

# **Union Board Boycott Movement in Midnapore - Background and Impact**

## *Synopsis*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Midnapore is evidently a forerunner of freedom struggle during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The subdivision of Contai started playing a significant role during these days. The Union Board Boycott Movement was organized in the Sub-division of Contai concurrently with the Non-cooperation Movement (1921) in protest against the implementation of the Bengal Village Self Government Act (1919) and consequent establishment of union boards under the Act in 1921. The present study “*Union Board Boycott Movement in Midnapore: Background and Impact*” aims to trace back the events and causes leading to the movement, its local impetus, the leadership and extent of mass participation, its outcome and impact on the future course of anti-British struggle. In searching these aspects, archival papers and literature have been considered. Contemporary issues of the *Nihar*, a popular anti-British newspaper from Contai have been extensively used. Interviews of the persons associated with latter day anti-British struggle are also used in this study.

The present study is divided into seven chapters. **Chapter-I** deals with the geo-historical characteristics the district of Midnapore District and Sub-division of Contai, review of literature, research gap and methodology of the present study. The undivided district of Midnapore, the southern most district of Burdwan Division during the British Raj is situated between 21<sup>0</sup>36' and 22<sup>0</sup>57' north latitude and between 86<sup>0</sup>33' and 88<sup>0</sup>11' east longitude. The Sub-division of *Contai (Kanthi)* lying between 21<sup>0</sup>36' and 22<sup>0</sup>11' north latitude and between 87<sup>0</sup>25' and 87<sup>0</sup>59' eastern latitude was created on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1852 with a total area of 850 square miles and a population of 4,42,272. In respect of castes and tribes, almost one-third of the whole population is from the *Kaibarttas*, whose lineage can be traced back from the ancient *Smriti* texts. Among the *Kaibarttas* the cultivating class was categorized as *Mahishyas*. In Contai, the population of the *Mahishyas* was substantially high. However, their position in the caste hierarchy in Bengal was low. The District and the

Subdivision had a rich legacy of anti-British struggle since the First *Chuar* Rebellion (1767). Since the foundation of the Congress Midnapore was associated with organized politics. Swadeshi Movement ushered in the mass mobilization in this District and the Subdivision. Midnapore was again the hotbed of revolutionary activities since 1902.

**Literature on this Movement** can be traced in various writings on freedom movement in India. Some are written from the perspective of comprehensive national movements, where local issues find least reference. Subhas Chandra Bose in his *“The Indian Struggle 1920-1942”* has referred to the Bengal Village Self Government Act resulting in dissatisfaction of the people of Midnapore and consequent success of the Movement under the popular leadership of Birendranath Sasmal. Sumit Sarkar in his *“Modern India 1885 – 1947”* also refers to the Movement as “very effective no-tax movement among the predominantly *Mahishya* substantial tenantry of Midnapore” under the leadership of Sasmal. Amales Tripathi in his *“Swadhinata Sangrame Jatiya Congress (1885-1947)”* also briefly analyses success of this Movement against the rise in taxes in view of caste solidarity and same interest between the leaders and participants.

Some studies are from regional and local perspectives which throw different opinions while making an estimate of the Movement. Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay in his *“CASTE, POLITICS AND THE RAJ BENGAL 1872-1937”* includes very brief mention of the Movement without going into much detail. Bidyut Chakraborty in his *“Local Politics and Indian Nationalism Midnapore 1919-1944”* traces back history of the Movement and its significance. Rajat Kanta Ray in his *“Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal 1875-1927”* discusses the Movement at the backdrop of rivalry between the two groups in Contai - one is local people predominantly represented by the *Mahishyas* and another is settlers in Contai coming from outside. Gitasree Bandhyopadhyay in her *“CONSTRAINTS IN BENGAL POLITICS, 1921-41”* analyses that the success of the Movement was “largely due to the atmosphere created by the non-cooperation movement”. Partha Chatterjee in his *“Bengal 1920-1947”*, Volume

One attributes the success of the Movement to peasants' consciousness. Hitesranjan Sanyal in his "*Swarajer Pathe*" opines that Union Board Boycott Movement initiated the saga of glorious mass movements in Midnapore. Sanyal in his article titled "*Congress in Southwestern Bengal: Anti-Union Board Movement in Eastern Medinipur, 1921*" in "*Congress and Indian Nationalism*" edited by Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert analyses the background and course of the Movement considerably at length. He attributes the initiation of the movement to popular resentment, where both the lower and upper strata of the society comprehended the various implications of the Union Boards and decided for a common action. Anil Kumar Jana in his study "*Quit India Movement in Bengal – A Study of Contai Subdivision*" has examined the background of the Union Board Boycott Movement in the Sub-division of Contai. Though the study leads our investigation to some local issues related to the Union Board Boycott Movement and other movements in the Subdivision, the main focus of the study is the Quit India Movement in the Sub-division and hence it does not elaborate and pinpoint the gravity and depth of the happenings that took place simultaneously with this Movement

There are some books depicting regional history of freedom movement. "*Swadhinata Sangrame Medinipur*" of Basanta Kumar Das discusses the background and course of the movement at length. Birendranath Sasmal in his own autobiography "*Sroter Trina*" mentions the events resulting in his decision of leading the people of Midnapore against the Union Boards. Sri Pramathanath Pal, in his "*Deshapran Sasmal*" refers to the Movement in a chapter, much of which is written following Sasmal's autobiography, his article published in *The Amrita Bazar Patrika* and his letter to Sub-divisional Officer Sri J. Dey. Dr. Bimal Kumar Shit in his "*Deshapran Birendranath Sasmal O Banglar Jatiyatabadi Andolon*" discusses the role of Birendranath in the Anti- Union Board Movement.

Apart from these, the following books have also been reviewed for the purpose of tracing the research gap so as to delineate the main objectives the proposed study: (1) *Peasant Movement in India* by Sunil Sen, (2) *Agrarian Bengal* by

Sugata Bose, (3) *Shatabdir Alope Deshapran Birendranath* by Sri Pramathanath Pal (Edited), (4) *Romanthan* by Prasanta Pramanik, (5) *Kaler Nirikhe Deshapran Birendranath* by Gourishankar Mahapatra (Edited) and (6) *Deshapran Birendranath Sasmal* by Bina Das.

While the books chiefly on national movements briefly touch the issues concerned with the Movement and refer to its success as a matter of fact without going much profound in specific introspection to the origin and development of the Movement, books on narrative studies on regional and local history comprehensively discuss the origin, course and leadership of the movement. Again, the books on studies of regional history from different critical perspectives have covered specific areas of caste elements, local political orientation, people's solidarity, unique role of leadership and peasant consciousness.

But a comprehensive study on the Movement starting from the specific administrative, political and social background of the Movement, spanning through course and development of the Movement and highlighting the impact of the movement is required to understand the proper significance of the Movement. The present study aims to undertake its efforts towards that dimension. The major gap that has been identified in these studies is the lack of comprehensive understanding of the Movement. The Movement needs to be studied from its very own impetus and momentum. It also necessitates a closed scrutiny of the linkage among the various socio-political factors and of its impact later movement in the District. Thus the present study is a humble attempt to fill the gap in the right perspectives

Main **objectives** of the study is to identify the factors and causes leading to the launching of the Movement, critically examine course of the Movement, find out reasons for withdrawal of the Union Boards, trace the role of socio-political factors leading to the success of the Movement and find out linkages between the Union Board Boycott Movement and the later Movements in this District. The proposed study is **mainly historical and partly empirical**. The combined methodology has been

preferred to single one since the Movement took place almost a century ago under foreign rule against which the native people organized a mass protest. Historical information is traced from various Government records and files (both confidential and non-confidential), Proceedings volumes of different Departments Government of Bengal, Administrative Committee Report, volume of Annotated Acts, Report on Indian Newspapers and Periodicals, Reports of the Census and extracts copied from different newspapers. Field visits to Contai and interviews with some local veterans including a few outstanding freedom fighters have been used as additional sources with caution and precision in this study.

## II

**Chapter-II** deals with the socio-political background, origin and development of the Movement. The last couple of years of first decade and early half of the second decade of twentieth century witnessed different political activities and organization in India and abroad. The Moderates did not offer much resistance against the administration before 1909. At the backdrop of moderate-extremist debate, revolutionary activities again offered staunch opposition to the colonial Government. After 1909, revolutionary activities became strengthened. The Government repressed both the extremists and the revolutionaries equally. Alongside it created an atmosphere of expectations with the promise of the more reforms by Montague since 1917. The two Home Rule Leagues leaped forward the ideological and organization base after 1915. By that time, the moderates became weakened owing to the demise of leaders like G. K. Gokhale, Pheroz Shah Mehta, M. G. Ranade, Ramesh Chandra Dutt and Anand Charlu. India stood at the crossroad waiting for leadership and mass participation.

Lucknow Congress (1916) was the culmination point of Besant's charisma, as it marked the official re-entry of the Extremists in the platform of the Congress and the rapprochement between the two fighting groups. Above all, it signified the

cooperation towards political agenda between the Hindus and the Muslims as both accepted self-rule as their ultimate political goal

Local grievances among the peasants offered Gandhi ample opportunity to use his political weapon. Before plunging into national politics in India, Gandhi preferred to keep low profile since his return from South Africa in 1915. He decided not to take a public stand on any political issue during the very first year of his return. He became engaged in organizing his *ashram* in Ahmedabad. Besides he toured around the country and gathered first hand information regarding various ongoing political activities. He could identify himself neither with the moderates nor with the Home Rulers. He had already made his vision for national struggle during his sojourn in South Africa. Gandhi was deeply convinced that only *satyagraha* was the viable way for national struggle. He could think of joining only an organization or a movement that would adopt non-violent *satyagraha* as its method of struggle. He was, therefore, in search of an opportunity for bringing in his own ideas. Gandhi started his initial endeavours in India in Champaran (Bihar), Kheda (Gujrat) and Ahmedabad (Maharashtra).

Gandhi reached the threshold of national movement with the Rowlatt *Satyagraha*. The movement was organized in protest against the unpopular Rowlatt Act (1919) which embodied some of the recommendations of the Sedition Committee headed by Justice Sydney Rowlatt. The Report of the Sedition Committee, published on 19th July, 1918 aimed at making war-time restrictions on civil rights permanent through a system of special courts and detention without trial for a maximum of two years. Rowlatt Satyagraha was not a success but it was a learning experience for him. Montague Chemsford Report evoked mixed response from the Indian politicians. Moderates like Surendranath Banerjea welcomed it. C. R. Das and B. Chakraborty of Bengal opposed the proposed Act. The Special Session of Congress in Bombay pronounced the proposed reforms disappointing and unsatisfactory. It accepted Dyarchy for a limited period, and demanded full responsible government to be established within in fifteen years in the Centre and

six years in the Provinces. Gandhi was in favour of accepting the basic principles of the Reforms and fighting for betterment of the proposed Act. Simultaneously with these developments Indian Muslims were enraged with the *Khilafat* issue. Gandhi was politically drawn towards the issue. He thought that the call for *Khilafat*, if incorporated within his pledge for national struggle, would create an assimilating force of the Hindus and the Muslims against the British *Raj*. Nagpur Session (1920) of the Indian National Congress passed the programme of Non-Cooperation *Khilafat* Movement. It ushered in Gandhi's weapon of non-cooperation with *Khilafat* as an integral issue aiming at '*swaraj*' – a goal for the imminent mass movement. In spite of spontaneous response from almost all the corners of the country Gandhi called off the Movement after the *Chauri Chaura* incident (1922). This abrupt suspension caused dissatisfaction among most of the Congressmen in the country. The Movement evoked a considerable mass mobilization in Bengal. The undivided District of Midnapore was active with the Non-Cooperation activities of boycott of schools, colleges and courts, establishment of national schools and colleges, organization of arbitration courts, campaign for swadeshi commodities and boycott of foreign goods.

The Union Board Boycott Movement in Midnapore (1921) though took place simultaneously with the Non-Cooperation Movement and had its base stood upon the supporters and activists of the Congress, it fought against the enactment and implementation of the Bengal Village Self Government Act (1919), which brought in a new institution called "Union Boards" in the villages of Bengal with the official promise of more self-reliance in local administrative level. Election of the Union Boards was conducted in January, 1921. The Movement was generated out of discontent of the village strongly protested against the imposition new tax. Though Union Boards were entrusted with immense responsibility of civic amenities for the village people, it was seriously handicapped with the limited financial resources. This issued was raised by Birendranath Sasmal, who was a non-cooperator barrister and a close associate of Chittaranjan Das. In spite of his efforts, Sasmal was not able to



pass the programme of non-cooperation with and civil disobedience against the Bengal Village Self-Government in the meeting of the Executive Council of Bengal Provincial Congress Conference (1921).

### III

**Chapter-III** deals with the course of the Movement. The course of the Movement can be divided in three phases: early phase, second phase and the third or last one. During the early phase – from the April-May, 1921 to mid-August, 1921 - people were organized for future programmes. They attended meetings, listened to the discussions held in the meetings and expressed their opinion on being asked by the leaders. The leadership organized meetings, arranged discussion on the issues of resentment and appealed to the authority for withdrawal of the union boards following the Section 58 of the Bengal Village Self Government Act. Sasmal sent a letter to the then Sub-Divisional Officer, Jnanankur De informing his decision of not paying the new tax. This phase may be defined as the period of active preparation for the Movement. The second phase started from mid- August, 1921 and continued up to the 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1921. During this period, situation became politically charged with enthusiasm running high among the people who attended the meetings. The meetings which were frequently organized were hugely participated. From 22<sup>nd</sup> September to December 1921 the Movement ran its last but the most vibrant period. Confiscation of movables of the defaulters started on 22<sup>nd</sup> September. People showed rare kind of patience in face of administrative repression and followed the path of civil disobedience and passive resistance as directed by Birendranath. By December, 1921 the Movement reached its final stage and its goal was on verge of being achieved. Since the establishment of Union Boards in March, 1921 people resented against the new system and the imposition of new tax. Government used force to break the morale of the people but the people simply refused to budge an inch from their determination. Government notified the withdrawal of 226 union boards from the whole district of Midnapore, except one of

Gopalnagar in Panskura *Thana*, Tamruk Subdivision on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1921. The Gopalnagar Union Board was withdrawn on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1922.

#### IV

**Chapter-IV** investigates the response of the Government. Initially the Government did not show serious concern over the development of agitation in Contai in particular and Midnapore in general. The issue of financial inadequacy of the Union Boards was raised by Birendranath. Ministry of Local Self-Government under the charge of Sir Surendranath Banerjea took notice of the issue. It made provision for grant-in-aid from the District Board. Government was seriously observing the turn of situation resulting from the Non-Cooperation Movement. It was alarmed that the system of administration might collapse under the pressure of agitation. It was also reported that the growth of the village self-governance was destroyed by the non-cooperators in Midnapore district. Government was seriously concerned over organized campaign against the new Union Boards. Birendranath Sasmal was held responsible for the destruction of the union boards by the Home Department, Government of Bengal. Local administration started the distraint of movables when people refused payment of taxes. A team officials comprising Satyendranath Ray, Joint Magistrate along with the Circle Officer, Norman Bose and Sub-Divisional Officer, Mr. J. Younie visited Contai to examine the situation. A discussion was held in the meeting of the Bengal Legislative Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1921. The motion for the withdrawal of the union boards was moved by Dr. Suhrawardi. Ultimately Government withdrew Union Boards from the district of Midnapore.

#### V

**Chapter-V** attempts a study on relevant issues involved in the Movement, and their socio-political impacts and mutual interactions. There were some particular political and social elements present in the whole affairs. Political elements can be looked into the programmes approved by the All India Congress Committee Congress

for the imminent Non-Cooperation Movement vis-à-vis the programmes and activities of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. Alongside, contemporary political situation in Midnapore vis-à-vis Sasmal's stature as a leader was another element of importance. The solidarity among the people during the Movement and its ultimate success had some particular local social elements. Non-approval of the Executive Council, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee was political factor. Subsequently, mass mobilization in Contai during the Movement was resulted from some local socio-political impetus.

## VI

**Chapter-VI** investigates the total impact of the Movement. The Movement significantly contributed to the strengthening of future anti-British struggles in Midnapore. It created a legacy of leadership and mass opposition against the foreign rule. However, the trend came with different nature at different phases of times – sometimes defying the original characteristics of the Union Board Boycott Movement. At the same, response from the authority acknowledged the impact of the successful Movement on the Government policy. Birendranath's leadership was leading factor in the Movement. Government kept a close watch on his activities. Hence the impact of the Movement can be treated in three categories: first, impact on the administrative policy in the future course of people's agitation and Birendranath's activities in the district of Midnapore, secondly, impact on the prospect mass mobilization in future movements and thirdly, impact on future leadership.

## VII

**Chapter-VII** brings home the summery and conclusions. There were particular declared and undeclared objectives of the Government behind the establishment of Union Boards in Bengal. Government hailed that the villages of Bengal were given an apparatus of self-governing with the establishment of Union Boards. From the Report of the Administrative Committee of Bengal 1913-14 it is evident that

Government was concerned about the absence of direct link between the District administration and village people. Alongside, the Report identified that the educated Bengali youth were inclined to be politically challenging for the Government. These two factors led to the establishment of Bengal Village Self-Government Act. The organization of the Movement ensured its peaceful programme. The leaders kept a close watch on the mobilization of the people. All the constructive activities undertaken as the programme of non-cooperation made the leaders socially acceptable and their endeavour credible. This factor influenced the acceptance of the particular political programme of the Union Board Boycott Movement. Caste factor played a considerable part in the Congress organization of Bengal. Again this caste factor contributed to the development of local solidarity in the Movement. The Movement left a deep imprint for the administration which was vigilant towards further political development in Midnapore. For the people of Midnapore in general and Contai in particular the success of the Movement left an inspiration for mass mobilization. Following the theoretical perspective of typologies of movements the inherent character of the Movement has been analyzed. Assessing the issues involved, programmes taken, mode of organization and role of leadership, as reflected throughout the course of the Movement, character of the Movement is identified in this chapter.

The Union Board Boycott Movement was generated in the District of Midnapore in general and in the Subdivision of Contai in particular. Government hailed the Union Boards as the bliss of self-rule for the village people of Bengal. The Movement were organized locally with a limited object i.e. withdrawal of the Union Boards. It left a profound legacy in the District in general and the Subdivision in particular. Immediately after the withdrawal of the Union Boards some parts of the District were charged with political stirs in opposition to the payment of *Chaukidari* tax. In the long run, the impact was exhibited in people's courageous determination against the mighty British Raj during the future course of anti-colonial struggle in this part of the country.

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