means. They let loose their regular bands of lathiyals and spearmen upon the rebels. But this time the ryots were not to be cowed down.
They retaliated with equal force. They built up powerful resistance from village to village.

It was totally unthinkable that the Bengali ryots, who were usually known for their meekness and docility, could ever put up such an organized defiance and on such a grand scale against the all-powerful planters. The main brains behind this wonderful organization were Bishnu Charan Biswas and Digambar Biswas who provided leadership to the ryots in the Jessore and Nadia districts. They came from the petty landholder and money-lender class. They were elevated into legendary figures by Sisirkumar.

The part played by these two leaders in the heroic saga was unknown to the outside world until it was revealed by Sisirkumar in his "Story of Patriotism in Bengal." That Sisirkumar was in the thick of the affairs was evident from the intimate tone he took in describing the achievement of the two Biswases. He remarked:

"The rulers of the Empire know not the origin of the great combination. It is yet a mystery to them as to how a combination of the apathetic Bengali ryots, a combination in which about five millions of men took part, was brought about so secretly and so suddenly without the authorities knowing anything about it. We shall disclose the secret to-day, for

* First published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika on September 3, 1880.
the benefit of the rulers of the land. There is no longer any need for secrecy as both the noble heroes of our story are dead....

"... They were not acquainted with the English language, but they were men of indomitable perseverance and courage. They were, besides, men of heart and had a large share of that intelligence which generally characterises a Bengalee gentleman. Both of them served as Dewans of several indigo factories in the district of Nadia, and they were obliged to leave service in disgust ...." 23

The victory of the indigo ryots in their struggle against the planters will appear the more creditable when it is considered that they were never violent unnecessarily. They generally remained non-violent and law-abiding even in the midst of extreme provocations. As a matter of fact, they launched a non-co-operation movement or passive resistance against their oppressors. What they actually did was to resist the violence on the part of their enemies. On the whole, they were on the defensive. They never indulged in violent activity unless forced by the arrogant and ferocious planters. Indeed, their victory was the victory of the moral force over the brute force. As Sisirkumar pointed out:

"The indigo ryots won because they obeyed law...They won because they never invaded the rights of others. They
only protected theirs, when invaded by the indigo planters, by force of arms; and when by the Government, by a passive resistance. They cared not for the indigo planters, for after combination, they felt themselves immensely stronger than their oppressors. They had, however, to fight a good fight with the Government officials, the friends of the planters... When the Government myrmidons came to apprehend one, ten offered themselves to be apprehended. When the officials sent them to prison they went there with a joyous heart. They were respectful before the Magistrate and the Commissioner, but they never yielded an inch of ground. "Beat me, kill me, Saheb, but you can not make me yield to the planter," said the ryot, and he was beaten and incarcerated, and sometimes murdered. But the indigo ryots were never impertinent, never they yielded."

Considering the tender age of Sisirkumar at the time, his involvement in the indigo affairs can not be adequately accounted for without taking into consideration the cultural milieu of the early nineteenth century Bengal in which he lived and moved. Early in his life he came to acquire a strong sense of justice, a spirit of social service, sympathy for the poor and the lowly and, above all, a deep love of his own country. All these had taken a deep root in him even when he was only in his teens. All these found their early expression through the philanthropic association called Brotherhood, which he organized for the upliftment of his own village. Some of
the outstanding achievements of the Brotherhood were a high English school, a night school for the peasantry, a charitable hospital etc. One of his biographer remarked:

"... Very soon the attention of the then district Magistrate of Jessore, Mr. Munro, was attracted to the fast developing village of Palua-Magura, and he came to inspect it on Sisirkumar's invitation, was struck by the new life infused into it and the progress made in all directions. He commented very favourably on the work done by this little band of young men and secured financial aid for the school and the hospital...."

This was Sisirkumar and it was not surprising that he supported the cause of the ryots. It was his inherent sense of justice and also his love and sympathy for his own countrymen that impelled him to espouse an idealistic but dangerous cause. It should also be noted that he began his life as a social rebel. His radical outlook was apparent when in his early youth he discarded the traditional Hindu faith and embraced Brahmoism as the true religion. He took this step at the risk of social ostracism and the wrath of his parents. But he preferred to alienate the love of his parents for the sake of truth.

According to Prof. Nirmal Sinha, the indigo struggle was given "direction and edge" by Sisirkumar, Harish Chandra Mukherjee and Girish Chandra Ghosh. As he remarked:
"Hardly in his twenties, Shishir Kumar, as the Jessore correspondent of the 'Hindu Patriot' from 1859 — to 1860, stung the conscience of the British officials by his graphic reports on the oppression practised by European indigo planters and their Bengali Dewans on the ryots in Jessore and Nadia. He moved from village to village in Jessore and Nadia, sometimes by boat, encouraging the ryots to unite in their resolve not to cultivate indigo any more on their lands...

To the ryots Shishir Kumar was known as Sinni Baba (God-sent father), and to the educated public as M.L.L., under which pseudonym he wrote about their persecuted life in the 'Hindu Patriot'. 27

As the Jessore correspondent, Sisirkumar brought into focus the pitiable condition of the ryots, the inhuman selfishness and greed of the planters, and the corruption and partiality of the high district officials who acted as accomplices of the planters. The HindooPatriot which started a systematic campaign against the tyrannical planters, opened a column under the heading "The Indigo Districts" to make public the actual state of affairs obtaining in the indigo districts of Lower Bengal. J.C. Bagal observes:

"... Sisirkumar Ghose (Later, Founder-Editor of Amrita Bazar Patrika) wrote several letters for the Press in 1860 on the subject based on his personal experiences. Some of the letters were published under the initials 'M.L.L.' I came to discover these letters in the files of The Hindu
Patriot of 1860 ... To form a true idea of the indigo struggle these letters are indispensable ..." 28

That the correspondent who wrote these letters under the signature of M.L.L. and Sisirkumar were one and the same person has now been well established. There is an evidence even from his family member, which may be taken as authentic. As J. C. Bagal pointed out:

"... Sisirkumar's sister, Sthir Saudamini (younger to him only by two years) writes in her Reminiscences: "At that time the indigo-planters were tyrannising the people of the northern parts mercilessly. Sejda (third elder brother, Sisirkumar Ghosh) began to write about these in the newspapers in order that the Government might take notice of them. Instead of putting his own name, he used to give his "rashnam" Manmathalal. His efforts were not fruitless. " 29

The rashnam* of Sisirkumar with the family title should have been initialled as M.L.G. J.C. Bagal explained that the printer of the Hindoo Patriot printed the initials as M.L.L. through mistake. 30 But the substitution of 'L' for 'G' might have been a well-thought-out device to get the dog off the scent. It should be kept in mind that the Jessore correspondent charged some of the high district officials with abetment of crimes committed by the planters and thus drew upon himself

* The astrological name created during a special ceremony.
their hatred and anger. Of these officials, Molony and Skinner, Magistrate and Joint Magistrate of Jessore, earned a great notoriety. They were nicknamed by the rybts as Boro patramara and Choto patramara respectively.31 *

It is easy to imagine that they would be rather delighted to catch hold of the Jessore correspondent and subject him to all sorts of persecutions once they could ascertain his identity. Sisirkumar must have foreseen the reactions his letters would produce on them. He knew that they would leave no stone unturned to track him down and were sure to vent their spleen upon him like an injured animal. So he thought it unsafe to put the initial of his surname which might have betrayed his identity to his enemies. That there might have been some such arrangement between him and the Patriot was a possibility which cannot be ruled out.

It is now an admitted fact that the Jessore correspondent was no other than Sisirkumar himself. A foreign writer, Blair B. Kling, who made an extensive study of the indigo disturbances of Lower Bengal during 1859-50, unreservedly attributed the authorship of the letters to Sisirkumar. He stated:

* A patramara being one who lives on the bounty of others.
The correspondent of the Hindu Patriot in Jessore, Sisirkumar Ghose, closely followed the proceedings of Skinner, while the joint magistrate tried desperately to discover the author of the damaging reports. Sisir wrote of Skinner's frequent social visits with various planters and of his exonerating planters who had committed outrages. Molony was similarly denounced... In one case Sisir accused Molony of holding five villagers accused of cattle trespass in godown for one month before the trial, and during the trial itself of permitting the planter to sit beside him on the bench...

The letters themselves provide some valuable clue as to the identity of the Jessore correspondent. Of these letters, two will be taken into consideration here as these are more relevant. From the letter dated August 1, 1860, it is seen that Skinner and Molony, many of their illegal acts being exposed, were desperate to find out the author of the letters. But all their efforts proved abortive. At last they were supplied with a list of suspects containing as many as three dozen names. The letter reads:

"... The names were devoured greedily by the Magistrates. Some of them they knew, some they did not, but it was not an easy matter to select the man who writes in the papers. However, these of men, ... Ananda Baboo, Nazir; Vishnu Baboo, Postmaster; Shishir Baboo, a teacher; Krishna Baboo; Baboo Grish Mouliek and another, have been picked up as the most
likely. Mr. Molony suspecting Ananda Baboo has severely reprimanded him. Mr. Skinner is sure and certain of Shishir Baboo's being the man ... The rumour is that Ananda Baboo will be dismissed, Shishir and Vishnu Baboos flogged and Krishna and Grish Baboos imprisoned... Mr. Skinner... has noted down every particular of Shishir Baboo, namely, his place of residence etc. ... "33

Thus it is evident that Sisirkumar figured prominently in the list of suspects. It is also evident that Skinner's suspicion fell upon him right from the beginning, and he held steadfastly to his suspicion to the end. The following extract is taken from the letter published on August 8, 1860:

"I can not now remain in the Sudder station for fear of being detected by Mr. Skinner, who is trying his utmost to find out our Jessore correspondent and has already stretched his vindictive hand to punish Shishir Baboo, the teacher whom he has suspected. He has succeeded in raising suits against Shishir by sending a Chaprashee to a neighbouring village of his and bringing four chashas who deposed before Mr. Skinner to the effect that they have been prevented by Shishir Baboo's father to sow indigo for seed. It appears that those chashas were promised something by Mr. Skinner ... "34
It is more than clear that Sisirkumar was the prime suspect and, as it is known to-day, rightly so.

The direct involvement of Sisirkumar in the Indigo revolt had a profound influence on his future course of life. It left deep and enduring imprints on his mind and thought so much so that when, later, he came into conflict with the British India Government itself as a staunch champion of Indian rights, he would look back on this historic event as a great source of inspiration and would reminisce about it. His brief and youthful career as the reporter of the Hindoo Patriot must have inspired him later to found and edit the Amrita Bazar Patrika. Again, he looked upon the glorious event of 1859-60 as politically most significant. To him, it was not an isolated economic struggle of the indigo ryots. There was manifest through it the resurgent spirit of a subject people long smarting under the foreign yoke and just awakening to political consciousness. In the columns of the Patrika, he remarked:

"It was the indigo disturbance which first taught the natives the value of combination and political agitation. Indeed, it was the first revolution in Bengal after the advent of the English. If there be a second revolution, it will be to free the nation from the death-grips of the all-powerful police and district magistrates. Nothing like oppression! It was the oppression which brought about the
glorious revolution in England and it was the oppression of half a century by indigo planters which at last roused the half-dead Bengallee and infused spark in his cold frame." 35

Indeed, the Bengali intelligentsia emerged from the indigo struggle with a heightened political conscious- ness that prepared them, as Blair B. Kling observed, to lead the rest of India in nationalist agitation in succeeding decades. 36

Thus Sisirkumar learned the practical lessons of nationalism from the Indigo Revolt. His subsequent contribution to Indian nationalism was deeply coloured by the experience of this historic event.

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