**Abstract:**

*This paper studies the years 1940-42 in Bengal with a view to analyse the social fuel that made the Quit India Movement possible in the province. Wartime colonial policies created multiple disruptions and intrusions in the lives of the people of Bengal, building up anxieties and mass discontent. Coupled with widespread rumours, this profoundly reconfigured the image of the colonial state. This paper attempts to tap into the psyche of colonised minds in the early stages of the war in Bengal, which began to question British invincibility in the face of serious reverses on the Eastern Front. When a potent mix of mass discontentment and rumour was combined with 'revolutionary' political activism in the countryside, it acted as an explosive catalyst, animating the Quit India movement.*

Key words: Quit India, War, Rumours, revolutionary parties, political activism, Subhas Chandra Bose

## The Second World War and the Prospect of Quit India in Bengal: Perceptions, Rumours and Revolutionary Parties

The Quit India Movement of 1942 was the last of the mass-movements launched by Gandhi, and his biggest up to that point. However, the movement, as it developed in the after the arrest of the leadership of the All India Indian National Congress, was different from pervious Gandhian mass movements because of the scale of violence that ensued. Bihar, Orissa, Maharashtra and Bengal were the most affected provinces. In Bengal, Midnapore, which saw the formation of the Tamralipta National Government in December 1942, was the main storm centre. There were violent attacks on British symbols of power and authority, especially *thanas,* post offices, train lines and telegraph poles. The idea that British rule had ended, or was on the verge of collapse, was pervasive. The wartime context with Japan's expansion towards India's eastern border made the movement particularly worrisome for the British.

The causes and the nature of the Quit India Movement have been studied by scholars for several years, yet no existing analysis explains its emergence adequately. While Francis Hutchins has described it as a spontaneous outburst, he strangely left out Bengal from his case study.[1] A. C. Bhuyan studies the role of the Second World War in prompting Gandhi and the Congress to call for the Quit India Movement; but his work is limited to colonial policies and Congress reactions.[2] Bidyut Chakrabarty's work is by far the most comprehensive on the development of the movement in Bengal, and he does well to trace the reasons behind the

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[1] Francis G. Hutchins, *Spontaneous Revolution: The Quit India Movement* (New Delhi, Manohar,1971)
[2] A. C. Bhuyan, *The Quit India Movement, The Second World War and Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi, Manas, 1975)

involvement of Mahishyas, the dominant caste in Midnapore, in Gandhian movements.[3] Chakrabarty as well as Srimanjari focus on the economic impact of the War on Bengal, drawing a link between war-time economic policies and popular discontent.[4]

What is missing from these different narratives is an account of the changing understanding potential rebels had of British institutions. Durba Ghosh's powerful intervention on Bengali revolutionaries argues that for nearly a generation, scholars have suggested that the revolutionary terrorist movement remained marginal to the larger arena of organised civil disobedience because the movement was secret, underground and its elite membership never managed to build a mass following.[5] Recent scholarship by Ghosh, Michael Silvestri and Kama Maclean, among others, has shown that revolutionaries were an important element of the Indian nationalist movement, not just a radical fringe.[6]

At the same time, there is a need to focus attention on the role of wartime anxieties and rumours, by reconfiguring the image of the colonial state in Bengal, which, coupled with the activism of 'revolutionary' parties, had profound implications for the Quit India movement. This paper seeks to address how changing perceptions about the war-afflicted state provided a unique milieu for political mobilisation, which was then utilized by political parties other than the Congress in Bengal to provide fuel for the movement. Though ostensibly responding to Gandhi's call, the movement's strength drew from many sources: wartime popular discontent,

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[3] Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism: Midnapur, 1919-1944* (New Delhi, Manohar, 1997)

[4] Srimanjari 'Denial, Dissent and Hunger: War-time Bengal, 1942-44' in Biswamoy Pati (ed.) *Turbulent Times India 1940-44* (Mumbai, Popular Prakashan, 1998)

[5] Durba Ghosh, *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919-1947* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.10.

[6] See Michael Silvestri, *Policing "Bengali Terrorism" in India and the World: Imperial Intelligence and Revolutionary Nationalism, 1905-1939* (Britain and the World Series, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (London, Hurst & Co, 2015)

rumours about Japan's intentions and strength, and from the political activism of Subhash Bose and 'revolutionary' parties.

The War drew upon Indian human and material resources on a mammoth scale. By 1945, India had contributed two and half million men to the British Indian Army, 30000 to the Royal Indian Navy and 28,538 men to the Royal Indian Air Force.[7] From May 1940, Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for India, oversaw the effort to ship from India around 40000 tons of grain per month and India became the largest contributor to the empire's war, providing goods and services worth more than £2 billion.[8] Naturally, for Britain, it was imperative that India contribute to the war effort, and the Government of India began to equip itself with every means possible to enable it to function effectively.  The Defence of India Act was passed on 5 September 1939, which gave the Viceroy special powers to pass any ordinance that Britain considered necessary for the proper prosecution of the War.[9]  The War Fund was also started in 1939. Collected by District Magistrates on behalf of the government, Yasmin Khan argues, it soon placed a new burden upon its donors – the peasant cultivators and the middle-class alike and this contributed strongly towards the public disenchantment towards the war.[10] Before Japan's entry, even a deep apathy towards the war prevailed in Bengal; Air Raid Precaution (ARP) exercises were often ignored and several firms in Calcutta were found selling unauthorised ARP badges to civilians.[11]

With Japanese successes in Singapore and Malaya and their rapid advance towards the Eastern Frontier of the British Empire, the War came closer to India. Wartime policies came

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[7] Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine: Bengal 1939-45* (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan, 2009) p.17.
[8] Madhusree Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York, Basic Books, 2011) p.5.
[9] Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine,* p.17.
[10] Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (London, Vintage, 2015), p.51.
[11] Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of Empire* (Harper Collins Publishers India, 2015), p.37.

into direct contact with, and often in conflict with, the local people in different parts of Bengal, including Calcutta, Noakhali, Tipperah, Khulna and Midnapore. What Britain considered necessary as part of a successful 'war effort' was often translated as forms of coercion by people whom these policies affected. In October 1941 the Government of India introduced the Bengal Time-plan in order to save electricity, and schools, offices and business establishments were expected to maintain working hours an hour ahead of schedule.[12] The middle-class complained that this measure had thrown out their daily routine.[13] In December 1941, Calcutta and its suburbs were declared a 'dangerous area' and residents of Calcutta soon began to flee to the countryside in large numbers. Marwari businessmen sold their stocks at reduced prices, closed their businesses and moved out.[14] To prevent anyone from potentially hearing Axis broadcasts, authorities confiscated any radios they could find. These unpopular measures had an impact: in January 1942, Amery was warned by Linlithgow that the potential for growth in Axis sympathies in eastern India was 'enormous'.[15]

Already, with the declaration of war in 1939 and dislocations in commodity markets, inflation had become rampant - the price of rice had risen by 33% and by September 1941 it had risen by another 36%, causing massive shock to rural population.[16] The influx of Calcuttans (and later Burmese refugees) into rural districts stressed commodity markets further, forcing a tough competition for basic provisions.[17] To top this, in February 1942 the Government of India brought into operation its most unpopular 'Denial Policy', to prevent Japanese soldiers from advancing further into the country in the event of an invasion. The Policy meant: 1) the removal of rice and paddy estimated to be in excess from the coastal districts of Bengal 2) the

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[12] Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine,* p.53.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal,* p.49.
[15] Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War,* p.63.
[16] Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal,* p.40.
[17] Ibid., p.55.

removal and destruction of boats which the enemy could use to their advantage.[18] Often the removal of rice was carried out forcibly; the sight of food being spirited away was disturbing.[19] Kamtekar describes how in Midnapore, when a crowd gathered one day outside a rice mill to prevent the shipment of rice away from the district, the police simply opened fire – 'The state's involvement in the grain trade thus made it directly responsible for dead bodies'.[20] Indian Civil servant Asok Mitra, who arrived in Munshiganj in east Bengal in February 1942, found that storehouses that could hold thousands of tons of rice, only held about ten; he was informed that the police had destroyed or seized stocks.[21]

The destruction of boats profoundly affected the lives of the poor farmers and fishermen. Places where the Policy came into operation were some of the richest rice producing areas in East Bengal and rice from here had earlier been transported to adjacent deficit areas like Dacca.[22] The withdrawal of boats directly affected the movement of food supplies as East Bengal comprised primarily of marshy lands, interspersed with small water bodies where boats were the only mode of transport.[23] In Midnapore, the district magistrate issued an order that all types of boats in Contai had to be removed in only a matter of three hours. Since this was almost impossible to do, hundreds of boats were burnt and hardly any compensation was paid.[24] Boat 'denial' had further far-reaching consequences: fishermen could not reach their fishing patches, cultivators of island paddies had to abandon their crops and potters could not carry

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[18] Famine Inquiry Commission, Report on Bengal (New Delhi, Usha, 1984) p.25. Henceforth FIC.

[19] Indivar Kamtekar, 'What caused the Quit India Movement?' *Working Paper Series* – 134 (90), Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, June 1990, p.27.

[20] *Ibid*.

[21] Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War,* p.66.

[22] Nanavati Papers, Volume II, National Archives of India, New Delhi, India, (henceforth NAI) Testimony of B. R. Sen (Director General of Food, Government of India), p.440.

[23] The FIC admitted that it was recognised that the removal of large number of boats from the delta, in which communications were almost entirely by river and not by rail and road, would cause considerable hardship and inconvenience. FIC p.26.

[24] Satish Chandra Samata et.al *August Revolution and Two Years' National Government in Midnapore*, Part 1, (Calcutta, Orient Book Company, 1946) p.7. Samanta was the President of the Sub-divisional Congress Committee of Tamluk, Midnapore.

their bulk goods to markets.[25] A British official posted in East Bengal agreed that Denial Policy had 'throttled' the economic life of the lower delta.[26] Even Gandhi, who had earlier written in defence of the govt. policy, revised his stand and opined that to deprive people of East Bengal of their boats was like 'cutting off a vital limb'.[27] Janam Mukherjee rightly argues that for the time being, it looked as if it were the British, not the Japanese who were launching an attack on the Bengal countryside.[28] To many in Bengal, it appeared that the war was bringing devastation with or without a new foreign occupier, and that the incursion of an occupying force could not be more destructive than the defensive actions already being taken.[29]

The fear that Calcutta could be bombed by the Japanese caused more panic and lent credibility to the image of a besieged state. The local press, which had earlier been instructed to focus on British military victories to help the war effort, now did the opposite, fanning emotions in the process. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* severely criticised the ARP practice of digging trenches as shelters during air raids. It called them 'nothing but shallow dug outs which resemble little slushy pools' in the rainy weather.[30] As fears of Japanese air raids escalated in December 1941, the newspaper described the city as one in chaos. People who were not working for essential services in Calcutta were asked to leave, city buses were ordered to remain stranded in the Maidan for one night in May 1942 to impress upon the people the seriousness of the situation.[31]

For most Bengalis the war brought misery and substantial intrusions into their daily lives. What made the situation even more volatile were the reverses which Britain faced in the War. The losses at Singapore, Malaya and Burma were militarily disconcerting for Britain, but

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[25] Anwesha Roy, *Making Peace, Making Riots: Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940-47* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) p.69.
[26] *Ibid*., p.70.
[27] *Harijan* 3 May 1942.
[28] Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal,* p.65.
[29] Khan, *The Raj at War*, p.97.
[30] *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (6 July, 1941).
[31] *Arani*, 8 May 1942, p.7.

more importantly, they were humiliating. Britain's chaotic retreat from Burma and the sufferings of refugees left 'indelible stains' on the reputation of the British; in the short term it undermined faith in the Raj's continued existence, as it gave rise to the feeling that the end of the empire had come.[32] Although 'subterranean eddies' of anxiety and discontent were swirling even earlier, Srinath Raghavan argues, the Japanese victories cracked 'the edifice of the Raj' and left large parts of India cowering at the prospect of invasion.[33] For the returning refugees, who now flocked the Sealdah and Howrah stations in huge numbers, the outcome of the war was not in doubt – a Japanese victory was certain; they had witnessed the Allied defeat, they *knew* the empire was ending.[34] Not only were these refugees a visible confirmation of England in retreat, they also carried with them 'alarmist tales' of Japanese military might.[35] Stories also filtered out of racial discrimination in the evacuation of South East Asia – Europeans had been let out along well-supplied tracks with plenty of porters, whereas Indians were held back and allowed to starve or die of disease in squalid transit camps.[36]

Even when the British propaganda machine expanded to meet the challenges of morale in eastern India, the dissemination of print and oral propaganda was undermined by difficulties, including lack of funds. For example, a report from Bengal complained that a single propaganda van had to cover three districts in the province and that the District War Committees were allotted an annual budget of Rs. 100 each.[37] This obviously impaired official inroads on war propaganda into the countryside. Although over time the British propaganda machine became more systematic, the Indian villager mainly pieced together an understanding

[32] Khan, *The Raj at War,* p 100, p.93.
[33] Srinath Raghavan, *India's War World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia* (New York, Basic Books, 2016), p.256.
[34] Kamtekar, 'The Shiver of 1942', *Studies in History*, Vol. 18 (1), 2002, pp.81-102.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London, Penguin, 2005) p.186.
[37] Sanjoy Bhattacharya, *Propaganda and Information in Eastern India 1939-45: A Necessary Weapon of War* (New York and London, Routledge, 2016) p.80.

of the war based on a bricolage of stories gleaned from the families of soldiers, newspaper articles read aloud at village gatherings, radio broadcasts from a shop in a district town and the counter-propaganda circulated by the Congress and the Axis.[38] Moreover, ordinary people were quite wary of the accuracy of information that was being fed to them through British channels.[39] The British had distorted and underplayed the story of the retreat from Burma, minimizing in their propaganda the hardships suffered by the refugees. Since they continued to alter the story even after the refugees had reached home, little that the official channels reported was accepted.[40] In such an atmosphere, anxieties and rumours about Japan thrived and played a significant part in rattling the image of the state.

**Rumours, Anxieties and Hope - the Changing Image of the Colonial State**

The Monthly Intelligence Report of March 1942, issued by the Central Intelligence Department in India, reflected that

> Rumours and stories of the wildest nature have continued to circulate, and have helped to produce a general feeling of unrest…There is general apprehension that should an invasion take place, there will be outbreaks of internal lawlessness and communal disturbances...Enemy inspired reports, now in wide circulation, and incidentally untrue, that the Japanese invaders are treating Indians and other Asiatic residents of occupied territories with special consideration, provide one reason for the section of the people maintaining that Japanese rule might actually prove a blessing…There has been much criticism of the Allied policy in the Far East, and resentment has been expressed over India's alleged unpreparedness to meet aggression.[41]

The Government of India pointed out that the spate of 'wild rumours' were obviously harmful to British 'interests', that there was a 'whispering campaign' that the Japanese have no quarrel with Indians and that, if they do drop bombs, they will take care not to injure Indian

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[38] Khan, *The Raj at War,* p.41.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] Kamtekar, 'The Shiver of 1942', p.86.
[41] India Office Records, British Library, London, (henceforth IOR) File R/L/WS/1/317, p.146, Monthly Intelligence Summary (henceforth MIS) No. 3, 4 Mar 1942.

life or property.[42] The Special Branch (Police) of Calcutta maintained detailed records of the kinds of rumours circulating throughout the province. Intelligence officials 'classified' rumours into several broad categories. First, there were rumours concerning Indian troops which alleged heavy casualties and dissatisfaction among Indian regiments in Malaya. The officer who reported this was quick to point out that the rumour was false, and that rumours in this category were clearly calculated to cause fear in recruiting areas and even general panic.[43]

The second category regarded the 'pan-Asiatic' narrative that Japan and India were part of Asia and hence Japan would not attack India, which was intended to undermine Indain antipathy towards the Japanese and any will to resist an invasion. Thirdly, and closely connected with this, was the anti-White rumour which, Intelligence reports claimed, was calculated to foment racial antagonism and to emphasise the difference between Britain – 'the aggressor' - and Japan – 'the deliverer': reiterating the preference shown to Europeans in evacuation from danger zones, and forcing Indian troops into the firing line while European troops sheltered behind them. Lastly, there was a miscellaneous category which aimed at creating panic, internal disorder and a generally 'defeatist' mentality.[44]

The Calcutta Police Commissioner repeatedly issued communiques, stating that rumours were being circulated deliberately by 'certain evilly disposed people for their own evil purposes'.[45] Demarcating potential rumour mongers from 'law-abiding and innocent citizens', one Communique stated that there was a growing sense of resentment that these 'mischief mongers' were trying to put law abiding citizens at the risk of 'ruin, misery and even death' and that they were 'guilty of a crime against the whole city; a crime worse than murder'.[46] Circulating rumours was criminalised, and anyone found circulating a rumour would find be

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[42] *Ibid.*, p.157, MIS No. 2, 8 Feb 1942.
[43] IOR/L/WS/1/317, p.156 - MIS No. 2, 8 Feb 1942.
[44] *Ibid.*
[45] Special Branch (Police) Records, Kolkata Police Museum, (henceforth SB) File Number PM/757/41, 1941, p.25, Communique from the Police Commissioner, Calcutta, 29 April 1941.
[46] *Ibid*.

labelled as a criminal not just in the eyes of the state, but potentially also that of civil society itself, or so the Communiques hoped.

However, such actions by the Commissioner did nothing to abate the general state of uncertainty surrounding the war. The state now intruded into private correspondence between ordinary people to find clues of their responses to the crisis. However, reading through the minefield of letters that Intelligence reports classified as carrying 'War-rumours', it is evident that the Government's definition of rumours was capacious, frequently including realistic fears and sometimes even accurate information as rumours. Although some letters did carry rumours, which gave even more credence to panic. But it is important to note that there was a fine line between 'news' and 'rumours'. There was a compulsive need of Intelligence officials to discredit everything that did not conform to the 'official' version. It is only when details chimed with an 'official' version that it was 'news', and therefore safe; everything else was regarded as rumour, and hence, dangerous, even when they were not completely baseless. Rumours communicated about the Japanese bombing (as described below) were, in fact, substantiated by Japan actually bombing Calcutta in December 1942. These letters give a sense of the pulse of war-time Bengal, describing the very real anxieties of Bengalis, and indicating the extent of the idea that the colonial state was on the point of breaking.

A Special Branch report in January 1942 declared that a total of 2000 'panic letters' came to their notice in the course of interception in Calcutta over a period of just two days - 31 December 1941 and 1 January 1942.[47] In an intercepted Bengali letter dated 15 December 1941, Ananta Banerjee of Calcutta wrote to Atashi Debi in Faridpur, that Japan had attacked Burma and that Calcutta itself would be destroyed within a few days: 'as the situation of the war stands, it can be presumed that the English has no chance of victory. They are being

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[47] SB File Number PM/757/42, 1942, p.51, SB Report on 6 Jan. 1942.

hopelessly defeated by Japan...'[48] Another letter, intercepted on 18 December 1941, from K. Sarkhel of Calcutta to Santi Debi in Barisal, underlined a more palpable fear. Sarkhel informed Debi that the situation in Calcutta was critical, that people were running away to their village homes and he was at a loss to understand what was to be done under the circumstances. Interestingly, Sarkhel points out the Japanese had most probably occupied 'Singhapur', in India.[49] The reference here is undboubtedly to the fall of Singapore, but the writer's belief that Singhapur was somewhere in India clearly created a sense of anxiety, which was sent from Calcutta to rural Barisal.

Two brothers, 'Dada' and Biren corresponded on 30 December 1941, when 'Dada' mentioned that Biren should not write anymore, given the 'abnormal times', no address could be taken as fixed or permanent. The writer also feared that the whole of Calcutta would be handed over to military control and that 'everyone would be subject to military control and will have to move under their compulsory evacuation.'[50] The stability associated with the very idea of Calcutta as a metropolis was now gone, as new territorial comfort-zones had to be imagined and scrambled to for safety.

In another letter, from 'Anu' in Calcutta to a Miss Sarkar in Birbhum on 24 January 1942, informed the reader that two gentlemen he knew had recently returned from Rangoon after being injured there, and that the bullets extracted were 'the properties of our authorities…i.e. British bullets. Our authorities have now begun to practice on us'.[51] This particular rumour rattled Intelligence officers: the Special Branch found the letter 'highly objectionable' and suggested it should be withheld, and action taken against the writer, since

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[48] SB File Number PM/757/41, 1941 pp.34-35, Gist of a Bengali letter, 15 Dec.1941.
[49] *Ibid*. pp.51-52, SB Report on letter on 18 Dec. 1941.
[50] SB File Number PM/713/40, 1940, pp.86B-86A, Letter dated 30 Dec. 1941, intercepted by SB 3 Jan. 1942.
[51] SB File Number PM/713/40, 1940, p.23, Translation of a Bengali letter written on 24 Jan. 1942.

'the writer is spreading anti-British propaganda. The Special Branch should trace him and bring him to book'.[52]

Letters sent outside Bengal mirrored similar anxieties. An intercepted letter dated 2 January 1942, written by Gaur from Calcutta to his uncle N. K. Bharatiya in Cawnpore, mentioned that there was 'so much of uncertainty' in Calcutta, that lives were no longer free from danger; people were expecting a raid any moment and that the city's defence arrangements were weak. The loss of faith in the Raj is evident when the writer mentions that 'This Government would do nothing for our safety'.[53] Two letters, one to Iceland and the other to England, written by a member of the Civic Guard to two women (probably pen pals, as inferred by the Special Branch), indulged in a long tirade against the British, stating that no Indian wanted Britain to win, that when Britain lost the war she would become 'a slave nation herself'.[54]

The substance of these letters mostly revolved around fears of an attack, invasion, or bombing by Japan and the inability of the British Government to defend India. Letters also spoke of a rumoured friendship professed by Germany and Japan towards Indians, and hopes of deliverance by Japan. For instance, in January 1942, Santosh Mukherjee of Dacca wrote to Durga Chakravarty in Calcutta, intimating that after Penang was thrown to the mercy of the Japanese, the latter encouraged Indians there to continue their everyday life as usual and that this news from Penang had generated hope in the mind of Bengalis 'at the time of impending change of master'.[55] A radio announcer was reported to have spread a rumour on the 'Berlin Radio' in January 1942 that Hitler had assured the Indians that he would not lay down his arms without making India free, but that he had no personal ambition in Asia and was concerned

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[52] *Ibid*.
[53] *Ibid*., p.66 A, SB report, 9 Jan. 1942.
[54] *Ibid*. p.18, SB Report, 8 Oct. 1941.
[55] SB File Number PM/713/40, 1940, p.72, English Summary of Bengali letter, 10 Jan. 1942.

only with Europe and Africa.[56] This benevolent interpretation suggests that fascism, at least for some Bengalis, seemed less aggressive than imperialism.

There was a mass exodus from Calcutta to the countryside and to neighbouring provinces, especially of up-country mill hands. Cloth production was an essential part of the war effort and the reduced number of mill workers severely impeded production. Calcutta had long attracted labour to its factories from far away, but in the panic following the Japanese declaration of war, the flow of workers from adjoining states to Calcutta practically stopped, with many returning to their 'native' places.[57] Intelligence reports in December 1941 claimed that the exodus from Calcutta was due to the apprehension of air-raids.[58] While managers of Calcutta jute mills tried hard to keep workers in the mills during the air-raid drills, many workers responded by fleeing mills and mill towns in what mill owners described as panic and fear.[59] A representative of the Titaghur Jute Mills wrote that Titaghur district had been full of ominous rumours and labour generally had been very unsettled.[60] Of 150 Oriya coolies employed in the Bengal Rope Works, Paikpara (Chitpore), fifty had fled, as had a number of Jute press workers in Cossipore and Chitpore.[61] An intelligence report on 20 December 1941 stated that about 3000 casual labourers of Cossipore and Chitpore areas had left the city in panic.[62] On 22 December 1941, about 65000 and 20000 people were reported to have left Calcutta via Howrah and Sealdah Stations respectively.[63] On 24 December, 30000 people left from Howrah and another 20000 from Sealdah, which mostly included labourers.[64] By 30

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[56] SB File Number PM/757/42, 1942, p.95, SB Report, 2 Feb. 1942.
[57] Kamtekar, 'The Shiver of 1942', p.88.
[58] SB File Number PM/757/41, 1941 p.57, SB Report, 17 Dec. 1941.
[59] Anna Sailer, 'When Mill Sirens Rang out Danger, The Calcutta Jute Mill Belt in the Second World War', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhay (eds) *Calcutta The Stormy Decades* (New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015) p.139.
[60] Private Official Letter from Calcutta to Dundee, Dundee University Archives, MS 86/V/7/6, 3.10.1940, cited in *Ibid.*
[61] SB File Number PM/757/41, 1941 p.57, SB Report, 17 Dec. 1941.
[62] *Ibid.*, p.60, SB Report, 20 Dec. 1941.
[63] *Ibid.*, p.95, SB report, 27 Dec. 1941.
[64] *Ibid.*

December 1941, the total number of evacuees to have left Calcutta was 632, 244.[65] By 15 January 1942, about 25 percent of the day labourers of the jute presses of Cossipore and Chitpore had left Calcutta and this exodus, combined with the stoppage of large jute purchases by the Marwari jute press owners, led to severe labour shortages.[66] Many small shops in Calcutta closed down from January 1942 for want of customers, owing to apprehensions of military control.[67] About 70-80% of the old hands employed in the Britannia and Lily Biscuit companies had left, with the result that production and supply was impeded.[68] The apprehension of aerial bombing also caused the management of the newspaper *Amrita Bazar Patrika* to consider the establishment of a skeleton press at Jessore. Suresh Mazumdar, the proprietor of the newspapers *Hindusthan Standard* and *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, was urged by his employees to start a similar press elsewhere in the countryside.[69]

Anxieties, panic and rumours hence created a combustible mix that destabilised Bengal. Discontent and frustration against the British mounted, pro-Japanese sympathies were fostered, and many were convinced that the British authority in India was on the point of collapse. There grew a belief that the Japanese could liberate India and the old adage that one's enemy's enemies were one's friends began to find currency. This was acted upon by revolutionary political parties in their mobilizing drives, in turn raising the political temperature in the province and acting as a catalyst for the Quit India Movement later in 1942.

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[65] *Ibid.,* p.111, SB report, 2 Jan. 1942.
[66] SB File Number PM/757/42, 1942, p 82.
[67] *Ibid.*, p 44, SB report, 10 Jan 1942.
[68] *Ibid.,* p 84, SB Report, 23 Jan and 24 Jan 1942.
[69] *Ibid.*, p 65, Extract from Statement of C. B – 18d, 13 Jan 1942.

**Anti-British political activism during the War**

While the state obsessed about rumours and their classification, political activism was taking a concrete shape in the form of mobilisation in the countryside, much of which was outside the purview and control of the All India National Congress. The years between 1939-42 were a prominent phase of the virulent anti-British propaganda carried out by smaller and often local political parties that fell outside of the reach and remit of the Congress. The British Government had classified these parties under the blanket term 'terrorist groups'. These included the Anushilan Samiti, the Jugantar Party, the Sri Sangha, the Bengal Volunteer Group and the Forward Bloc, all of which owed allegiance of varying degrees to Subhash Chandra Bose and enjoyed a particularly large student following. The alliance that Bose forged with Germany in early 1942, and later, with Japan, had a significant impact on the morale of these parties.[70]

With the deteriorating political scenario within Europe from the late 1930s, Bose had repeatedly sought an opportunity to free India.[71] He wanted to be ready to take advantage of some form of weakening of the British Raj, which might occur if there was a new war. Bose himself had a lot of admiration for Japanese military skill and aggressiveness.[72] As early as the mid and late 1930s, well before Gandhi envisaged it, Bose had advocated issuing an ultimatum to the British, backed by the threat of a renewed non-violent mass movement.[73] Once the War broke out, Bose continued to emphasise the need for utilizing the situation to India's advantage and advised the Congress to act decisively and put pressure on the British by means of a mass movement to quit India. In early 1940s, while addressing a student conference, he warned that 'true patriots' had to be wary of a 'Gandhian compromise' with imperialism.[74] As Gordon

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[70] Romain Hayes, *Subhash Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany: Politics, Intelligence and Propaganda 1941-43* (London, Hurst & Co. 2011), pp.111-113.

[71] Leonard Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj, Sarat Chandra Bose and Subhas Chandra Bose – A Biography* (New Delhi, Rupa, 2015), p.171.

[72] *Ibid*., p.190.

[73] *Ibid*., p.217.

[74] *Ibid*., p.240.

notes, Bose, even in his early forties, continued to identify with the young, calling upon them to join him in his 'manly' fight against all reactionary forces of imperialism and also within the nationalist camp,[75] a thought that echoed well with the different revolutionary groups of Bengal.

Bose's theme remained one of no compromise with British imperialism and after resigning from Congress Presidency in 1939, he formed the Forward Block and began to escalate anticolonial activities.[76] In July 1940 he started the Holwell Monument agitation for removal of an imperial monument erected in 1760 to mark the 'Black Hole of Calcutta', now seen as a symbol of India's slavery and humiliation.[77] This was a wise move, which secured Bose the support of both Hindu and Muslim students, further escalating his popularity in Bengal. His daring escape from his home in Calcutta in January 1941[78], right under the noses of British officials, caused tremendous excitement amongst Bengalis. News of his disappearance was published in the *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* and the *Hindusthan Standard* and then picked up by Reuters and transmitted to the world, leaving British Intelligence officials embarrassed and bewildered.[79] After the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, Bose made his first open broadcast to India, declaring that the Japanese victory presaged the collapse of the British Empire.[80] Among those who heard Bose's first broadcast, there was an 'exhilarating

[75] *Ibid.*, p.232.

[76] Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p.180. When Bose won the election to the post of President for the second time at the 1939 Tripura Congress, Gandhi took it as his own defeat. Gandhi had his own candidate, Pattabhi Sitaramaiah, whom Bose had defeated. But Gandhi, and majority of his supporters refused to accept Bose as the President and threatened to resign from the Congress. Bose was pushed to a corner; he resigned from the Congress and formed the Forward Bloc.

[77] Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Subhas Chandra Bose and Middle Class Radicalism: A Study in Indian Nationalism 1928-40* (London, I.B. Tauris, 1990) p.63.

[78] Bose was arrested in July 1940 because of the Holwell agitation and sent to prison. However, in prison, his health dangerously deteriorated and Linlithgow and Herbert (the Bengal governor) decided not to risk his death in prison and sent him, instead, to his home (in house arrest) in December 1940.

[79] Chakrabarty, *Subhas Chandra Bose and Middle Class Radicalism* p.193.

[80] *Ibid.*, p.213.

thrill of a new world order'.[81] Bose declared in this broadcast that Germany, Italy and Japan were India's natural allies and these countries had nothing but goodwill for India's independence.[82] Later that year, in a press conference on 12 June, Bose reiterated this point, but also significantly added that India was on the verge of revolt and was eager to break the chains of bondage.[83] Yasmin Khan argues that Bose simplified the political task ahead, reducing it to one basic mission – the ejection of the British – and persuaded many Indians that they did not have reason to fear the Japanese.[84] Bose was convinced that it was only a matter of time before the Axis powers attacked India and a revolution broke out and he gave clear instructions to his followers in the Forward Bloc to enable this revolution. The Bloc's 'subversion campaign' was to include an intensification of propaganda to weaken confidence in British rule, prepare the public for the entry of Axis troops and the positioning of Indian 'agents' along strategic points on the eastern coast of India to assist disembarking Japanese troops.[85]

Before the Quit India movement took shape 'terrorist groups' in Bengal, in consonance with Bose's scheme, began planning a mass uprising against the British and carried out propaganda campaign towards that end. Japan's victory strengthened their resolve and hopes about a potential British collapse only helped make their propaganda stronger. From March-April 1942, the Jugantar Party, which had bases in Dacca, Calcutta and Faridpur, propagated the idea of a mass uprising with newly recruited members because they were confident of Bose returning to liberate the country with the help of Axis powers.[86] A letter from Phani Mazumdar, a key leader of the party, was apprehended by Intelligence officials in early March 1941. He

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[81] Khan, *The Raj at War*, p.113.
[82] *Ibid*.
[83] Hayes, *Subhash Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany*, p.118.
[84] Khan, *The Raj at War*, p.113.
[85] Hayes, *Subhash Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany*, p.113.
[86] IOR/L/P&J/12/402 – Review of Revolutionary Matters (henceforth RRM) for four weeks ending 22 Oct. 1942, p.121.

wrote that the Party had already realised that an opportunity for 'mass insurrection' might present itself when conditions in England deteriorated and that seizure of power would not be possible unless such a crisis arose. This crisis, he wrote, was approaching and he urged the party to prepare for it.[87]

In 1941, Gandhi launched his Individual Satyagraha instead of a mass movement. He felt that a mass movement at this stage could turn violent and he did not wish to embarrass the British government at this stage of the war. Gandhi selected fellow Satyagrahis carefully; since the satyagraha had to remain non-violent at any cost, only those on whom he had complete faith were chosen. The Jugantar Party condemned this move. Bhupen Datta, one of the key leaders, expressed the opinion that the young men of Bengal would not be satisfied with a Satyagraha programme, but would require something more 'lively'.[88] Manoranjan Gupta, another leader of the party who opposed the Satyagraha, expressed the opinion that once Britain found itself in an unfavourable situation in the War, the time would be perfect for an armed revolution, and police stations, the visible symbols of Government in the mufassil, could easily then be captured by mobs and the arms looted.[89] Datta, whose main sphere of influence were the districts of Jessore and Khulna, deputed members to Jessore to explain to the peasants the war situation and urge them to be ready to rebel when the right moment came and to drive the police away from police stations.[90] The activities of both these men caused enough consternation among Intelligence officials for them to state that if they were not dealt with soon, there would a rapid spread of violence in Bengal. The plan to attack police stations was particularly alarming for its resonance with Chauri Chaura during the Non Cooperation Movement, which had proved that police stations were vulnerable in the face of a 'determined

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[87] *Ibid*., p.74.
[88] IOR/L/P&J/12/401, p.368, RRM for the fortnight ending 30 May 1940.
[89] *Ibid*., p.455, RRM for the four weeks ending 5 Dec. 1940.
[90] *Ibid*., p.456.

mob'.[91] Attacks on police stations later proved to be one of the defining features of the Quit India Movement in Bengal – in Midnapore, three *thanas* were simultaneously attacked by 'revolutionaries' on 29 September 1942.

From early 1940, the Anushilan Samiti, according to Intelligence reports, had been planning a simultaneous armed uprising all over India, believing that the movement for the final struggle would come when the British were in difficulties in the War.[92] Samiti leaders reached out to students, labour and peasants with a 'socialist' message and carried out a reorganization drive in several districts like Rajshahi, Tippera, Birbhum, Mymensingh, Bakarganj and Calcutta.[93] In 1940, the party changed its name to Revolutionary Socialist Party or RSP. Intelligence officials recovered two 'inflammatory' leaflets in July-August 1940. The first one in Bengali, titled, *Biplabi Senar Dal Egiye Chalo* (March on, ye soldiers of the revolutionary army), appealed to the 'soldiers of the revolution' to wrest administration from British hands and liberate imprisoned patriots and lead the revolution to victory.[94] The second leaflet, titled *March to Victory or Death* (remarkably similar, incidentally, in its title to Gandhi's later call of 'Do or Die'), declared that the time was ripe to break the chain that had bound India for 150 years and to seize independence.[95] This leaflet was distributed at a meeting of the All Bengal Muslim Students' Association on 13 July 1940 in Calcutta. The Samiti also was reported to be making detailed plans in the event of an armed revolution to attack government institutions.

In April 1942, Intelligence records claimed that the RSP was preparing for an armed revolution when the Japanese invaded Bengal.[96] There was 'speculation' that when Japan invaded India, she would grant her independence; there would be a new form of government,

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[91] *Ibid.*
[92] IOR/ L/PJ/12/401, RRM for the week ending 4 April 1940, p.334.
[93] IOR/ L/PJ/12/402, RRM for 3 weeks ending 13 Nov.1941, p.16.
[94] *Ibid*., pp.412-413, RRM for the fortnight ending 1 Aug. 1940.
[95] *Ibid*.
[96] IOR/L/P&J/12/402 – RRM in Bengal, p.70.

in which the Samiti hoped to secure for itself an important position as a reward for helping the Japanese.[97] Such feelings were rampant among leaders in Noakhali, Barisal, Mymensingh and Dacca. In March it circulated a Bengali pamphlet titled *Then and Now* in Dacca and Chittagong, which condemned the Communist Party of India for support of the British in the war against fascism and encouraged armed revolution now that British imperialism. Several leaflets found in Dacca accused the Communist Party of treachery, when all revolutionary parties of India under the lead of Subhash Bose were about to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the war.[98] An official assessment of the RSP in July 1942 read that 'The RSP is rabidly anti-British and is attempting to inflame the masses by propaganda that British rule is responsible for the rising cost of living, for draining India of essential food…and for placing Indians in the forefront of the battle while the British army remains safely in the rear'.[99]

A Special Branch report pointed out in January 1942 that the Forward Bloc in Calcutta was enthusiastic about Japanese successes in Malaya and the Philippines and they felt that Japan would ultimately invade India. While apprehending wholesale arrests of their leaders by the Government, they were also confident that they would be freed by the Japanese.[100] They were also reported to be propagating rumours that the Japanese were treating Asians 'decently' in the occupied territories, so Calcutta had nothing to fear.

In Midnapore, a key centre of the non-Congress agitation, revolutionary terrorism had a long history. The village of Contai had been ransacked in 1930 by police on suspicion of harbouring Chittagong Armoury raiders and Bhupal Panda and Sukumar Ghose were well known as revolutionaries, the latter belonging to Shree Sangha.[101] Between 1930-33, Midnapore had gained notoriety in official circles for the consecutive assassination of three

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[97] *Ibid.*, p.48, RRM for 4 weeks ending 29 Jan. 1942.
[98] *Ibid.*, p.70, RRM for six weeks ending 1942.
[99] *Ibid*, p.93, RRM for 6 weeks ending 9 July 1942.
[100] SB File Number PM/757/42, 1942, p.65, SB report, 13 Jan. 1942.
[101] Ghosh, *Gentlemanly Terrorists,* p.175.

District Magistrates, who had been renown for their high-handed and often brutal upholding of repressive government laws.[102] The Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act and the Emergency Powers Ordinance were passed in 1932 to tackle the growing revolutionary activities in Midnapore and Chittagong.[103] After the murder of the District Magistrate James Peddie in 1931, nearly 20 suspects from different revolutionary terrorist groups were investigated, but no witnesses or informants stepped forward to identify the assailants, leading to the observation by local officials that there 'seemed to be an undercurrent of feeling of sympathy with the outrage'.[104] The Jugantar party had also been active throughout the 1930s.

After the outbreak of the war, Midnapore was exposed to the propaganda of these revolutionary groups with renewed vigour. In April 1942, members of the Bengal Volunteer Group, which had been quite close to Bose from the 1930s,[105] expressed the view that they would welcome the Japanese. Rajani Jana, one of the important leaders of the district, met members in the coastal area in Contai and advised them to co-operate with the Japanese should they land in the area.[106] In February renewed efforts were made at Midnapore to recruit college students to the party. Intelligence reports also pointed out that from April, members in Calcutta were keeping in touch with those in Midnapore to prevent them from being won over by the anti-Fascist propaganda of the CPI.[107]

Several other anti-British pamphlets and leaflets were also found in circulation, mostly issued by the Revolutionary People's Party. In February, a Bengali leaflet titled *Awake, Revolutionary Party* predicted the immanent fall of the British, concluding with the slogan

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[102] Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism,* p.110.
[103] For more details on what these Acts entailed, see Ghosh, *Gentlemanly Terrorists*, p.161.
[104] WBSA IB File 215/31, Part II – Letter from FW Kidd, Director, IB, Midnapore, 20 April 1931 to Farmer, Director and IG, Intelligence Branch, CID, cited in *Ibid.* p.149.
[105] For more details on the relationship between Subhas Bose and the Bengal Volunteer Group, see Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj.*
[106] IOR/L/P&J/12/402 – p.128, RRM for the four weeks ending 22 Oct. 1942.
[107] *Ibid.*, p.129.

'*Subhash Bose Zindabad*'.[108]  Another leaflet, *Bidrohi* (Revolutionary), written in English and issued by the 'Subhash Rakshi Dal' (Subhash Defence Group) declared that Singapore was captured because Indian soldiers had refused to fight, further urging Indian soldiers not to take part in the war. The Subhash Guards, it stated, must take advantage of the international situation to liberate India, and the young revolutionaries of India should join the Subhash Guards in their thousands in response to 'the clarion call of *Bidrohi* Subhash Bose for armed revolution'.[109]

However, it must be noted that these pro-Japanese sentiments did not necessarily mean a blind support for fascism. Bose himself had been adamant about this, stating that an alliance with the Axis powers did not imply acceptance of their ideology.[110] Pro-Japanese sympathies were merely a mechanism to oust the British. An Intelligence report summed up this attitude precisely, that 'The Britain that they once thought so strong now appears to them to be weak, so why should they resist the Japanese; far better to curry favour with a possible victor…'[111] Many of his followers believed that as a result of Bose's interventions alone, the Japanese would respect India's cause for independence. While such views were ridiculed as 'myopic', and a reflection of the 'perversity of the mind' of the Subhash Guards by Intelligence officials, regular in-depth analysis of the activities of such groups is indicative of the concerns of the intelligence services.

**The Quit India Connection**

Above, I have laid out the role of war-time anxieties and rumours in changing the political mood in Bengal and the role of 'revolutionary' parties in escalating the anticolonial agitation. These two activities came together in 1942, with the Quit India movement. Students, who were

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[108] *Ibid*., p.80.
[109] *Ibid*.
[110] Hayes, *Subhas Chandra Bose in Nazi Germany*, p.120.
[111] IOR/L/P&J/12/402, p.69, RRM for six weeks ending 2 April 1942.

the main support base of revolutionary groups, were also at the forefront of Quit India movement in Bengal, especially in Howrah, Birbhum, Calcutta and of course, Midnapore. Students in schools and colleges of Tamluk, Kanthi and Midnapore town had imbibed militant nationalism from the extremist political workers.[112] Pulinbehari Sen, the student leader who led the movement in Khejuri, states that these workers trained the youth in the use of lathis and daggers and distributed revolutionary literature. Under the influence of such workers, Sen admitted that he had developed a 'partiality' for Bose.[113] In fact, in August 1942, the Congress and Forward Bloc leaders of Kanthi decided to close their ranks and prepare for the movement together.[114]

Sushil Dhara, one of the most important leaders of the movement, certified that Bose had a substantial following in Midnapore, because of his uncompromising stand against imperialism.[115] A young man of twenty-nine when Bose escaped from Calcutta, Dhara was thrilled with the news and seemed sure that Bose had gone to either Germany or Japan to secure India's freedom. Closely following Bose's rhetoric, Dhara regarded the enemies of Britain as his friends.[116] When news of Japanese successes started pouring in, Dhara was elated.[117] Dhara in fact had a long and complex relationship with both Gandhian non-violence and revolutionary terrorism. Although he was imprisoned for his participation in the Civil-Disobedience movement in 1930, Dhara wrote in his autobiography that an 'indulgent' Indian jailor permitted him to visit restricted areas in the prison, where members of a revolutionary outfit gave books on armed insurrection and spent hours indoctrinating him; their message of 'power'

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[112] Hitesranjan Sanyal 'The Quit India Movement in Medinipur District', in Gyandendra Pandey (ed.) *The Indian Nation in 1942* (Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1988), p.42.
[113] *Ibid*., p.43.
[114] *Ibid*., p.44.
[115] Chakrabarty, *Local Politics and Indian Nationalism*, p.137.
[116] Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War,* p.22.
[117] Kaushik Roy 'Military Loyalty in the Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Indian Army during World War II', *Journal of Military History*, 72, no.2 (April 2009), pp.497-529.

mesmerized him.[118]  The Jugantar also had a formidable influence amongst the students of Midnapore, and student leaders belonging to the Party, such as Prabir Jana and Rabindra Maiti, popularised the movement among the villagers as a possibility to end to their misery.[119]

A fascination with Nazism was also evident from the accounts of some of the participants in the movement. The name of the 'national militia' of the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar – *Bidyutbahini* (Lightning Force) – was inspired by Hitler's Storm Troopers.[120] The head of the Jatiya Sarkar was called *Sarvadhinayaka*, which, during the movement, the leaders at Midnapore themselves translated as 'Dictator'. Dhara proudly stated that he had a deep admiration for Hitler, and that the *Bidyutbahini* would root out the British from India and bring about independence, with the same determination as the Storm Troopers in Germany.[121]

**Conclusion**

Distress, when coupled with popular attribution of its responsibility, has a powerful political potential. To the profound war-time distress in 1941 was added news of Japanese advances in Southeast Asia, and an expectation of their arrival in India, which was tempered by an image of Japan that entirely downplayed its militarism and its imperial greed, depicting it as friendly to Indian aspirations. The collective anxieties felt by Bengalis, transferred throughout the province by letters and rumours, circulated panic, but also remoulded the image of the British empire as one that was surely on the verge of collapse. The vivid image of a vulnerable enemy resonated among the letter writers of Bengal, providing a glimpse into the imaginations of Bengalis as they responded to the conditions of the war. This created an opening in anticolonial activism, which was exploited by revolutionary parties in Bengal and translated into the

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[118] Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War*, p.24.
[119] Sushilkumar Dhara, *Prabaha*, Volume 1 (Midnapore, Janakalyan Trust, 1983), p.113.
[120] Gopinandan Goswami, *Banglar Haldighat Tamluk, Tamluk Mahakumar Swadhinata Sangramer Tathabahul Sankshipt Itihas* (Midnapore, Vishwabani Pathagar), p.37.
[121] Dhara, *Prabaha*, p.118.

demand that the British leave India, well before Gandhi and the Congress launched the Quit India movement. As the conviction of the strength and durability of the state waned in the early stages of the War, the combination of rumours, discontent and political mobilization laid the ground-work for 'Quit India' to be possible in Bengal.

(Word Count: 8607)