

CHAPTER - 7

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

(1932—1934)

I) EARLY PHASE ... SALT SATYAGRAHA

**(II) LATE PHASE... EPILOGUE OF THE
SATYAGRAHA**

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Civil Disobedience Movement (1932—1934)

(i) Early Phase: Salt Satyagraha

Shortly after his arrival in India from England on October 31, 1929 the then Viceroy Lord Irwin made the declaration that “the natural issue of India’s constitutional progress” was the attainment of Dominion Status, and that a Round Table Conference would soon be held to settle the complicated constitutional issues. But soon it became evident that the Government was dilly-dallying willy-nilly to come to an immediate solution of the issues concerned. It was at this situation the attaining of Dominion Status was of no great concern to the Indian National Congress. The Congress leadership was then thinking over ‘*Purna Swaraj*’ i.e. complete independence. With this cherished notion in mind the All- India Congress Committee in its Lahore Session in December 1929 resolved to launch upon a programme of Civil Disobedience including non-payment of taxes.¹ By the middle of February the Congress Working committee invested Gandhi with full powers to start and lead the Civil Disobedience Movement at any time and place of his own choice. It was at this juncture Gandhi wrote to Irwin that if his ‘Eleven Demands’ were not fulfilled there would be left no room but civil disobedience for any sort of understanding between the Government and the

Congress. Irwin turned a deaf ear to this intimation of Gandhi concerning civil disobedience. Consequently Gandhi resolved to initiate the Civil Disobedience Movement by disobeying the prevailing Salt Act.²

Gandhi having been invested with the charge of leading the Civil Disobedience Movement started first of all providing it with a solid moral and ideological base. In the *Young India* he made it clear that the Salt Act was an unjust and evil act as it stole the people's salt and forced them to pay heavily for the 'stolen' article.³ He also stated that the colonial Government had so long been depriving the people of India of using salt-earth of the coastal regions and salt- water of the sea to make and use salt by the imposition of unjust and evil laws. All the prayers and petitions of the indigent salt- makers to bring the cruelty and injustice of the tyrannous ruler at least a little tempered, failed. Therefore the only remedy that was open to them was, in Gandhiji's words, 'Satyagraha', the weapon to retrace the ruler's steps by suffering in their own person i.e. by inviting tortures to be inflicted on them for their defiance of the cruel law. "Hence, Satyagraha largely appears to the public as civil disobedience or civil resistance. It is civil in the sense that it is not criminal". In this connection Gandhi made it clear that Satyagraha was not passive resistance. It was not a weapon of the

weak. It was the weapon of the strong. And therefore it was the sovereign remedy.

It was thus fortifying the people with this his Satyagraha ideology Gandhi resolved to initiate Civil Disobedience Movement on a national scale by disobeying the prevailing Salt Act. He was over sure of the success of the Movement. He asserted that if 10 persons from each of the 7,00,000 of Indian villages became morally fortified to make salt, the government would get harassed and would be compelled gradually to make an end of the grim Salt Law violation movement by repealing the Salt Act.⁴ Ultimately this would prepare the way for the attainment of *Purna Swaraj*. With this his clear mission and vision Gandhi with 78 Satyagrahis started marching towards Dandi on March 12.⁵ The Dandi March electrified national consciousness. Every where there was both deep eagerness and grave anxiety as to see what might happen. In every corner it was apprehended that the attack on the Salt Law was just like an attack at the heart of the Government which might beget inconceivable dreadful consequences.⁶ But Gandhi assured the people that the Salt Satyagraha was a moral war and the *satyagrahi* was a pilgrim towards a holy land who would only bear the tortures without any protest. By this time Gandhi along with the Congress

Working Committee asked the Provincial Congress Committees to organize and widen the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Meanwhile in response to Gandhi's appeal to the nation to transform the Civil Disobedience Movement an all-India movement there was formed Civil Disobedience Councils in the provinces. The councils took every measure for organising the movement on solid foundations mostly by forming district committees and grass-root committees, enrolling volunteers, collecting funds and spreading nationalist ideas.⁷

The Bengal Council of Civil Disobedience started organising Satyagraha movement in six coastal districts namely Chittagong, Noakhali, Barisal, Khulna, 24Parganas and Midnapore. In each of these districts important centres were chosen as main fields of action. The country was thus made prepared for the movement.⁸

On April 6, 1930 Gandhi at Dandi on the Surat sea coast inaugurated the Salt Law Violation Movement. On the very day and almost at the same time there started the Salt Law Violation Movement in the districts according to the dictates of the provincial councils.⁹

The Bengal Council of Civil Disobedience chose a small sea- coast village Pichhabani in the sub-division of Contai in Midnapore as one main field of action.¹⁰ Now the question arises: why did the Council choose

Pichhabani? Obviously its vicinity to the sea and abundance of salt -earth almost ready for making salt prompted the Congress leaders to choose the spot. Besides, as a local journal the *Nihar* writes, during the Non-Cooperation Movement Contai played a very active role, and the people of the sub-division since then became devout adherents of the Gandhi ideology of village reconstruction.¹¹ All these prompted the choosing of Pichhabani for a convenient spot for Salt Law violation.¹²

On April 6 in the morning hundreds of Contai-men along with hundreds of *Satyagrahis* from different parts of Bengal under the leadership of Suresh Chandra Banerjee , a well- renowned *Abhay* Ashram veteran of Comilla marched on towards Pichhabani from Contai National School singing national songs and giving the slogans *Bandemataram* and *Gandhiji ki jay*.¹³ During this historic march hundreds of villagers thronged by the road side to welcome and cheer up the 'soldiers of peace' participating in the *dharmayudhha* without having any weapon but the moral determination to face 'what may come'.¹⁴

At about 8 A.M. the Salt Law was violated. Through some technical processes salt was made out of salt-earth and salt-water. It was thus the drama of Salt Act Violation was staged with uproarious shouts and slogans in presence of top-ranking government officials like S.P., A.S.P., Collector

of Midnapore, S.D.O. of Contai and also of some press reporters and photographers. People felt the government officials were present there not as chastisers of their unlawful acts but as mum and dumb spectators.¹⁵ Indeed what a joy it was! The unlawful law was thus violated. What a glory! Victory was achieved. What an expectation! The Salt Law would soon be repealed, and the *Purna* Swaraj would be attained, and Gandhi *Raj* would be established.

After the salt was thus made a meeting was held there. The Congress leaders then explained the significance of the Salt Law violation incident, and categorically pointed out that that day's victory was only the first scene of the first act of their drama of freedom struggle.¹⁶ The movement would go on till the goal was reached. Therefore the *Satyagrahis* would not flinch even an inch from the path of their desired destination. To popularize the movement and widen its periphery the village councils should always be alert in organizing regular *prabhat pheries*, holding *baithaks* i.e. small assemblages, discussing the mission and vision of the movement, making it clear to all that *Lavan* Satyagraha by creating gradual pressure on the government would one day lead to attain *purna swaraj*.¹⁷

In the days following April 6 *Lavan* Satyagraha at Pichhabani and in the surrounding villages like Sorghuni, Beltala, Belbediya, Ratanpur,

Gopalpur, Thakurchak, Bankabedya, Subarnadighi, Rangmalaput attained a religious significance. It was so because besides regular routine works like *prabhat pheries*, picketing, salt-making and so on the movement attained a religious tone.¹⁸ In the village-assemblages particularly in *dharmakatha asars* there were regularly discussed those epic and *Puranic* stories which relate the victory of virtue over vice. Following Gandhi's narrative the *kathak* seemed to tell a horrible tale wherein Prahlad, a young devotee of Lord Visnu, who in spite of being inhumanly tortured and persecuted by his demon father Hiranyakasipu, did not flinch from his faith in his Lord, and finally he won over his father who was ultimately ingloriously finished off for his vicious rage born out of disbelief. To the *kathak* here Prahlad stands for innocent Indians fighting for justice and the demon king stands for the ferocious and unlawful British rule. Again referring to an anecdote from *Chaitanya Charitamrita* it was told that the overmighty Kazi of Nawadwipa unjustly prohibited the innocent Vaishnavas to sing songs in praise of Hari in the city. But being morally fortified by Chaitanyadeva they ultimately made the Kazi succumb before them. According to the *kathak* Gandhi was the inspirer of the *satyagrahis* in the moral war against the unjust demoniac British rule. So the Indians would surely win victory in their war. This is

how the Contai Satyagraha was religionized as it made the people sure of success in their *dharmayuddha* with the British government.¹⁹

The Satyagraha went on with much vigour. The arrest of Gandhi on May 4 added much momentum to it. A massive wave of protest swept all over the country. The non-violent moral war was transformed into a violent one. In many places of the country all symbols of government authority were attacked. In retaliation the government let loose police repression over the *Satyagrahis*. Flogging, imprisonment and confiscation of properties became rampant.²⁰ It was at this stage the government imposed martial law (May 16) over the country and thus made a grave check over the movement.²¹

In the winter months of 1931 signs of exhaustion gradually became prominent. The people's capacity to sacrifice and their power of forbearance seemed to be crossing the limit. And there was as yet no chance of having any understanding with the government, and there was every possibility that the government could crush the movement applying lion's ferociousness and cruelty. That is why it became the nation's intention that the moral war might now end 'not with a bang but with a whimper'. It was at this situation the Salt Law Violation Movement was withdrawn as a result of the conclusion of the Gandhi- Irwin Pact (March 5, 1931). The Pact was 'a

stunning blow to the people who with their indomitable spirit flung themselves against the oppressive measure of the British Government'.²²

In this context it may be noted that Salt Satyagraha in Contai, though short lived, was an event of tremendous significance in the history of mass movements in India. In respect of intensity, gravity and depth the Contai movement deserves to be considered as a movement complete in itself.

Men and women, young and old, workers and peasants irrespective of caste and class, creed and religion participated in the movement with great vigour and expectations. True, their expectations were not fulfilled and they had to reel back to their former position. Yet in one sense the Contai movement ably initiated them along with all Midnapore and even all Bengal that all their bloodshed and suffering, and the tears of mothers and wives did not die up in the dry dust of Gandhi-Irwin Pact frustrations. The movement taught them that their night- long meditation and forbearance would bring forth good days of '42 Contai and '42 Tamluk and 2006 Singur and 2007 Nandigram. And these are not all. There may come many more with their rosy dawns with all promises of bright days glorified with crimson rays.

(ii)Late Phase: Epilogue of the Satyagraha

The history of the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Contai is just the 'epilogue of the Contai Salt Satyagraha'. The history of the phase signifies two things: one, the glorious victory of the movement in compelling the colonial government to submit to most of the demands of the people and the other, the piteous plight of the people caused by the stern demoniac repressive measures of the government. The very significant success of the movement is that the Gandhi- Irwin Pact (March 5, 1931) raised the political prestige of the Congress and so also the political morale of the people. At the same time the Pact undermined and lowered the British prestige as the Pact was concluded as if between two equal powers. Besides this time it became evident to the government that without the participation of the Congress no constitutional solution could be attained. It was this factor which heightened the morale and spirit of the nation. The other significant factor is that to the higher British officials the conclusion of the Delhi truce was a major blunder on the part of the government. In respect of the arch-enemy the Congress as well as of Gandhi Lord Willingdon in this connection expressed thus his grave dissatisfaction: "There seemed to be two kings in Brentford". Winston Churchill was also very much averse to any sort of negotiation with the 'seditious fakir' Gandhi on terms of equality.

In his opinion the British Empire could not lose her hold over India, her greatest imperial asset, by negotiation with only one political party which did not represent the interest of all India. In this situation to quell the political agitations in India the only panacea was to build a solid administration having no leniency towards the agitation-making political party or parties. Therefore what India required was relentless repression.

The Congress in general could not take the Delhi Pact whole heartedly though it was agreed that it would participate in the Second Round Table Conference. But there was every anxiety within the Congress and also of the people as to what would come out of the Round Table Conference when the higher British officials were in favour of no truce, no pact and 'no quarter for the enemy'. On the contrary they apprehended that something unimaginable and something detrimental to the nation might come out of the Round Table Conference. The same thing was sounded by the Gujarati poet Meghani when he, addressing Gandhi on the eve of his departure for London, sang; '*chchello katoro jerno aa: pi jayo, bapu*', which means "Even this last cup of poison, you must drink, *Bapu*". It is also to be noted that Gandhiji himself said:

“When I think of the prospects in London, when I know that all is well in India . . . then there is nothing wanting to fill me with utter despair . . . There is every chance of my returning empty handed”²³.

Coming events cast their shadows before. So what Gandhi and the people had thought happened exactly in the following months. Gandhi returned from London empty handed.

Gandhiji had sailed for London on August 29, 1931 and he landed in Bombay on December 28, 1931. This is how the first phase of the Civil Disobedience was over. In T. S. Eliot’s words:

*“This is how the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper”.*

Practically the Salt Satyagraha bore nothing; and the British government very artfully hoodwinked Gandhiji and the people of India. It was at this stage the Congress Working Committee took the decision of renewing the Civil Disobedience Movement. Gandhiji’s call to the nation to renew the battle was a great call: so the people were fluctuating between ‘blind hope and blind despairs’ responded to the call in the way as they did in the earlier movements. The government had already been aware that the unfulfilled mission of the Indians would lead to another serious movement. So Gandhiji was arrested. There started relentless repression. The

promulgation of harsh and hard ordinances and their stern application created a sort of Reign of Terror.²⁴ Men and women, young and old were barbarously treated. Prisoners in jails were not spared from severe corporal punishment²⁵. Civil liberties were wiped away;²⁶ and confiscation of personal property became a regular feature.²⁷ As a result of this rule of lawless law the movement was crushed within a few months barring some coastal regions like Kumilla and Noakhali in East Bengal, Contai and Tamluk in West Bengal and some Gujarat regions. It was in this situation the Congress Working Committee could not but take the decision of withdrawing the Civil Disobedience Movement.

In this connection it is to be noted that the people of the coastal regions of the country particularly those of Bengal and Gujarat remained always adhered to the Gandhi-ideal of *Purna Swaraj* attainable by following the constructive programme of Gandhiji. In this respect Pichhabani of the Contai subdivision which made a name in the history of the Salt Law Violation Movement as the second Dandi, is an exemplary instance. In spite of the withdrawal of the Movement the people of Contai did not flinch even an inch from following Gandhi ideals.

During the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement the Contai people followed the Congress directives relating to the organization

of the movement. In most cases they regularly met together at least once a week to discuss their progress in respect of propagating Gandhi ideals and in the solution of local problems, and so to say in respect of continuing the movement. They, through their local leaders and local bodies kept themselves in contact with the whereabouts of the movement of all over India. 'No-tax campaign' to a great extent united them, but the local landlords played a somewhat different role. Again they had the apprehension that the introduction of the Union Boards would disrupt the rural order by the intrusion of the government agents the like chowkidars and dafadars into the villages. This apprehension of the Contai people acted in favour of heightening anti- British mobilization²⁸. Again the anti- *chowkidari* tax issue played a very effective role in creating a solid anti- British organization. The Union- Board issue and the anti- *chowkidari tax* issue solidified the Contai people into one very powerful anti- government organization.

Since the Non-Co-operation *Samgram* days the Contai people were following as far as practicable the boycott of foreign goods, government offices and courts and so on. During the second phase of the Movement they put much importance to boycotting government courts. The local Congress leaders and leading volunteers started parallel arbitration courts. It is learnt from the *Nihar* and other local journals that 31 parallel courts were in

operation in various places in the district of Midnapore.²⁹ These courts projected an effective legal system alternative to the British system, and thus they exposed the weakness of the government. The government was aware of it. Yet the government was at a loss in respect of what it was to do as the establishment of arbitration courts was not an offence in itself.

Meanwhile some agrarian issues particularly the *bhagchasi* issue i.e. the share-cropper issue, became to a certain extent critical as it was heading towards a rift between the peasants on the one hand and the zamindars and *jotedars* on the other, and threatening the multi-class Mahishya dominated platform. Fortunately enough, the local leadership assiduously solved the issues and maintained the solidity of the platform. As a result the Contai movement astutely led by the local leaders was progressing steadily towards the open rebellion of '1942.

It was in this situation of the movement the government now took active measures to break the Hindu- Muslim unity of the Midnapore people which was gradually posing a threat to the district administration. Bidyut Chakrabarti writes, "... the authority preferred to recruit Muslim officers to strengthen its attack on the Congress which was essentially a Hindu organization ...".³⁰ Besides one Rahamat Bux, a Bhagawanpur daroga, was reported to have organized the Muslims to loot the Hindu villages and

terrorize the people.³¹ Undoubtedly this caused much communal tension. Fortunately local and district Congress leaders took strains to ease the tension.

In fine it is to be noted that as a result of the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement all the country was immersed in despondency. Now hundreds of questions arose which in one word meant what the nation achieved from years of suffering. To top-ranking Congress leaders like Jawharlal, Subhaschandra and Bithalbai Patel and others the questions were: was Gandhism in crisis? Was Gandhi as a leader a total failure? Did the country require a radical reorganization of the Congress on a new principle and with a new method? And was it that a new leader was essential?

Gandhiji was aware of the situation and also of the angry consternations of the people. Yet he was not disturbed a little. This time in a letter to Nehru he wrote that he had then no sense of defeat in him, rather he had the hope that the country was marching fast towards its goal of attaining *Purna Swaraj*, and this his hope was then as bright as it was in 1920. To one it may seem to be right if it is thought in the context of the movement of the Contai- people which, as an epilogue of their high drama of struggle against the colonial demon, made it explicitly clear that the Congress had become a

solid and well-knit mass organization following the articulation of local issues in political mobilization.

With the collapse of the Civil Disobedience Movement the movement of the Contai- people came to an end. But this end was not an end in itself; on the contrary it was the beginning of a new course of action enriched and energized with the experience which the people gained in their tooth and nail participation in the two phases of the Movement.

The Contai- people are always religion- minded. So their each and every movement got tuned with their religiosity. They learnt it from the '*puran- katha asars*' that every demon has his fall. Therefore the colonial demon would surely fall if it was challenged with a new spiritual strength backed by social and economic forces. It was this their realization that prompted the Contai Village- Congress Committee to organise the villages anew expunging the prevalent ills and abuses of the village people, settling the land disputes relating to agriculture disputes, encouraging cottage industries and setting- up of village co- operatives. This was not all. The village committees were very particular in respect of holding regular sittings in which they discussed the progress of their works and the problems and difficulties if there were any. As a result in the next few months Contai was made a solid unit for facing any national problem. True, there were

weaknesses in the work of the village- committees. Yet it is the wonder that Contai thus kept all along the fire of fight alive in their each and every walk against the British government till the days of the Quit India Movement. It was thus Contai defying all sorts of inhuman police repression formed three Parallel Governments and hoisted the flag of independence. It is thus clear that the epilogue i.e. the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Contai was not an end in itself: it was the beginning of a newer and fresher movement.

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