

Freedom Movement in Contai and the 'Nihar' **(1901-1935)**

*A Thesis Submitted to the
University of North Bengal*

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To Whom It May Concern

This is to certify that Sankar Kumar Das has prepared the Ph.D. thesis titled "**Freedom Movement in Contai and the Nihar (1901-1935)**" under my supervision and guidance. The thesis embodies the result of original research work done in the light of published and unpublished records in the area of study by Mr. Das. He has fulfilled all the necessary requirements for the purpose of submitting the Ph.D. dissertation for examination of the University of North Bengal.

I am happy to forward the thesis, which is worthy of consideration for the purpose concerned.

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Preface

The preface to the present study contains the first words in respect of the issues which impelled me to undertake research work on the history of the national movement of Contai. In my student-life I used to attend *Harikatha* and *Dharmasabha* sittings where the *kathaks* discussed Epic and Puranic tales with emphasis on their essence. In almost all cases, the *kathaks* emphasized that pride of rulers like king Kamsa of Mathura, the Kurus of Indraprastha and so on had all met with their falls for their pride, arrogance and insolence. They also made it fully clear that a '*pararaj*' would not look after the well being of his subjects, so he should have to be rejected and exterminated. The essence of the *Harikatha* sittings greatly impressed me, and since then I had been thinking for a long time of the epic and puranic base of nationalism of the Contai people. Bankimchandra's *Kapalkundala* which was written when the author was in government service in Contai, bore in this respect the torch to me a little, and Dr. Amallesh Tripathi's *The Extremist Challenge* made the point in question fully clear to me. That is why I decided to work on the religious nationalism of the Contai people.

The present thesis has been completed under the able guidance and supervision of Dr. Bijoy Kumar Sarkar, Associate Professor & Head of History, University of North Bengal. It was Dr. Sarkar who highlighted the importance of this area of research to me, evinced a keen interest in the subject and guided me

emphatically for the greater span of my research. I am deeply beholden for all the guidance and help that he had so kindly given.

In the completion of the present thesis, I am indebted to a large number of scholars of Midnapore and West Bengal and among them I must mention the names of Prof. Pranabananda Jash (Visva- Bharati), Prof. Smṛiti Kumar Sarkar (Vice-Chancellor, Burdwan University), Prof. Ranjan Chakravorty ((Vice-Chancellor, Vidyasagar University), for their valuable suggestions and other academic help extended so kindly to me whenever I had approached them.

I am indeed extremely grateful to the authorities and staff of the *Nihar* Press, West Bengal State Archives, Contai Library, Tamluk Library, Midnapore District Library, National Library, Calcutta University Library, Bangiya Sahitya Parisad Library, North Bengal University Library etc. for the required academic help.

In this connection I beg to humbly note that my respected school and college teachers of Contai and my dear learned colleagues of the North Bengal University gave me constant encouragement and suggestion to prepare the thesis. I cannot but note it humbly that without their sincere help and co-operation the thesis could not have been written.

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Abbreviation

AICC	All India Congress Committee.
AIKC	All India Khilafat Committee.
ASP	Additional Superintendent of Police.
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.
BVSG	Bengal Village Self Government.
CKSP	Congress-Khilafat <i>Swarajya</i> Party.
INC	Indian National Congress.
NCP	Non-co-operation Programme.
SDO	Sub-divisional Officer.
SP	Superintendent of Police.
USA	United States of America.
WBSA	West Bengal State Archive.

Glossary

<i>aman</i>	winter crop.
<i>amla</i>	an officer.
<i>anna</i>	one sixteenth of a rupee.
<i>asahayoga</i>	no co-operation.
<i>asars</i>	sittings
<i>babu</i>	address of a Hindu gentle man.
<i>Bandemataram</i>	'Hail to the Mother'; the first line of a song in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel <i>Anandama</i> which was adopted in Bengal as the slogan of nationalism during the anti-partition agitation.
<i>charka</i>	spinning wheel, symbol of self-help, freedom, dignity of labour and also of social equality and unity.
<i>chowkidar</i>	village watchman appointed under the village <i>chowkidari</i> Act of 1880, later under the village government Act, 1919.
<i>chowkidari</i>	tax levied on villagers for the <i>chowkidars</i> or village watchmen.
<i>dafadar</i>	head of batch of <i>Chaukidars</i> or village watchmen under the Village Self-government Act, 1919.

<i>dharmasabha</i>	guest house where pilgrims and travellers are accommodated temporarily free of cost.
<i>dhatma-guru</i>	religious head.
<i>dhivara</i>	fishermen.
<i>gomostaan</i>	agent of the <i>zamindar</i> who collected rent.
<i>hartal</i>	suspension of work or business to indicate mourning or protest, traditional form of strike in India.
<i>hat</i>	market, especially one held on fixed day or days of week.
<i>Jalia</i>	fishing.
<i>jotedar</i>	pety landholder.
<i>khadi</i>	<i>chark</i> -spinning, cloth hand-woven from hand-spun thread.
<i>langarkhana</i>	place where cooked food is doled out in charity to needy persons during famine or scarcity.
<i>lavan</i>	salt.
<i>naib</i>	a deputy.
<i>panchayat</i>	originally a committee or council of five members, now a small local council; a committee of three to five members in a village

administering *chaukidari* affairs under the
Chowkidari Act, 1880. Under the W.B.
Panchayat Act of 1973, the Panchayat may
consist of more than five members.

<i>pararaj</i>	the rule of an alien.
<i>patni</i>	boatmen.
<i>patta</i>	land deed.
<i>patuya</i>	scroll-painters.
<i>praja</i>	tenants.
<i>puja</i>	worship.
<i>pundit</i>	Brahmin scholars.
<i>purohit</i>	priest.
<i>purohit sabha</i>	organization of priests.
<i>Rahu</i>	an all devouring demon.
<i>resmi churi</i>	glass bangles.
<i>ryot</i>	peasant.
<i>sabha</i>	association.
<i>samaj</i>	society.
<i>samiti</i>	association; organization.
<i>samkritan /kritan</i>	singing the names of God, especially that by the

different *Vaisnava* sects, i.e. worshippers of *Visnu*.

siva-chaturdashimela this festival is related to the night of *Sivachaturdasi*, the fourteenth lunar day in the month of *Phalgun* (B.S.), a specially auspicious day for the worship of god Siva.

swaraj self-rule; independence.

swaraj karmi sangha *samiti* of the *swarajist* workers.

swarajya self-government.

tahasildar a revenue collector.

thana police station.

yajman a devotee.

Yama the Lord of death.

yatra open-air opera or dramatic performance.

yuddha sahayak samiti war-aid committee.

zamindar landholder, paying revenue direct to Government.

CHAPTER – 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter – 1

Introduction:

The history of the freedom movement in Contai, the south-west subdivision of Midnapore in West Bengal, is a history of unique importance. It is unique in the sense that in respect of its geographical situation, natural resources and economic strength, socio-religious and socio-cultural traits and traditions and also in respect of its historical trends and legacies, Contai of the colonial period holds exclusively a place quite apart from other parts of India. It is quite certain that in respect of its origin, growth and character the freedom movement of Contai constituted an integral part of the all-India freedom movement, but at the same time it is also certain that the issues and dimensions and dynamics of the Contai movement hold altogether a new picture, and make it clear that the character of the Contai politics in spite of having its all-India general characteristics is always, to a very great extent, local. This is the uniqueness of the freedom movement of Contai.

The freedom movement of Contai had a very early beginning. In 1760 Midnapore along with Burdwan and Chittagong came under the sway of the English East India Company and since then the people of the Company's Midnapore Zamindari had to fight tooth and nail against the

oppressions and exploitations of the Company's officials. Before that, all Midnapore particularly had to bear the brunt of the Mughal inroads and the Maratha incursions. It is thus that the people of Midnapore acquired their much valued character of resistance against all sorts of onslaughts.

With the change of times the course of history was changed. During the first century of the Company's rule Bengal experienced very many new things. The solid police administration of the Company established peace and social solidarity. The economic experiments and newly introduced measures, particularly the land and land revenue measures, begot both good and bad results and restructured the Bengal society. With all these came western education, western ideas, ideas of social reform, liberalism, ideas of local self- government, democracy and above all nationalism and so also the ideas relating to the governor and the governed. As a result of these incomings Bengal awakened.

The awakening of Bengal was first felt in Calcutta, Howrah, Serampur and some other towns, particularly the district towns of importance and so also in some sub-divisional towns. The district town of Midnapore as well as the district along with its two sub-divisional towns namely Contai and Tamluk rapidly came under the spell of this sort of awakening and there started a new lease of life. Schools of English

education were set up. Religious reform movements particularly the Brahmo movement shook all the district. With the spread of the English education and with the acquaintance of land lords with the district and Calcutta Courts, the wave of national consciousness flowed over the district, and thus Midnapore became a new one ready to receive the changes which were to come.

The newly awakened people of Midnapore by degrees became aware of their glorious past, of their heritage and also of the prowess of their historical heroes. The Chaitanya cult and its teachings in respect of the love of man which were imbued by the people of Midnapore, particularly those of Contai for a number of centuries, made them aware of their social and religious oneness and solidarity. It was in this context that Rishi Rajnarayan Bose's *Jatiya Gaurava Sampadani Sabha* was set up (1866). The *Sabha* did much to promote the national consciousness of the people. Again Bose's '*A Prospectus for the Promotion of National Feelings among the Educated Natives of Bengal*' (1866) ignited the rising national consciousness of Midnapore. The people of the Contai Sub-division, particularly the educated elites including lawyers, doctors, businessmen and zamindars - were so alert to respond to the call of the country that shortly after the birth of the *Bharat Sabha* in the six *thanas* of the Contai sub-division namely Contai , Khejuri,

Bhagbanpur, Pataspur, Ramnagar and Egra, a number of branches of the *Sabha* was organized. Under the circumstances, the Mahishya community at the behest of the *Mahishya Samiti* acquired a well-knit solidarity and got ready to respond to the call of the *Samiti* for the amelioration of the caste and for the redress of the grievances caused by colonial administration.

Again when the Curzon device to strike at the roots of the Bengali nation and its nationalism was in operation, the people of Bengal demonstrated their protests through processions, picketings and conferences. It is learnt from the local journal '*Nihar*' that over the implementation of the boycott slogan the organizers of the *Swadeshi* Movement made a dissension among them. This rift weakened the Movement of Conati. At the same time it did one novel thing. It paved the ground for revolutionary terrorist activities in Midnapore and so also in Contai.

The Government formulated a plan to partition the district of Midnapore on the logic of administrative convenience. But circumstantial evidences make it clear that the partition of Midnapore was purely an imperial design with a view to crushing the nation's spirit and the nationalist movement. But so vehement was the protest of the people of Midnapore and so sharp and articulated were the grounds against the proposed partition that

the government had to draw away from the design on the lame excuse of financial reasons.

Under the leadership of Birendra Nath Sasmol Contai participated in the Non- Cooperation Movement. The people followed the well-defined Gandhian programme. But the movement was not so forceful and effective as a national movement should have been.

The fighting spirit of Contai and so also of Midnapore came to the forefront during the Anti-Union Board Movement (1921). It was the credit of the local leadership and also of the people that their 'local pride' was crucial in striking hard in the colonial rule.

The Civil Disobedience Movement in its first phase assumed a devastating character in the Contai sub-division. The violating of the Salt Law became a mission of the *Satyagrahis*. But the violent police oppression broke the backbone of the Movement. As a result the 'second phase of the Movement did not gain ground.

After the murder of Birdge, the then district magistrate, many of the prominent Midnapore leaders were arrested and killed by the government. Naturally the revolutionary spirit declined. It was at this time a section of the revolutionaries, attracted by Marxism, joined the Communist Party.

The proposed study is intended to present an unexplored aspect of the local politics of the Freedom Movement in Contai stressing all the ebbs and flows and currents and crosscurrents of the subject. To a researcher, to construct the history of the Freedom Movement in Contai which is almost a virgin field, is a sacred duty. In the context of the pan-Indian freedom struggle the freedom struggle of Contai, though may seem trivial because of its limited campus, will surely be enthralling and of sufficient help to researchers and also to general readers of the days coming to have an idea of the allpervading nature of the freedom struggle of India.

The work is mostly based on the *Nihar*, a Weekly News Bulletin published from Contai from 1901 to 1947. The *Nihar* since its first publication was all along sensitive to the varied aspects of the life and society of the people of Contai, and also to the political convulsions in the local and national politics, particularly to the tumultuous turmoil of the Anti-partition boycott- *swadeshi* days.

The *Nihar* dispassionately presents the sentiment of the Contai people in connection with their whole hearted participation in the Gandhi *Hartal*, the Rowlatt *Satyagraha*, the Khilafat Movement and also in the Non-Cooperation movement. It is the credit of the Bulletin that it very successfully steered the people of the coastal areas to participate in the

Lavan Satyagraha during the Civil Disobedience Movement. That is why I feel that for an in-depth research work on the national movement in Contai it is a must to go through the columns of the *Nihar*. Otherwise the vibrations of the national movement in Contai may not thoroughly be felt and understood.

* * * *

CHAPTER – 2

**RENASCENT *MAHISHYA SAMAJ*: THE BREWING OF
THE MOVEMENT.**

Chapter – 2

Renascent *Mahishya Samaj*: The Brewing of the Movement

The history of Midnapore particularly of its south and south-west regions is in one sense the history of one movement in many respects. It is mostly the history of the movement of the Mahishyas, a caste community, for establishing their caste -position and for cultural assertion and also for political resurgence. The Mahishyas claimed that they were a 'pure caste' from time immemorial. They were all along a land- holding and land occupying cultivating people divided mostly in three classes viz landlords, tenants and agricultural labourers. During the Turko-Afghan and the Mughal rules the socio-economic set-up of the community, in spite of little communal troubles and administrative transformations, was quiet and placid, and it was in no way detrimental to their material and religious interests.

With the establishment of the British rule in Bengal and the introduction of the Permanent Settlement the agrarian economy of the region was changed to a very great extent. It was then there began the rise and growth of new land-holders like zamindars and *jotedars* in the Contai and Tamluk subdivisions. Some of them again securing *pattanis* and *pattas* in

the Sundarbans in the neighbouring 24 Parganas became *latdars* and *chakdars*. Some of the advanced Mahishyas now took to business and started business relations with the East India Company in respect of salt, mulberry and silk trades. Others again took services in the Company's merchant offices.¹ As a result a certain section of the Mahishya community of Midnapore particularly the Calcutta-based lawyers and traders thrived plausibly. It was at this stage the spread of progressive Western- ideas and the highly blowing *Sankritization* waves made the upper section of the community feel that their caste-identity and social position were not commensurate with their economic position.

This was not all. There were other grave factors which prompted the Mahishyas to fix their caste-identity and to establish their respectable position in the upper caste dominated Hindu society. It seemed to them that the label '*chasa Kaivartaby caste*' as it was being written in the property-deeds, was an ignominy. So, there should be put a stop to it. Again it is more grievous that Brahman-Kayastha-Vaisya dominated upper caste Hindu society in almost every case slighted them by calling them '*chasa*' i.e. bucolics. In this connection high caste people often cited ingeniously composed *slokas* to hurt the feelings and social prestige of the Mahishyas,

however honoured, wealthy and aristocrat they were. One of the *slokas* runs thus:

*as'vaprsthe gajaskandhe athavā narāvāhane ca /
tathāpi jātimāhātmyam na chāshā sajjanāyate //*

“A *chāshā* be he on horseback or on an elephant or on the shoulders of palanquin-bearers, can never be taken as a civilised person because of his inherent low caste qualities”.

To ward off these attacks a good number of Mahishya zamindars of Midnapore at the initiative of one Narahari Jana of Tajpur in Nandigram called a conference (1897) of the Mahishyas , particularly of Mahishya landlords in his zamindari estate to fix the caste-identity of the *chasa* Kaivartas and thus to establish their higher position in the upper caste-dominated Hindu society. In the conference it was unanimously resolved that the *chasa* Kaivartas would henceforth identify themselves with the ancient Mahishyas as mentioned in the Puranas and other Sanskrit *Shastras*.² The net result of the conference was the formation of the *Jati Nirdharani Sabha* with the whole-hearted support and collaboration and financial assistance of the local landed proprietors present in the meeting. The *Sabha* resolved to publish ‘*Mahishya Samaj*’, a weekly Paper to give a

wide publicity of the mission of the *Jati Nirdharani Sabha*, and thus to make the people of their community conscious of their high caste in the Hindu society.³ The *Mahishya Samaj* in its First Number wrote that they would persuade the Census Commission to schedule the *chasi kaivartas* as ‘Mahishya’. In its following Numbers the *Mahishya Samaj* repeatedly appealed to the people of the community that they should always be loyal to the government and would try to secure the favour of the government abiding by its rules and regulations, and they would not participate in any anti-government agitation.⁴ Besides the *Mahishya Samaj* also wrote, “God has sent the English as the fortune-makers of India in a very auspicious moment. It would be the duty of all subjects to acquire from them all branches of knowledge”.⁵ Eulogizing on the Coronation of George V, the ‘*Mahishya Samaj*’ wrote “Has the world ever seen such a big empire? Did the first emperor of the world ever dream of such a big empire? Let our agitated India be blessed with the sympathy and co-operation of the great emperor”.⁶ The *Sabha* took the decision that it would carry on research work on the origin of the Mahishyas and on their present status in the Hindu society. Shortly afterwards the identification-move of the Mahishyas as distinct from other castes like *Jalia* (fishing) Kaivartas and *patni* Kaivartas (the boatmen kaivartas) and so on became an organized movement. The *Jati*

Nirdharani Sabha started functioning through a good number of local Mahishya associations which sprang up in different districts like Nadia, Barisal, Faridpur, Pabna, Dacca and so on. In 1901 the *Sabha* founded *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* in Calcutta. Since then the caste-identity agitation became a vigorous movement, and it drew the attention of the government as well as of other castes in Bengal. In the Census Report of 1911 the Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal wrote that “ the (caste-identity) Agitation was carried on with great energy by committees formed by influential persons ...” and that the agitation was well-founded ... with evidences from the ancient Hindu *Shastras*, and with the opinions of the Nadia College of *pandits*, and the *pandits* of the Sanskrit College of Calcutta and also of the Benaras Sanskrit College.⁷ In the context of the caste-identity agitation the Census of 1911 decided to categorize the Indian population in terms of caste. This time the Superintendent made it clear to the *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* that in the next Census the Mahishya caste question was to be given due consideration.⁸

In view of the progress of the Mahishya caste-agitation the *Jalia Kaivartas* forwarded their claim to the Census Superintendent that in the Census they required to be scheduled as Mahishyas as they were originally the Mahishyas of Mahishmatipura of the ancient Haihaya Kingdom of

Central India, and that owing to some political and religious convulsions they left their original habitat and settled on Kimvarta janapada , a Haihaya territory, and in the 6th century B.C. they came to be known as Kaivartas, as 'Kaivarta' is a variant of Kimvarta (kimvarta + an).⁹ Therefore the Kaivartas are the same as the Mahishyas , and there can have no distinction between the Mahishyas and the Kaivartas. The *Calcutta Mahishya Samiti*, a caste-society formed by the *Jalia* Kaivartas, hereby tried to make it clear to the Census Superintendent that Kaivarta is no caste and that the Kaivartas were originally the Kimvarta people. On these grounds the so-called *Jalia* Kaivartas would be scheduled as the Mahishyas in the Census.

The claim of the *Calcutta Mahishya Samiti* that all Kaivartas irrespective of *haliks* and *jaliks* should be scheduled under the general heading as Mahishya, led to a prolonged wrangle.

In protest the *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* put forward before the Census authorities lots of authorities and opinions of Sanskrit scholars to prove that the *chasi* (*halik*) Kaivartas are a distinct caste, a distinct endogamous group and that they are different from the *Jalia* Kaivartas in origin, caste, and profession and also in social position. In this connection it is forwarded that in the Yajurveda and the Gautam Samhitas it is clearly stated that the *dhivara* (fishermen) kaivartas i.e. *Jalia* Kaivartas are the

offspring of a Vaisya father and a Kshatriya mother, and they are a pratiloma caste while the *chasi* Kaivartas are according to Brahmavaivarta Purana and Padma Purana are the offspring of a Kshatriya father and a Vaisya mother, and they are therefore an anuloma caste. Therefore in respect of origin and character the two castes stand poles apart.¹⁰

The long wrangle over the caste identity question at last came to an end in March 1911. On March '11, O'Malley, Superintendent of the Census Operations, Bengal informed *Babu Radha Nath Das*, Secretary of the *Calcutta Mahishya Samiti* that all Mahishyas could not be returned under one general heading "as the use of the term Mahishya is confined to the *chasi* Kaivartas only ...".¹¹ On the same date O'Malley sent this his information to the Secretary of the *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti*. This was indeed a great success of the Mahishya movement in the crucial test for caste-identity fought for more than a decade.

Henceforth the Mahishya movement went on advancing with a great enthusiasm as it held before the *chasi* Kaivartas the hope that they would attain a separate caste status, and that they would thus obtain a step upward on the ladder of society, and that '*chasa na sajjanayate*' would be warded off. But soon a cloud came over the movement. A split became open in the Subdi conference of the zamindars of Contai and Tamluk subdivisions of

Midnapore over the taking to the Mahishya designation and the adoption of the Vaisya status for the *chasi* Kaivartas.¹² The traditional levers of power in the community like the high-born conservative Kaivartas expressed openly that they felt no interest in taking to the Vaisya status as they were content with their clean Sudra status.¹³ While the poorer section of the *chasi* Kaivartas preferred their *chasi* Kaivarta designation to Mahishya. On the other hand the progressive and educated zamindars and lawyers and journalists claimed Vaisya status for the Mahishya community. As a result 'a sort of social revolution was on the way in the Mahishya community'. But owing to the pervading influence of the zamindars and *jotedars* over the community the split did not stand. And the Mahishya movement was crowned with success.

The Mahishya movement faced a new problem after the publication of the Census Report of 1921. Now it was so thought that the Census provided an opportunity to the low-castes like the *Jalia* Kaivartas and the *Patnis* and others, and as a result they might put forward claims to use the term Mahishya or a variant of it for attaining a higher status. Hence the low castes started a new agitation for achieving their desired goal with great enthusiasm. It was at this stage the *Mahishya Samaj*, the mouthpiece of the *Bangiya Mahishya Samaj*, raised an uproar and vehemently protested against

this design of the low castes.¹⁴ In this connection the *Mahishya Samaj* warned that if the mercenary *pandits* would justify the totally unjustified claim of the *Jalia* Kaivartas and others on the basis of farfetched and concocted *slokas* from the Sanskrit texts they would not be spared, and they would not be taken to act as honoured *purohits* in their rituals and social festivities. The *purohit* section of the priests was alarmed as this would pave the way for a social revolution.¹⁵ Hence the contending low castes lost their stand to fight for rising steps up in their social ladder. As a result the agitation of the low castes for attaining higher status in the society did not proceed further. It was thus the caste-identity of the Mahishyas was firmly confirmed and socially established.

The leaders of the movement realized unhesitatingly that only with the spread of education they could westernize themselves, and they could come to the touch of the government, and thus they would themselves do the official works without the via media of Brahman- Vaishyas - Vaidyas. That is why the big zamindars and even the second grade landlords set up in their estates free Primary Schools, Middle English Schools and even High English Schools.¹⁶ Besides they made arrangements in a number of ways for the accommodation and education of Mahishya students desirous of having higher education in Calcutta. For an easy spread of education the *Mahishya*

Samiti set up *Mahishya Sikshya Bistar Bhandar* ; and for offering educational help to poor students it set up *Mahishya Anath Bhandar*.¹⁷ Moreover the *Samiti* encouraged Mahishya students to set sail for foreign countries to study Law, Engineering and Medicine. This encouragement of the *Samaj* proved highly successful. The veteran lawyers like Birendra Nath Sasmol and the ingenious engineers like Asutosh Jana, two distinguished Mahishyas led in due course the Mahishya movement in all its different stages successfully, and helped the Mahishyas to form a well-knit community and to assert its political resurgence through successive movements.

One noteworthy feature of the Mahishya awakening of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the attempts of the *Samiti* for the spread of western education in the Mahishya community. The *Bangiya Mahishya Samiti* and its mouthpiece the *Mahishya Samaj* gave much importance to women's uplift and to the spread of female education. According to the *Samiti* the three grave social ills of the *Mahishya Samaj* were women illiteracy, child- marriage and dowry system.¹⁸ The *Mahishya Samaj* wrote: "The progress of a caste is impossible without the progress of women".¹⁹ And the *Mahishya Mahila* (*Jaistha- Ashadh* 1319 B.S.) wrote: "... without female education no caste or community or nation could never



make any progress".²⁰ But it is peculiar that the Mahishya leaders along with the spread of female education did not think of westernizing Mahishya women. They only thought of idealizing their womanhood with the honoured ideal lives of Sita , Sabitri, Damayanti of the epics.²¹ It is thus the Mahishya leaders tried to build the basic foundation of the Mahishya community. In this connection it is to be noted that the Mahishya leaders so thought that Mahishya women with this ideal education would surely teach their children , relatives and so on that the name of their caste was Mahishya and not *chasi* Kaivarta. Obviously the awakening of the Mahishya community was thus being done on a solid social, educational and religious base.

The leaders of the *Mahishya Samiti* were aware of the fact that the Mahishyas could in no way be a well-knit community till its economic backwardness was at least bearably minimised. That is why the *Samiti* in almost all its meetings and conferences discussed and devised measures for the economic development of the community.²² The zamindars were asked to help their *prajas* and *chasis* in respect of cultivation particularly in the plantation period and in dire times.²³ In addition to this there was established with the initiative of the Mahishya leaders the Agricultural Association of Bengal for agricultural improvement. Besides the *Samiti* took initiative in

setting up the Mahishya Banking and Trading Company to assist the Mahishyas with business loans and advice.²⁴ But it is a pity that both these agencies could not properly help the agriculturists and traders. Be that as it may these two agencies of the nascent *Mahishya Samaj* paved a new way for them to a newer life. Herein lay the credit of the Mahishya movement.

The solution of the caste identity question and the establishment of the caste solidarity and the gradual socio-economic changes transformed the horizontally differentiated Mahishyas into a homogeneous community. The community was always well aware of its newly achieved caste status and *chasi-profession*. The British rule and western education and western ideas of the representative form of government gradually made the community politically agile. Now the difference between the rulers and ruled and their difference of interests came to picture. The *Mahishya Samaj* appealed to the Viceroy for a share of the people in the governance of the country. In this connection they argued that “every land-owning proprietor without limitation or restriction, every tenure holder, every occupancy *ryot*, actual cultivator of the soil, each of whom has a stake in land, may possess a right to vote in the election of the council”²⁵.

During the Boycott and Swadeshi Movement the once loyal Mahishyas vehemently protested against the government design of

partitioning Mother Bengal, and they enthusiastically participated in protest meetings, processions and pickettings against the use of foreign goods with the sole demand for annulling the Partition.²⁶ It is peculiar that the Mahishya movement against the foreign rule did not abate with the collapse of the Anti-Partition movement and it went on in various forms in the following decade. The post-war crisis aggravated their distrust in and anger for the foreign rule. So in the Gandhi-led Non-Cooperation Movement the Mahishyas of Midnapore, particularly of Contai and Tamluk played a leading role, and they were sure that they would win in this their moral war against the foreign demon.

The Mahishya movement assumed a new dimension during the non-violent Non-Cooperation Movement. It was at this time the Anti-Union Board Agitation (1920- 21) of Midnapore was merged to a great extent with the national movement. As a result No-Union Board Movement got a sustaining impetus and strength, and became a forceful movement. The Union Board system was introduced in the district of Midnapore in 1920 with the avowed intention of the government to municipalize i.e to modernize the village life. In the initial stage this government drive was welcomed. It was hoped that a greater number of educated people would henceforth participate in public life. Birendra Nath Sasmol the veteran

Mahishya leader, soon made it clear to the people that the primary objective of the Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1919 was only to strengthen administration at the grassroots.²⁷ That is why there started the Anti-Union Board Agitation to resist the introduction of the Act. The Agitation became so powerful and effective that the authority thought it wise to repeal the Act.²⁸ To the renascent Mahishya Samaj it was their great victory over the colonial demon. This their victory gave them strength and confidence for their protests against the foreign rule in the coming days.

This awakening of the people of Midnapore provided them with moral courage and mental strength to fight against all odds and ills both in the home and national fronts. During the Civil Disobedience Movement under the leadership of Sasmol they participated in the movement with great vigour and expectations. True, the expectations were not fulfilled. Yet it is to be noted that the Gandhi- Irwin Pact could not damp their spirit for ever long. On the contrary they took the oath that they would remain prepared to respond to any and every call of the nation when it would reach them. This their vow was not merely hollow words. This was true to every word that the Mahishya dominated Contai subdivision established independent provisional parallel Governments in (i) Patashpur (October, 1942 – December, 1942), (ii) Khejuri (October, 1942 – December, 1942) and (iii) Contai (July, 1943 –

December, 1943) during the Quit India Movement caring little what worse might come to them.

The Mahishya movement of the early twentieth century is a sort of social revolution. The net result of the movement was the renaissance of Mahishya, the re-awakening of the Mahishya community. The movement made the Mahishyas a well-knit community. It assured their caste identity. In other words it crystallized their caste-peasant identity. It made the community socially coherent, economically secure and culturally advanced. As a result the Mahishyas felt proud of their caste and social status. It is noteworthy that one Ananga Mohan Chakrabarti, a candidate for the Tamuk- Contai seat in the election to the Legislative Council of 1921, lost his credibility because of his one outré and derogatory remark that Midnapore had no future as long as it remained a land of chasas.²⁹ The Amrita Bazar Patrika noted that Mr. Chakrabati's remark so hurt the people of Mahishya Midnaporee that he was hounded of in a meeting held in Midnapore. The 'crystallization of peasant-pride' i.e Mahishya caste-pride made a serious impact on the future political mobilization in Midnapore so vigorously and so effectively that the British government had to take afterwards stern measures in respect of implementing its administrative policies which were detrimental to the interests of the people.

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CHAPTER – 3

***SWADESHI* MOVEMENT AND ITS TRENDS
(1905—1911)**

Chapter – 3

Swadeshi Movement and its Trends (1905—1911)

The partition of Bengal was an outcome of the anti-Bengali, anti-Hindu and anti-Congress philosophy of the colonial government. Of course very many grave issues particularly administrative and political led to the formation of the idea of partition of the province. Since 1860's British officialdom had been thinking of the reduction of the enormous size of Bengal, a very unwieldy province very difficult for sound administration. That is why to the government the reduction of the size of the province for administrative convenience became a must, and this could only be done by partition. In addition to this administrative issue there was a grave political issue of great importance. This time nationalism was gaining in strength. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy (1899 - 1905), apprehended that nationalist agitations might take the form of dark clouds and these might one day threaten the British rule in India. The Viceroy thought that as Bengal was the epi-centre of the all India nationalist agitations so to weaken the Congress party was absolutely necessary and for this an effective blow at Bengal and at the Bengalis required to be hurled by partitioning Bengal and thereby dividing the Bengali speaking population. It is needless to say that this

decision of Curzon was very crude, cruel and virulent. Yet this had to be effected. Risley, the Home Secretary to the Government of India, very bluntly explained thus the logic behind Curzon's plan: "Bengal united is power, Bengal divided will pull several different ways". Risley also added that if Bengal was split up, a solid body of opponents of the British would surely be weakened. Minto, Curzon's successor, in support of the partition argued that from a political point of view the partition was a good political strategy.

In December, 1903 the partition proposals were publicly known. Immediately a tumult of spontaneous protest arose all over Bengal. In towns and markets places protest meetings were held. Besides, petitions and memoranda against the proposed partition were sent to the authority. All these were done to make the people aware of the inhuman and injudicious wrong done to Bengal and the Bengalis. It was expected that the uproarious protest of the Bengalis would put sufficient pressure on the government and as a result of which the partition might not be affected. But all these bore no fruit, and the government remained unmoved. Gradually it became clear to the people that the moderate methods of protest against the proposed partition could in no way hold good. In a mammoth meeting held in the town Hall of Calcutta on August 7, 1905 the Boycott Resolution in respect of

Manchester cloth and Liverpool salt was passed. Strangely enough with the Boycott Resolution was added the call for *Swadeshi* in a very short time. Since then the *boycott* and *swadeshi* became a full-fledged political movement. It was at this stage of the movement the government on September 1, 1905 announced that the partition was to be effected on October 16, 1905. Since then protest meetings were held almost every day all over Bengal.

The partition took effect on October 16, 1905. Mother Bengal was now cut up into two halves. All Bengal shivered in an indescribable agony, pain and sorrow. So the day was observed as the day of national mourning. There was no cooking and no taking of any cooked food on the day: it was the day of '*arandhan*'. To the Bengalis it was a very bad day, nay it was the beginning of their worst of times. The Bengalis deeply felt and apprehended that the Partition was to break all their traditional ties which could never be restored again, and as a result of which there might engender serious political and communal problems of future times. Particularly the ties were so broken and so impaired that they did not get back their former normalcy and buoyancy even after the annulment of the Partition.

October 16, studied in its reverse swing, was not a bad or dark day. On the contrary it was a good and bright day. On the day the people of

Bengal leaving aside all their social and religious differences observed '*rakhibandhan*', the tying of yellow thread at the right wrist of each other's arms. This signified the amity and unity of the people of Bengal. Hence an emotional wave began to sweep all over Bengal. And now Bengal in spite of her present torn and dissected state became a new Bengal. On seeing the changed environment of Bengal, and on feeling the enthusiastic mental fervor of the people Rabindranath sang out:

“Oh Mother, (now) you have emerged all at once from the core of Bengal with so great an amazing beauty. The more we see you the more the eyes get petrified and to our surprise we see that your gates are thrown open towards a golden temple”.

Particularly this is to what Bengal was changed that day as then the *Bengalees* had no other thinking but the thinking of their Mother Bengal. In this context Tagore has prayed “Let the minds and hearts of all the brothers and sisters of Bengal be one, my Lord”!

The Partition awakened Bengal into a nation. This awakening manifested itself in various nationalist ideas and activities. Bengal now became aware of the fact that hundreds of prayers and petitions and thousands of mammoth meetings could not make the government rescind its orders regarding the Partition. So new weapons were now thought of. In the

context of the Partition 'boycott' and '*swadeshi*' these two old concepts got a new impetus. Now the partition agitations were not mere agitations. The character of the protest movement was now totally changed. *Boycott* and *Swadeshi* held before the people new courses of action and new premises also. *Boycott* could create an economic pressure on Manchester; it would act as a weapon of political agitation against imperialism and it would also train the people in self-sufficiency for the attainment of *Swaraj*. On the other hand *swadeshi* would teach the people to reflect on their political and economic condition, to shed fear, to defy authority and to welcome what worse might come to them.¹ Henceforth *boycott* and *swadeshi*, these two complementary courses of action, added an overwhelming emotional patriotic fervor to the partition agitations as a result of which the anti-partition movement took the character of a full-fledged national movement. In Bengal this was so named as the *Swadeshi* Movement.

The *Swadeshi* Movement of Contai constituted an integral part of the all-Bengal *Swadeshi* Movement. But the issues, dimensions and dynamics of the movement hold altogether a new picture, and make it clear that the Contai movement in spite of having the all-Bengal characteristics was always to a very great extent Local.

Midnapore during the colonial rule was branded as a land of rebels, rebellions and revolutionary activities. Since 1867 the Provincial authority had been thinking of the partition of Midnapore for the reduction of its enormous size with a view to making it feasible for administrative convenience. In the following years the idea did not progress much and it remained shelved for the time being. But the apprehension that Midnapore might be partitioned at any time on any pretext went on ringing in the minds of the people of Midnapore, particularly those of the Oriaya-speaking frontier sub-division Contai adjacent to the newly created province Orissa.

On December 12, 1903 the partition of Bengal scheme in its embryonic form came to be publicly known. Bengal burst into protest against this grievous wrong. Hence all cities and towns and market places assumed a new appearance and a new fervour with the strong determination to resist the implementation of the partition scheme. Protest meetings and protest processions became a regular feature. Newspapers disgorged the wounded feelings of the people. *Nihar*, severely criticized Curzon's divisive scheme without thinking of any ire that might come upon it. It writes, "As Curzon *Bahadur* has decided to partition Bengal however ludicrous be the scheme, so it will surely be affected. But it is a pity that the Viceroy must have it known that the partition scheme will bring about unnecessary

changes, and it will unnecessarily disturb the easy and peaceful life of the Bengalis".²

It is evident from the *Nihar* that Contai was all along aware of the fact that if any partition would occur she would be affected more badly than any other region of Bengal. Besides she had the great fear that as a result of any partition her geography would be circumscribed, her economy would be crippled much more than it had been during the early years of the colonial rule owing to the destruction of her salt-manufacturing industry and other cottage industries, and her socio-cultural life would be impoverished owing to her arbitrary joining with the culturally impoverished Orissa. That is why thinking of this agony of the Contai people the *Nihar* writes: "The government thinks that India is the play ground of the British national ideas and activities, and it is the amphitheatre for the exercise of the prowess of the ruler, and that the subject-people should only have the fear of the ruling power, and they can have no sense of liberty".³ In this context the *Nihar* delineating the worst bureaucratic features of the government which recklessly disregards the cherished feelings of the people, challenges: "Does the government feel itself so supreme as to make and unmake the land and the people according to its own whims and vagaries".⁴ In this connection it is worth noting that nine days before the partition Rabindranath similarly

challenged the ruler: “Are you so strong enough to sunder what fate has bound together, do you really think that our lives are yours to make and break”?⁵

Between December 1903 and July 1905 the anti-partition agitations in Contai were confined mostly to ritualistic *Harikatha* and *Krishnakatha* sittings and *dharmasabha* discussions in which the grappling and crippling of Sonar *Bangla* by the colonial demon, the *Rahu*, was vividly and elaborately analyzed with cogent allegorical interpretations. This created an antipathy of the people towards the devilish rule; but as they then felt themselves helpless against the mighty British rule so they could not but wait for a proper movement and for a suitable occasion to rise against the injudicious and arbitrary actions of the colonial ruler. At last it was on October 16 came the opportune movement and the intended occasion to exert the nationalist feelings and congealed protests of the Contai people – the people who had so long been remained energized with the extremist ideology of Aurobindo which was taught them by Hemchandra Kanungo, a native of Contai, and his associates.

To all Bengal October 16 was a day of solemn mourning. So the day was observed with two special ceremonies: one was *Arandhan* and the other was *Rakhibandhan*. *Arandhan* signified the depth and gravity of the sorrow

of the Bengalis, and *Rakhibandhan* asserted the fraternal solidarity and the unity of the Bengalis. Besides these two ceremonies there were protest processions with *samkritan* parties which sang mournful *kritans* and patriotic songs.⁶ In the *Harikatha* and *Kathakatha* sittings there were allegorically stressed what great wrong the government had done to the people. On the day there was organized a vast meeting in Contai town. One local zamindar Sjt. Bipinbihari Sasmal presided over the meeting. He emphatically pointed out that all their humble prayers and petitions to the government for not partitioning Bengal were brushed aside, so they must have to take resort to other means.⁷

Now in place of the moderate, and so long ineffective, techniques of prayers and petitions traditionally qualified with *Vaishnava* modesty and humility there came new techniques tempered with Tantric ideology. By this time the anti-partition agitation was merged into the Boycott and the *Swadeshi* movement. So in almost all the meetings that followed the speakers eloquently explained the meaning and significance of 'boycott' and '*swadeshi*'. According to their interpretations boycott was not merely the abandonment of Briton- goods it was the idea of non-co-operation with the British in every field. In a deeper sense it was an act of self-defence, an act of aggression for the sake of self- preservation. And '*swadeshi*' which

literally means a sincere and wholehearted love and attachment to anything and everything of mother Bengal (and also of India) now implicitly referred to the newly awakened nationalism of the Bengalis ultimately aiming at political regeneration leading India towards '*Swaraj*'.

The vast meeting of Contai after the efficacy of the partition was a great success. It was attended by almost all the local zamindars, most of the teachers of High English and Middle English Schools, some lawyers and *mukhteer* and a large number of common people. Some well-to-do Muslims and some Christians also were present in the meeting. All the people assembled in the meeting enthusiastically welcomed 'boycott' and '*swadeshi*', and heartily agreed to follow the practices concerned with the application of the new weapons of the anti-partition movement. They all proclaimed that they would not use Briton-goods particularly cloth, salt and sugar and they would use country-made goods instead.⁸ It was agreed in the meeting that for the furtherance of the movement *swadeshi samitis* were to be organized in villages and towns.⁹ It would be the bounden duty of the *samitis* to see that protest processions were being held regularly at least at intervals, and they would implore the people to stick to the ideas and activities of boycott and *swadeshi*. Besides they would organize regular sittings of *Harisabha* and *Kathakata*, which would allegorically detail the

wrongs of alien demons, and thus they would inspire the people to stand against the evil designs of the government.¹⁰

Meanwhile the Congress leaders made an extensive tour all over Bengal with a view to making the boycott general and to making the *swadeshi* an effective exhilarating nationalist action. As a result in every district and sub-division local centres of agitation sprang up with a variety of their own leaders. In Contai the local leaders were mostly local zamindars who were just before the efficacy of the Partition intensely loyal to the government. The Partition put a severe strain on their loyalist sentiment. Now it was clear to them that the government had designed the Partition outwardly for administrative convenience but practically to impair the unity of the Bengali race and above all to weaken the Bengali nationalism. So the Partition must be protested with all vehemence to make the government rescind the Partition.

In Contai the zamindars played a significant role in the anti-partition movement. In most cases they themselves took the leading in championing boycott and *swadeshi*.¹¹ They engaged their *naibs*, *gomostas* and other *amlas* to speak to their tenants in favour of boycott and *swadeshi*. It was so heard that in one case or two the zamindars by the beating of drums in their estates forbade the shop-keepers to import and sell British goods, and they also

forbade the buyers to purchase any such goods.¹² It is learnt from *Nihar* and *Medini Bandhaba*, the two local weeklys that in the families of the zamindars and also in those of their relations the use of British goods particularly salt and sugar was totally stopped, and that their deities in temples were served sugar-less oblations.¹³

In the *Swadeshi* movement the women of Contai played a significant role of some great historical significance. It is historic in the sense that like Rani Krishnapriya of the Tamluk Raj Estate (1781) and Rani Siromani of Karnagarh of the Chuar days (1794) who heroically raised their heads against the colonial arbitrary rule and economic exactions Rani Haripriya of Garh Basudebpur made a direct protest against the colonial cruel design of partitioning Bengal for weakening Bengal and Bengali nationalism.¹⁴ Raniji decided to protest against this grievous wrong; so she unhesitatingly made a direct participation in the running boycott-*swadeshi* movement in which big zamindars of Contai like Digambar Nanda and others had already taken a leading part.¹⁵ In a meeting held in her Estate Raniji spoke to her tenants that Bengal was now in a great crisis. Her society, economy, culture, religion and above all her nationality were now on the verge of ruin. Now it was the duty of all her sons and daughters to stand by her in this her crisis, and to undo the wrong they must have to put pressure on the government by using every

possible means. Raniji felt that the boycott and *swadeshi* would be the effective weapons to achieve their desired end i.e. to make the government rescind the Partition orders. She asked her people not to use Briton cloth sugar and salt. Raniji along with all her relations set fire to their valuable *bilati* cloths and smashed all their dear *reshmi* bangles. All these gave imparted a great impetus to the women of her Estate and also to the women of Contai.¹⁶ For these her heroic activities the people of her Estate and also of Contai hailed her as the Rani Siromoni of Garh Basudebpur. Particularly in those days Raniji became a true role model to women-fighters of all Bengal. And that is why participation of the Contai women in the boycott-*swadesh* movement became a unique episode in the history of Midnapore. Again it is unique in the sense that it was the breeding-ground that gave birth to the heroines of *Lavan* Satyagraha of 1930.

The students and their teachers of the High English and Middle English Schools were the life-force of the *swadeshi* movement of Contai.¹⁷ Practically this was so as they added a new connotation to nationalism. To them nationalism was now not merely religion, faith and creed. It was solely *matri- puja*, worship of the motherland Bengal. In this *puja* their mantra was *Bandemataram*.¹⁸ Now it became the gospel of their new nationalism, and as mother-worshippers they were crusaders. *Bademataram* was their war-cry.

The running boycott and *swadeshi* movement was the crusade in which they would be laurelled with victory. They had the firm conviction that they would surely win, and that the government would surely have to reunite Bengal if they would persist in the movement.

The students threw themselves heart and soul into the movement caring little for what punishment might come upon them. They had the only one motto that they would make the boycott general and extend it as wide as possible. So they took it as their bounden duty to participate in protest processions and picketing at shops selling Briton-cloths and other British goods, and to organize protest meetings and participate in them.¹⁹ It was found in most cases their picketings bore the desired results, but in certain cases where the shop-keepers did not pay any heed to their protests against the selling of imported cloths, they forcibly entered into the shops and took out all the cloths and set them to fire. This led to police cases and to their flogging and other repressions including imprisonment.²⁰ In such cases the students sang out: "They have no longer any fear even a little of the red-capped and black-uniformed police. They will all along remain dedicated to adoring the mother land even if the brute force sends them to prison".²¹ The students were then the leaders in their own right. They organized street meetings in markets on market-days.²² In the meetings they mostly read

aloud leaflets like *Raja ke*, *Sonar Bangla*, *Mukti Kon Pathe*, and then explained how the alien ruler had ruined golden Bengal by looting her riches and destroying her industries. They also held before them from the Calcutta-published news papers how the movement was extending and progressing all over the country.

The sacerdotal class i.e. the *purohits*, *goswamis* and *pundits* played a lot in fostering the boycott movement. The *pundits* of *Contai-tols* following the dictates of the *Nawadwip* and *Bhatpara* *pundits* condemned the use of sugar and salt in worshipping gods and offering oblations to the forefathers as these two articles were clarified with the blood and bones of cows and pigs, and therefore these two articles would grievously impair Hindu religion. All the family priests took up the matter readily and carried the boycott into every household of their *Yajmans*. Again the *goswamis*, the devout *vaishnavas*, were dead against the use of sugar in their *Hari-puja* festivities. Three *mahantas* *Raghunath Das Adhikari*, *Kripasindhu Das Adhikari* and *Narattom Das Adhikari* of *Chhota Thakur Badi* and *Bada Thakur Badi* and their disciples devoutly appeal to all not to use Briton sugar and salt as these would impair the worship of their idols. It is needless to say all the devotees of the *mahantas* tried to follow of the dictates of their *mahantas*.²³ And it is astonishingly striking that the *Purohit Sabha* of

Contai and some well known *dharma-gurus* appealed to the editor of the *Nihar* to make a general publicity through his paper about respect of the profanity and impurities of British sugar and salt; and thereby they asked their *Yajmans* not to use these articles.²⁴ In addition to this it was asserted that if any *Yajmans* would ignore this their appeal made known through the *Nihar* he would be socially ostracized i.e. no one would perform any religious function in his house from birth to death. It is evident from the *Nihar* that the appeal of the *Purohit Sabha* created a great alarm among the Hindus.²⁵ As a result boycott got a strong religious support in the villages and towns of Contai.

In fostering boycott and *swadeshi Hari- Katha and Kathakata* sittings played a very significant role. To the Contai people the *Kathak- thakur's Ravana, Duryodhana* and *Kamsa* and their inhuman and cruel wrong-doings seemed to be the true personifications of the demoniac actions of the alien rulers. All these deeply impressed the emotionally fevered Contai people, so in every evening they thronged to these sittings. It is thus evident that the *kathakatha asars* drew the people of Contai to participate in the boycott and *swadeshi* movement whole heartedly.²⁶

The zamindars of Contai from the very first stage of the anti-partition agitation did their best by all means to put pressure on the government for the withdrawal of the Partition. They conducted the agitation with reckless hostility towards the cruel design of the government, and they tried with every sincerity of purpose to extend and foster the boycott and *swadeshi*. They held regularly protest meetings at their houses, in the *chandimandaps* and in open market places to explain the dire need of protesting against the Partition. The participation of the zamindars in the protest processions and picketings gave an effective impetus to the movement. The personal presence of the zamindars in the processions and picketings and their inflammatory speeches delivered in the meetings attracted the common mass to the movement and inspired them to keep their religion deprofaned, to fight against the government design to weaken Bengal and the Bengalees and above all to strengthen Bengali nationalism.²⁷ By virtue of the repeated shoutings of *Bande Mataram*, the singing of patriotic songs and the *samkirtan* in chorus the *Swadeshi* movement in Contai assumed an air of romance and was transformed into a sort of religious festivity.²⁸ As a result of all these all the processionists and picketers along with the leading zamindars were so engrossed in the *Swadeshi* frenzy that they entered into the shops selling Briton cloths and other British goods and destroyed all their articles. It is worthwhile to note that on one market day the

processionists led by zamindar Digambar Nanda of Mugberia threw away all the Liverpool salt packets in the Itaberia canal; they also set fire on the British cloths, destroyed sugar and other British goods and glass bangles (*reshmi churi*).²⁹ The Itaberia incident inflamed the *swadeshi* fire in Contai. All the *thanas* of the Contai subdivision adroitly took the Itaberia model as the proper method of boycottism. To the people *Swadeshi-ism* now became their only one idea, nay the only one weapon of salvation.

The heroic leading of Digambar Nanda at Itaberia fanned the flames of boycott, and incited all the zamindars of Contai to come to the forefront of the movement. Henceforth they engaged their *amlas* to spread the boycott idea among the tenants; they prohibited the shop-keepers to sell British salt and sugar.³⁰ They asked the students to extend the agitation to villages and to explain to villagers the boycott ideal and to follow the boycott activities whole heartedly as all these would do good for the country and the countrymen.³¹ The priests of the zamindari estates came forward to foster the boycotting; and working on the religious scruples by emphasizing the profanities of salt and sugar they carried the boycott into every household.³² The zamindars also engaged the *Harisabha*, *Dharmasabha* and *Samkritan* parties to heighten the tone of the boycott-*swadeshi* movement.³³ It was thus the Contai movement attained the character of a religious reform movement. In this connection it is

striking to note that in a meeting held in the house of one Sital Prasad Mandal of Chandibheti near Contai some thirty to forty *Harisabha* parties graced the assemblage with an aroma of religiosity. It is evident from the *Nihar* that *Harisabha* and *Samkritan* parties were regarded as one cardinal feature of the meetings organised in the *swadeshi* days.³⁴ From this one may surmise the heightened the character of religious nationalism of Contai.

To foster boycott and *swadeshi* the zamindars organised *melas* in their estates. The religion-centric *melas* like *Rasmela*, *Dolmela*, *Siva-chaturdashi mela* and *Charakmela* were by virtue of their organisation transformed into *swadeshi melas*. Students and volunteers paraded up and down the *melas*. They sang *swadeshi* songs and lectured on the impurities of the British sugar and salt. In the *melas* stalls of *swadeshi* goods were opened. In most cases *swadeshi melas* became centres of the exhibition of ingenious *swadeshi* goods which drew the attention of the people and attracted them to the dexterity in their production. This is how the *melas* in one sense upheld the significance of the *swadeshi*.³⁵

Shortly after the efficacy of the Partition it was felt that a well-knit organisation was extremely urgent for conducting the boycott-*swadeshi* movement. With this end in view zamindar Digambar Nanda in a meeting held at his residence spoke in respect of the setting up of a *Swadeshi Samiti*. Nanda

said: the *Samiti* would facilitate the progress of the movement in very many ways: the *Samiti* would assess the nature and development of the boycott-*swadeshi* agitation, it would solve problems that the agitation might gradually face; it would keep contact with the District and Calcutta *samitis* in respect of conducting the movement; it would organise *swadeshi* meetings with invited national leaders who would lecture on the usefulness of boycott and *swadeshi* for the economic well-being of the country. It would also open *swadeshi bhandars* and help them with *swadeshi* goods and also with money.³⁶

The boycott-*swadeshi* movement in Contai became a movement of constructive *swadeshi*. Practically it laid much stress on *swadeshi* economy. Meanwhile there grew the idea that the boycott of British goods could in no way be a permanent boycott; because in the then economic set-up of the country it was really difficult to substitute indigenous goods for the British goods. That is why much importance was given to the resuscitation of cottage-cotton handloom industries and even to the foundation of cotton cloth mills. Digambar Nanda and some other zamindars of Contai personally helped cotton weavers with money and with means of production for starting their work. One more interesting thing is that they inspired their tenants and others to grow cotton in their zamindari estates.³⁷

It was at this time when the resuscitation of the decayed industries was given much importance and the rejuvenation of agro-economy became a question of great importance some public-spirited liberals and wealthy zamindars were thinking of forming a fund for the growth and development of Contai economy. In one *swadeshi* meeting B. N. Sasmol raised a proposal for the formation of such a *Dhana Bhandar*. Sasmol proposed:

“We the inhabitants of the Contai subdivision being fully inspired by national consciousness and being fully aware of our duties to our dear motherland wholeheartedly take the vow that we shall donate our one day’s income for cotton thread spinning and for the development of the weaving industry of Bengal”.³⁸

The proposal was seconded by one Munshi Mahiuddin. Some prominent nationalists of Contai like Banabihari Mukherjee, Pramathanath Banerjee, Dwarikanath Dhar and Bidhubhushan Giri in their speeches highly applauded the proposal. In the meeting the object and scope and working of the *Dhana Bhandar* was fully explained.³⁹

The lawyers of the Contai court also played a very positive role during the *swadeshi* movement. Almost regularly they attended the *swadeshi* meetings, almost regularly and in most cases they presided over them. Their logical explanation of the wrong done to Bengal and the Bengalees impressed the

audience. And in cases of any friction between shopkeepers dealing in British goods and student-picketers forbidding their sales they did not take the cases of the shopkeepers. On the contrary they stood for the students-picketers, and by applying pressure tactics they forced the shopkeepers to come to understandings with the students.⁴⁰

The boycott programme was a direct hit at the government and at the same time it was a challenge on Manchester economy. During the early stage of the *swadeshi* movement it was expected that if the boycott was thoroughly and actively followed it would put a heavy pressure on the government to rescind the Partition.

It is strikingly peculiar to note that when boycott and *swadeshi* were amalgamated and the movement was running forcefully there emerged a new trend of the movement ---- the trend of revolutionary nationalism. This time under the guidance of Satyendranath Bose and Hemchandra Kanungo there were established in Midnapore a number of *akhras* which were outwardly centres of physical culture but practically covers of revolutionary activities. Kshudiram Bose personally supervised the *Bande Mataram Ground Akhra* of Contai. Digambar Nanda of Contai and some other local zamindars gave financial assistance to those *akhras*.⁴¹ It is thus evident that the *swadeshim* of Contai was gradually taking the character of revolutionary nationalism.

By the middle of 1907 it became perceptibly clear that the anti-partition movement was gradually declining and by the middle of 1908 it was clear that the boycott programme could not achieve the desired end. The leaders of the agitation were now trying hard to keep the movement alive. But they could not stir up the former enthusiasm of the people. It was found that by this time the zamindars had got dispirited. The pressure of the government circulars drew the students to schools. Practically this time they had lost their fighting zeal and nationalist enthusiasm. The cry of *Bande Mataram* was almost stopped. The agricultural class now questioned what benefit was there in boycotting British goods as the *bilati* goods were much cheaper than country-made goods particularly cotton-cloths. Besides, it became clear to all that there was no possibility of a united Bengal. Contai as well as Bengal was now getting totally changed. The Contai of 1905 and 1906 was now almost a dream. Now all over the country there prevailed an amazing silence. In Aurobindo's words ---- "A hush had fallen on the country". Yet the leading agitators of Contai hoped against the hope that though the first upsurge of the movement was gone, the nationalist sentiment of the Contai people did not disappear. True, the stream of *swadeshi* had lost its life-force in the desert of failure and frustration; at the same time it was also true that the stream would again flow with all vehemence and forcefulness in proper times. Practically and historically this became a

reality during the enthusiastic and heroic participation of the Contai people in the Non-co-operation Movement of 1920-21, in the historic *Lavan* Satyagraha of 1930 and also in the Quit India Movement (1942).

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CHAPTER – 4

A NEW WAVE: WAR AND THE MOVEMENT IN CONTAI (1914—1919)

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A New wave: War and the Movement in Contai (1914-1919)

‘A New Wave’ refers both explicitly and implicitly to the changes gradually taking place in the colonial policy of the British rule in India in the years following the Revolt of 1857. The changes also clearly hint at the transformation of the Indian elite who had so long been devoutly loyal to the so-called utilitarian and benevolent British rule, but afterwards became aware of the mechanism of the economic exploitation and of the policy of benevolent domination. These people gradually realized that the outward beneficence of the British government was only a mask, and its administrative apparatus was its pro-active handmaid in the task of exploitation. As a result in this situation the government could not take pro-Indian development policies unless and until the Indians could assert their influence over it through any weighty association or associations. Herein was felt the necessity for the foundation of an all-India political organization. The stage for the formation of such an association was ready there as the nationalist newspapers and journals and a good number of nationalists had been continually unmasking the draining out of Indian

wealth, and exposing the ills and evils of colonial domination working all along for the interest of Britain alone. Therefore there was felt the dire necessity for the country to found an association which would fix its basic tasks and objectives, and put them forward to the government for their implementation. It was at this stage the all-India National Congress was founded holding the vision of a new age and a new life to the nation that was in the making.

With the foundation of the National Congress there opened a new chapter in the history of the imperial and nationalist policies and activities of the colonial India. Practically henceforth a new wave began to sweep over the country incessantly with new courses through different channels according to varying situations.

The attitude of the Government towards the Congress did never stick to any fixed point. It varied from time to time according to situations. W. C. Bonnerjee writes, Viceroy Dufferin suggested to A. O. Hume, a Retd. Civil Servant that if his proposed association consisting of Indian nationalists through their discussions of political matters could keep the Government informed of the public opinion this would perform 'the function which Her Majesty's Opposition did in England'.¹ In Dufferin's suggestion it was implied that an association of this kind might be allowed.

Some thirty years later Lala Lajpat Rai, an Extremist leader, on the basis of prevalent notions relating to the birth of the I.N.C. and particularly on the foundation of Bonnerji's statement made the theory that the Congress was 'the product of Dufferin's brain', and that it was so made as a safety-valve to serve the interest of the British rule in India. Later on following Rai's "safety-valve' theory R.P. Dutt, a veteran Marxist historian and many others asserted that the Congress was formed through direct Government initiative and guidance 'as an intended weapon for safeguarding British rule against the rising forces of popular unrest and anti-British feeling'.² But recent researches have shown it that the so-called safety-valve machination was only a myth as the Government did not then feel the necessity of having 'an intended weapon' to safeguard itself against impending mass risings as the *mohantas* forecast. On the contrary the British officialdom including the Viceroy himself read new messages in the birth of the Congress as it was conveying to them through its nationalist activities an ominous sense of foreboding. That is why the attitude of the Government towards the Congress became gradually hostile because of the continual attacks of the nationalists and also of the press in respect of the ills of the colonial rule as it was incessantly hammering in the anti-British feelings of the people exactly in a seditious manner.

Shortly before the birth of the Congress Dufferin wrote to the Secretary of State on August 7, 1885 that the Bengali *Babus* and the Maratha Brahmins had the intention of starting Irish type of revolutionary agitations in India. And shortly after the birth of the Congress the Viceroy in a letter to Reay, the Governor of Bombay wrote that the nationalist Press was generating 'a sincere conviction that we (the British) are all of us the enemies of mankind in general and of India in particular'. Dufferin's antipathy to the Congress is evident in his St. Andrews' Day Dinner Speech in which he suggested to the Nationalists that the Congress would do better if it took to social reform for the benefit of millions. Otherwise a happy despatch was better for the Congress in some way or other. In this connection he made the doughty declaration: "... we cannot allow the congress to continue to exist"³. In spite of this Dufferin had the idea that it would not be difficult for the Government to incorporate the leading nationalists of the Congress into 'the colonial political structure' where they would only let off their political steam. Therefore 'the bureaucracy could afford to pay no attention to them'⁴. But very soon the tables turned. Dufferin's idea of the Congress was totally changed. The nationalists transformed the Councils into very much like open universities for imparting political education to the people, and for criticizing and ventilating

government policies and administrative shortcomings. It was at this stage the government devised a number of measures to counter the growing nationalist movement. To weaken the Congress an attempt was made to start an anti-Congress movement within the Congress. The government fanned the communal rivalry of the Muslims towards their opposition to the cow protection movement started by the Orthodox Hindus. Besides the British authorities held before the Muslims that they would henceforth attain all the political privileges which were still unattained by them if they would not ally with the Congress. In spite of these machinations nationalism in Bengal was growing blatantly and gaining strength.

From the very beginning of his viceroyalty Lord Curzon was very much sensitive to the Congress-led national movement. It seemed to him that the national movement had become an acute political crisis which might be very much pernicious to the interest of the British rule. That is why it was felt that the prime necessity for the government was to weaken the Congress. From a deep study of the situation it became clear to the Viceroy that the Moderate-led Congress because of its inherent dissensions was nearing its fall. In this context Curzon declared (1900) "... one of my greatest ambitions while in India is to assist it to a peaceful demise"⁵. Again in 1903 he wrote to Lord Nor, the Governor of Madras, "My policy, ever since I came to

India, has been to reduce the Congress to impotence”⁶. Curzon had the firm conviction that his policy could be realized only by dethroning Calcutta, the nerve centre of nationalist politics, from its position of regulating the all-India national movement by dividing the Bengali speaking population⁷. Risley, the Home Secretary to the government of India, harped more clearly on the same string: he said on December 6, 1904. “Bengal united is power; Bengal divided will pull in several ways”⁸. It is thus clear that all the top British officials were anxious to make a happy end of the Calcutta-manipulated nationalist movement. Curzon’s successor Lord Minto said, it mattered little what administrative grounds were there behind the partition of Bengal as the matter was practically a ‘grave political necessity’⁹.

The early nationalists, the advocates of moderate politics and moderate methods, now scientifically analyzed the draining out of Indian wealth and raised the slogan in the style of the American colonists ‘No representation , No taxation’. Gradually they moved miles away. They now put forward their demand for ‘self government’ for India like that of other British colonies. In 1905 Dadabhai Naoroji asserted: “Self-government is the only remedy for India’s woes and wrongs”¹⁰. In the Calcutta Congress he pointed out categorically that the goal of the Indian National movement was

Swaraj i.e. self-rule on the model of self-governing colonies of Canada and Australia.¹¹

By this time the inner contradiction between the imperial colonial interest and that of the Indians became quite glaring to the Indians. So they could not but think of hitting hard at the trunk of British imperialism by launching on a violent movement. It was now clear to them as broad daylight that the unity of opposites-- this very principle of Hegel's Dialectics,- could never be realized (actualized) in the Indian context. It was so because of the fact that the vapour arising out of Indian economy by nature being transformed into heavy clouds did not shower in India. They were in accordance with the colonial system only showering fertilizing rains in Lancashire and so on. Therefore this insoluble contradiction between the Indian people and British colonial imperialism could never turn in favour of India except radical changes in the present system of the colonial administration, and this could only be possible by the overthrow of the British rule. This time the British authorities settled to strike at the heart of the national movement by the application of all effective weapons, particularly by the communal weapon for partitioning Bengal. This was how the partition of Bengal was at last settled. Lord Curzon applying the sharp Delilah-communalism had Samson-locks of Bengal-unity cut off¹². The

partition of Bengal caused a tumultuous uproar. But the *Boycott* and *Swadeshi* activities did not last long. "By mid-1908, the open movement with its popular mass character had all but spent itself"¹³.

In between 1905 and 1908 two very important things took place: one was the foundation of the All India Muslim League (1906) and the other was the Split of the Congress at Surat (1907). The British Government felt very much elated at the foundation of the League as it now became easier (for the government) to play off the League against the Congress, and to play off the Muslims against the other sections of the Indian population. On the other hand British authorities felt elated at the Surat Split (1907) as it was to them an event of tremendous significance in favour of their much desired boon. Practically it was the result of their long hatched devilish machination to weaken the Congress and the national movement, and thus to expunge the anti-colonial sentiment of the Indian populace. This is evident from Minto's letter to Morley in which he wrote that the 'Congress collapse' resulting from the Surat Split was 'a great triumph for us'¹⁴. The collapse had a tremendous impact on the national movement and particularly over the Bengal nationalists. Historically a sudden change came over the country. In Aurobindo's words "A hush had fallen on the country"¹⁵. Practically a dead silence prevailed except some agitations for constitutional reforms in the

country. It was at this stage the government offered a bait of reforms in the Legislative Councils to tactically suppress the agitations, to divide the nationalist ranks and to incite Muslim communalism.

This is how an eventful and significant chapter in the history of the British *Raj* came to an end leaving behind regional and in some cases local agitations. In this context an incidental remark of Viceroy Elgin is noteworthy: "India was conquered by the sword and by the sword it shall be held". But it is striking that Elgin in one of his statements implicitly signified that in the sub-continent what was of prime importance was diplomacy not sword i.e. nationalist agitations and problems were to be handled with Machiavellian diplomacy and not by Tsarist sword. That is why the government to handle Bengal politics took recourse mainly to three policies; the policy of using indiscriminate repression over all anti-government people, the policy of winning over the Moderates by holding before them assurances of a number of political concessions and above all the policy of making the Bengal Muslims stand apart from the Congress through the device of separate electorates.

A section of the Moderates in the beginning welcomed the proposals of the Act of 1909 as 'large and liberal'; but very soon they on considering the excessive concessions granted to the Muslims became very much critical

of the Act. The Muslims now felt themselves much empowered by the Act, and by nature and activities they became much more different from what they had been before the creation of the new province. As a result looting, killing and setting fire on Hindu houses and market places, attacks on Hindu landed- gentry and on Hindu women and despoiling of temples and so on went on rampant. Law and order now failed; the government failed to enforce the rule of law. As a result the new province was turned into an abyss of disorganization, confusion and anarchy.

To the provincial authority and so also to the British government both in India and Britain the crisis of the new province gradually became very much perplexing. To get rid of the 'partition ulcer' the government thought of revoking the partition of Bengal. In December 1911 Emperor George-V at the Delhi Durbar revoked the partition. The two Bengals were now united, and the capital of British India was transferred from Calcutta to Delhi. At this the Muslim political elite was rudely shocked. The main purpose behind this recalling of the Delhi-based Mughal glory was only to sop the enraged Muslim sentiment. But owing to changes in British foreign policy towards Turkey the Muslim opinion in India towards the British authority became hostile. Gradually this hostility grew deeper, and during the inter-war years it grew much more tense and violent. Under the circumstances the

government was to adopt a new course of action according to varying changes.

In fine it requires a particular mention of the fact that the aforesaid factors both governmental and nationalist both knowingly and unknowingly slowly but steadily paved a solid ground for the emergence of a new nation and a new India. Coming events cast their shadows before--- in the Indian context this maxim proved true to every word as the late 1910's heralded a new era in Indian politics. Particularly 1920 heralded the birth of a new India-wide national movement under the leadership of a new leader leading the nation with a new course of action against a super colonial power bent on crushing the birth of the nation in its embryo.

In 1913 a new chapter opened in the history of Contai consequent to a catastrophic flood that made the people socially disrupted and economically crippled. Again with this socio-economic crisis Contai had to face the crises generated by the war.¹⁶

The attitude of the colonial government towards the flood-victims and its administrative activities during the pre-flood and post-flood periods exposed clearly the hard-hearted nature of the colonial rule. That is why the Contai nationalists put forward a number of grievances against the government: (i) the government did not organise a proper effective prompt

relief system; (ii) it did not provide the flood-victims with employment; (iii) the embankment and canal systems of the locality all along remained neglected, and so there was the over-flooding of the Contai areas; and the canals could not properly discharge the locked waters of the lower areas; (iv) the neglected government sanitation, health-care and medical facilities of the people of the flooded areas, and it did not take any particular care for supplying pure drinking water to the victims, and if this could have been done epidemics might have been kept under control¹⁷. In addition to these grievances the government proposal to realise the loans and revenues at this critical hour made the people critical in respect of the government. Besides the government proposal to close the sluices after *aman*-harvest was very much perplexing to them¹⁸. It was at this stage the lesson propagated in the *swadeshi-katha* sittings that 'a good king's rule is good for people and a bad king's rule is bad' – was very much appreciating to the people. It meant that if the alien ruler was right and alert there would have been no flood, no famine and no flood generated epidemics. There is no doubt that this lesson implicitly ignited the nationalist spirit of protest of the people and made them prepared to respond according to circumstances.

Contai in 1913 as a result of natural disasters was transformed into a new Contai, totally different from the Contai of the former times,

particularly from the Contai of the *Swadeshi* days. Truly speaking, Contai was now economically crippled. Her society and social relations were disrupted. There was no food, no clothing and no medical care. Instead there were hunger, starvation, diseases and deaths. There were no *mahajani* loans. Government relief was irregular and insufficient, and local benevolences were only little. It was at this critical stage there was none to instil in the misery- stricken people the hope and confidence of a new life and of new days. In spite of this their stringency they hoped against hope. They somehow managed to cultivate their paddy fields; but all along they had the apprehension that all their fields might be washed away again as a result of heavy rain and by the water coming from the west high lands.¹⁹

In August 1914 the apprehension of the people came true. The paddy fields were all submerged due to heavy rains. Besides this natural calamity they faced a terrible man-made calamity, the Great War. The War broke out in August 1914. None knew what might come out of the War. At this state of confusion the statesmen of the belligerent states particularly those of Britain and the USA with a view to clearing the aims and objectives of the War made the public declarations that the Allies were fighting for liberty, for self-government for the development of all peoples, and for making the world safe for democracy. The British Prime Minister Lloyd George

repeatedly announced: "The Allies are fighting for nothing but freedom". These solemn and liberal declarations from the beginning of the War went on ringing in the ears of the nationalist leaders. So they were in favour of showing sympathy and rendering support for Britain. From the beginning of the War Britain made an indiscriminate use of Indian's men and money and other material resources for conducting the War. The Congress made no protest over it. In the Madras Conference (1914) the I NC adopted the resolution that the Indians should support the British Empire in her great peril whole-heartedly and with all loyalty. Probably this time it was considered that "England's necessity was India's opportunity". That is why the Indian national leaders remained loyal to the government and thought of demanding political reforms as a price for their loyalty.

This time the national leaders like Tilak and others appealed to the Indians to stand by the government with men and money in order to qualify India for *Swaraj*. This appeal of Gandhi to the national leaders created a great sensation all over the country. Meetings and seminars were organised to publicize the necessity of rendering help to Britain. In this connection it is striking that as soon as the War broke out a general meeting was convened in the Bell Hall at Madras to assure the government that the Madras people would render loyal services to the government with all sorts of help²⁰.

On September 17, 1914 in a meeting convened at the *Mukhteer* Library under the presidentship of ... the S D O , Contai there was formed one *Yuddha Sahayak Samiti* (War-Aid Committee) by the respectable persons of the district²¹. The prominent members of the committee were some big zamindars and the teachers of the Contai High English School and the Contai Model Institution. It is strange that most of these persons before the breaking out of the War were mostly devout nationalists, and they participated in anti-British meetings and agitations. But now the tables turned, and their political colour was now changed, and most of them with a crusading zeal came forward to speak in favour of the government, and they asked the people of the locality to serve the government with all possible ways and means. Not only that they also engaged themselves in collecting donations for the Imperial Relief Fund, and in persuading the young people to join the War for the greater interest of the country²². It is thus evident that the flow of the national movement was now almost totally checked. On the contrary there flowed a strong current towards furthering the interests of a new social class composed of zamindars and school teachers. In this War-generated environment almost all the zamindars of the Contai sub-division in association with the teachers occasionally convened meetings to explain to the people the necessity of providing helps to the government as dutiful and

loyal subjects. In those days some might remark that they did so only to show themselves off that they were more loyal than the others²³.

The Nihar gives a date-wise list of meetings held at different places in the Contai sub-division. In the meetings the speakers put before the people the necessity of joining the British Army, and giving war-loans to Britain and of remaining loyal to the government²⁴. In addition to this they made the people known of the progress of the War, and assured them that as soon as the War would come to an end they would attain Swaraj i.e. liberty and self-government and development in all respects. All these their saying encouraged and inspired the people; so they willingly promised to donate to the Imperial Relief Fund through Post Offices, and they felt eager to enlist themselves for being recruited for the Army.²⁵

The history of Contai from 1913 to 1918 was a period of great socio-economic and socio-political crises. Occasional draughts and recurrent floods and War-related problems made the sub-division economically devastated. Owing to natural and man-made calamities agriculture, cottage industries and trade and business of Contai were all ruined. So there was only hunger, starvation, diseases and finally sure death. There was no employment, even no sufficient relief. At this stage they could not but leave their so dear ancestral homestead. Some went away to towns like Kharagpur

and Midnapore and to some distant unknown places like the Sundarbans and so on. Some parents sold their children with the expectation that they might get food elsewhere, and this was how they would live²⁶. The *Nihar* reports (Sept. 21,1915) that in the Khejuri P.S in 1915 there was almost no cooking of rice in 90% houses²⁷. Again on October12,1915 the *Nihar* writes that about 90% men were prey to hunger and starvation, and that there was none in the sub-division of Contai who could give one handful of rice to any beggar²⁸. At this stage of crisis when a householder found a rent-collector at his door he could not but go on shedding tears.²⁹

The socio-political picture of Contai was to a certain extent better. The news of the emergence of Gandhi and of his reforming activities at Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kaira held before the helpless and destitute people of Contai hopes of a new life. They eagerly expected that their hard times under the cruel and hard-hearted rule of the colonial government would surely come to an end if a new leader would appear with the prospect of a new course of life and instil in them the faith and confidence of a free life free from their present crises.

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CHAPTER – 5

NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT:

**(i) THE MAIN STREAM-GANDHI IDEA –
DEVIATIONS AND ADDITIONS**

**(II) ANTI-UNION BOARD MOVEMENT –
CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS**

Chapter – 5

Non-Cooperation Movement:

I

The Main Stream - Gandhi Idea - Deviations and Additions

At last the War ended. During the War years the Allies proclaimed that the war was to defend democracy and that after the war all their colonies and peoples would get back their right to self-determination. This proclamation of the Allies gave a renewed fillip to nationalism in the colonies. But after the war the Allies particularly the English showed no indications of putting an end to colonialism; on the contrary they became intent on curbing the newly awakened nationalism. The British government now adopted the policy of applying a strong dose of repressive legislation. One such virulent application was the enactment of the Rowlatt act --- the so-called no court, no jury and no appeal act by virtue of which all persons suspected of anti-government activities were subject of arbitrary arrest without trial. In Gandhiji's words the Rowlatt Act was an open challenge to all the Indians.

After the Rowlatt Bills were passed in spite of all-India intense opposition Gandhiji decided to oppose it with an all-India hartal. The hartal was called for April 6, 1919. In consequence of this hartal there occurred on

April 13, 1919 the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, an unimaginable firing on an unwarned and unarmed crowd who after their *Baisakhi* celebrations assembled in the Bagh to attend a public meeting. The net result of the firing was that several hundred were dead and several thousand were wounded. This was not all. The devilish massacre was followed by humiliating orders. Besides there were flogging in public, confinement of the arrested in cages, and hand-cuffing of Hindus and Muslims in pairs demonstrating secular unity and so on. In addition to all these the government proclaimed martial law to restrict the free movement of the people and their free exchange of opinions. This was how Amritsar became a hell; and a great fear now overpowered all Punjab. This reign of terror stunned all India. But to the British Government these were merely the off-shoots of a 'preventive murder'. The Hunter Committee appointed by the Government to enquire into the Punjab disturbances was merely an eye wash as this was done only with a view to suppressing the eruptive outbursts of the nationalists. Now the Congress and its top ranking leaders were to think what was to be done. It is striking that this what was to be done, did not convey a passive mood as to all the nation it was an active affair. Particularly this time the humiliations and indignities of the nation became unbearable and intolerable. At this crucial stage Gandhiji was to lead the nation and the movement. It was at

this situation the grave Khilafat question and the mental anxiety of the Muslims born out of the belying of the war time promises of the Allies became very much tense. Now Gandhiji's attention was slowly drawn to the Khilafat agitation.

During the war the Allies, particularly Britain, to purchase the loyalty of the Muslims offered assurances of generous treatment towards Turkey. But during the close of the war when Turkey was totally devastated the Allies decided to dismember the Ottoman Empire in the face of Lloyd George's war time promises; and according the Greek and Italian army landed in Turkey which foreshadowed the destruction of the Empire and the Caliphate and the irreligious disgrace of the Caliph, the spiritual supreme of the Muslim world. Now the Muslims felt sure that the poor dishonoured position of the Caliph would surely affect their position under imperialist domination. This anxiety of the Muslims resulted in the birth of the Khilafat Movement in India.

The Khilafat agitation drew the sensitive attention of Gandhiji. He felt sure that the Khilafat demand to restore the Sultan-Caliph to his former position was a just demand and that he was unjustly deprived of his legitimate political and religious authority over his dominions. Gandhiji decided to help the Khilafat agitation. In this respect his primary aim was to

unite the Hindus and the Muslims, and there by to make the Indians one single nation bent on putting joint pressure on the government in order to make it realize the justness of their demands and objectives.

In November 1919 Gandhiji as President of the All India Khilafat Committee suggested that if the Government would do no justice towards Turkey the Khilafat Committee would resort to boycott and non-cooperation against the ruling power. Early in 1920 deputations of the AI KC were sent to the Viceroy and to the Prime Minister with the demands for restoring the former position of the Caliph-Sultan along with his former dominions. To the Khilafat leaders and to Gandhiji also the curt and point blank reply of the Prime Minister was that Turkey would get the same treatment as would get the defeated Christian powers. On May 15 the humiliating peace terms of the Treaty of Sevres were known. Being sorely aggrieved Gandhiji on May 17 urged upon the Muslims to adopt 'non-cooperation' as the only effective remedy for the rude and inconsiderate attitude of the British Government towards Turkey and the Muslim world. On May 28 the Central Khilafat Committee following Gandhiji's advice adopted 'Non-co-operation' as the only practical line of action. At this stage Gandhiji decided to start the Non-co-operation movement on the Khilafat issue. It was thus the Non-cooperation Movement Started on August 1920.

The non-cooperation phase of the national movement in Contai was very much striking for its varied contour and varying configuration. During the short period from August 1, 1919 to February 12, 1920 Contai along with all Midnapore was agitated and constrained by the imperial designs and by the Gandhi-led '*asahayoga satyagraha*'. As a result the all India Non-cooperation Movement was provided from the very beginning with a solid supporting background.

The administration of Bengal had been considering since 1904 that the Midnapore district was unmanageable for one district magistrate. That is why on the basis of the recommendations of the District Administrative Committee the Bengal government decided to make a partition of Midnapore¹. The partition plan was made public on January 26, 1915. Since then protests arose and agitations were formed in various circles land owners and lawyers raised a hue and cry as the partition of the district would undermine their economic interests². Nationalists including a section of prominent Congressmen read in the partition scheme the sinister imperial design for crushing the political activities of the Midnapore people and for weakening their participation in the national movement. This time the local weeklys like *Nihar* and *Medini Bandhab* warned the people about the evil

design of the partition plan and asked them to protest unitedly against ‘ the terrible scheme of partition’. Otherwise ‘the satanic government’ would destroy them³.

On August 1, 1920 the Non-cooperation Movement started. All the nation was now filled with a new enthusiasm. On seeing the growth and force and vehemence of the Movement in the district of Midnapore the government made it known through an announcement that for administrative convenience and also for financial considerations the partition scheme of Midnapore would remain suspended⁴. This announcement of the government was a victory for Midnapore. Now the nationalists of Midnapore felt sure that their moderate techniques of warfare would surely help them attain their desired end *swaraj* if the non-cooperation methods were sincerely followed.

The introduction of the Union Boards in the district of Midnapore pushed Contai towards a new movement. Along with the Gandhi-led Non-cooperation Movement which was running on in full swim there started in Contai the Sasmol-led anti-Union Board Agitation which had no connection with the all India national movement.

By the middle of 1920 the Bengal Government Act 1919 and on the recommendations of the District Board of Midnapore and the local Board of Contai and Ramnagar thanas of the Contai sub-division for the general well-

being of the village people. The government expected that the Union Boards would contribute to rural development and they would undertake public utility services. They would promote health of the rural masses. They would build and maintain roads, bridges and waterways. They would take care of primary education and free health services plus the general comfort and convenience of the rural masses. The official propaganda for all these and many other beneficial works the government drive towards the establishment of the Union Boards was welcomed by the people and the local weeklys. But very soon it was clear that the government did not sanction money for the Boards to discharge the public utility services. So the Boards were to raise their resources locally by the imposition of extra taxes. As a result people were agitated and their agitations led to the formation of a local movement.

It was at this time Birendranath Sasmol on realizing the anti-Union Board sentiment of the people, organised powerful agitations through general meetings and the local weekly against the introduction of the Union Boards. In the meetings Sasmol held out before the public that the taxes likely to be imposed under Act might be seven times higher than the prevailing Chowkidari rate. In the meetings people told in one voice that they would not pay the Union Board taxes, and they were ready to face any

sort of punishment that the government would inflict on them for not paying the newly imposed union rates⁵.

In this situation the government officers applied armed pressure on the tax-payers who refused to pay new union rates. The officers started attaching the movable articles of the tax-payer in September 1921 the attaching operations went on unabated for about three months. During the operations the tax-payer submitted to attachment their articles without any violence as this was the dictate of their leader Sasmol. The operations met a ludicrous end as cart men and labourers were in the beginning unwilling to carry the articles to places of auction. Besides it was an irony that there was nobody to bid the attached articles. After a thorough study of this tense situation the District Magistrate reported to the Bengal Government that would not be wise to continue Union Boards in the district and it was also the report that to delay any longer in respect of the withdrawal of the Union Boards would be to throw Midnapore in the arms of the non-co-operators altogether. In view of these considerations and reports the Union Boards were dissolved in the district of Midnapore.⁶

The Contai Union Board Boycott Movement was a grand success. Truly it was a great victory for Contai and so also for Midnapore. The boycott movement though passive by nature, was a direct challenge to the

British administrative authority, and made the authority surrender to the peaceful non-violent boycott movement of Contai. The movement had a great bearing on the subsequent history of Contai. The movement brought new actors on the political scene, and it expanded the constituency of national politics. It is striking to note that the women of Contai gladly and willingly submitted their articles to attachment, and they became much more glad when the attachment operations were stopped by government notices, and they got back their attached goods. This is how the women of Contai learned the first lessons of being the *lavan* heroines of the 1930 movement. It for these reasons the Anti-Union Board Agitation remains unparalleled in the history of the contemporary mass movements of Bengal.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Punjab tragedy, the proclamation of the Martial Law in Punjab and its consequent brutal indignities and inhuman humiliations led disconcerted India towards the stage of a volcano before eruption. In addition to all these there was the Khilafat wrongs which unbearably hurt the Indian Muslims. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the dishonour of the Sultan-Caliph, the spiritual supreme of the Muslim world, deeply aggrieved the Muslims. In this situation the age-old maxim 'Reject the ruler who misrules' seemed to them the only pointer to their future course of action. Under the circumstances Gandhiji by making

an ingenious blending of the Moderate and Extremist ideologies drew the attention of the Congress to the justness of the Khilafat issue. He also suggested that to vindicate national honour and to prevent repetition of similar wrongs it was an utmost necessity to attain *Swaraj*. This time Gandhiji clearly asserted that this *Swaraj* would be attained within the Empire with the means of *asahayoga* i. e. no co-operation with and the demonic ruler i. e. to the colonial government. It was in this context on August, 1920 Gandhiji started the non-co-operation Satyagraha on the Khilafat issue. This time he assured that if the people would implement the non-co-operation programme wholeheartedly and sincerely *Swaraj* would be ushered in within a year.

Swaraj within a year --- this assurance of Gandhiji made India a new land with new nationalists and new common people. The assurance awakened India out of years of slumber beset with indignation and despondence and dependence. Now it was the question how *Swaraj* would be attained. By this time it was clear that *Swaraj* could not be attained by constitutional and legal means but by peaceful and legitimate means as Gandhiji suggested i. e. by the implementation of the Non-co-operation Programme. And this NC P had two aspects: one, positive and the other negative. The important items of the positive aspects were constructive

works concerned with the promotion of *Swadeshi* like the revival of hand-spinning and weaving, removal of untouchability, prohibition of liquor and national education. And the 'exiting items' of the negative aspect were the boycott of legislatures, law-courts and government and semi-government educational institutions.

According to the directives of the AICC some significant changes were introduced in the organizational structure of the Congress. The Congress knew it for certain that to conduct the Movement a compact organization was necessary. The organization would work round the year and would reach down to villages by the formation of village committees. Over the village committees there would have union committees, circle committees, sub-divisional committees, and district committees and so on in an ascending order. This constitutional change made the Congress a far more representative body. Now the Congress was in no way a distant affair. Its membership was open to all who were eighteen or above, who had adherence to the Congress principles and who paid four annas as membership subscription per annum⁷. As a result the members of the Congress rose by leaps and bounds. The Congress was now fundamentally changed in respect of outlook and policy. A wave of emotional sensation swept over the country. A Congressite was now not merely a member of the

Congress but one committed for any sacrifice in respect of fulfilling the non-co-operation programme. In this changed all-India perspective of the national politics Contai participated in the Non-co-operation Movement with high hopes for attaining *Swaraj*. The Contai Congress adopted wholeheartedly the Non-co-operation Programme as an all India phenomenon. From the beginning Contai put much stress on both the constructive and boycott aspects of the Movement viz. boycott of law courts, boycott of government aided institutions and boycott of British goods particularly Lancashire cloths.

It was at this time Birendranath Sasmol, an eminent Bar-at Law of the Calcutta High Court renounced his lucrative income in response to the Non-co-operation Programme, and dedicated himself to the service of the nation. Sasmol's example was readily followed by lawyers. In Contai Bipin Bihari Adhikari, a pleader, Surendranath Das, a mukhtear, and Udaynarayan Mandal a mohorar (a pleader's clerk), all of the Subdivisional Court, relinquished their practices⁸. This was not all. Many others of the Contai court followed suit. It was at this situation the Contai Congress set arbitration boards/courts and village panchayets for settling private disputes. This time the Congress volunteers dissuaded the litigants from going to law

courts and asked them to get their disputes settled in arbitration courts and in panchayets.⁹

Sasmol with some teachers and eminent nationalists undertook a wide tour in the district during which he addressed hundreds of meetings explaining the aims and objectives of the NCP. In his addresses Sasmol stressed mainly on two particular items of the Programme viz. reconstruction of villages and nationalization of education¹⁰. They also appealed to the people to work sincerely for the removal of untouchability and unjust caste-distinctions and also for temperance and Hindu- Muslim amity.¹¹

The appeals of Sasmol in respect of the revival of cottage industries particularly hand-spinning and weaving *khadi* industry greatly impressed the people of Contai.¹² The non-co-operator nationalists over and again made it clear to them *khadi* would help them attain economic self-sufficiency and it would thus remove their poverty, and build a sound village life. In a few months after the adoption of the NCP *khadi* was introduced in the national schools as an extra-curricular subject. The wearing of *khadi* became a condition of Congress membership. In the upper levels of the society men and women in *khadi* costumes were paid *sutrayanga* high respect. Besides the character of *khadi* was now greatly changed. *Khadi* now assumed the character of a religious rite. It was seen in every Congress meeting the

spinning-rite was observed with solemn grandeur for at least five minutes. *Khadi* became a very popular feature in Bengal life. For the spread of the *khadi* industry the Contai Congress distributed *charkhas* to needy persons and encouraged cotton growing variously. In all the *thanas* of Contai *khadi* centres were set up. In villages non-co-operator volunteers spoke high of the usefulness of the *charkha*. This time Bengali poets like Nazrul Islam and Satyendranath Dutt extolling the merits of the *charkha* writes: the *charkha* is the symbol of India's desire for self-government i.e. for 'swaraj'. According to Nazrul, in the mild rattling of the *charkhas* is sung the arrival of the chariot of *swaraj*; in Dutt's words the *charkha* is all wealth, all livelihood, and in the *charkhas* of Bengal there is the dazzling flash of gold. In a similar spirit it is sung probably by an old woman that the *charkha* is her dear husband and her son and also her grand-son, and it is the benignity of the *charkha* that has made her so affluent as to keep an elephant tied at her door.¹³

One exciting item of the Non-co-operation Movement was the boycott of Government aided educational institutions and the establishment of national institutions where students after leaving the Government schools might continue their education. In response to the call of the Congress students left schools and teachers resigned their services. Practically a wave

of nationalization of education began to sweep all over the country. This time B. N. Sasmol and some eminent persons of the locality, were dead against the prevalent system of the western education, Sasmol condemned. They took the lead in respect of introducing a national system of education that would promote the moral and spiritual well-being of the students and the welfare of the people of India. In a meeting held on February 1921 at Saraswatitala of Contai Sasmol declared that his palatial building of Contai would henceforth be used for all the purposes and services relating to the nationalization of education. The meeting made a great impact over Contai. Now national schools from ten-class high schools to upper and even lower primary schools sprang up readily at different places¹⁴. In this connection two national mention may be made of two national schools of importance, one at Kalagachia P.S. Khejuri (March 1, 1921) under the initiative of Jagadish Chandra Maity and the other at Contai town on March 7, 1921. In the syllabi of the school there were provisions for three types education viz. academic, technical and agricultueal education.

The boycott of law courts created a sort of dead lock in respect of settling civil and criminal disputes. That is why private arbitration courts/boards were set up for the settlement of private disputes. Respected and influential local persons were appointed arbiters to settle the disputes. After

one or two hearings of the appellants and defendants the cases were in most cases satisfactorily solved. Iswarchandra Mal, Srinath Chandra Jana, Taraknath Pal, Girish Chandra Rana of the Contai arbitration boards made a good name for their satisfactory solution of land disputes¹⁵. As a result Contai arbitration courts became very popular in the subdivision. So in Contai it was highly felt that arbitration courts were great contribution of the Non-co-operation Movement.

During the movement the Contai Congress took some attempts to uplift the status of women in society, particularly in the upper class Hindu society. It was that for some social evils like illiteracy, early marriage and polygamy they were reduced to second class citizens, and there was developed a sense of inferiority in them. So they were mostly indifferent to the national movement and their participation to the movement was negligible¹⁶. The Contai Congress with a view to raising their status in families and their place in the society took attempts to provide them with education and means of livelihood, and to make them aware of performing their duties towards fulfilling the programme of village reconstruction¹⁷. As a result the Contai women were found gradually preparing themselves for the coming waves of the national movement. There is no denying in the fact

that the Contai Congress thus paved the way for making the heroines of the *Lavan Satyagraha*.

Caste-distinctions and untouchability – these two social evils are quite contrary to the basic, elemental, moral and religious principles of a society and positively harmful to the spiritual and moral growth of the nation. On thinking of this elemental truth and bearing in mind the dictates of Gadhiji preached in respect of the Harijans the Contai Congress from the very beginning of the movement started campaigning against these two social evils. In religious assemblages there were very often Ramchandra's love for Guhak Chandal, Bhima's love for the aborigines and Chaitanyadeva's love for all men irrespective of their caste and creed and of their touchability and untouchability. Besides, they distributed free of cost Digindranarayan Bhattacharya's works on anti-caste-distinction and anti-untouchability viz. '*Jatibheda*', '*Sudrer Puja and Vedadhikar*', '*Aprsyatabarjan*' and '*Sri Gauranga*'. This time Contai Congress arranged some inter-caste marriages and introduced inter-dining. Now temple-entry and use of reserved tanks meant only for religious uses of the upper were allowed to all. As a result the two great social evils were abated¹⁸.

During the First World War the drinking of wine and the taking of hemp, opium and many other articles of addiction became a ruinous habit to

the people of Contai. The number of drug-addicts were gradually increasing. That was why the Contai Congress took various measures to put a stop to this practice. Picketing started at liquor shops. Some shops were forced to shut down. Drug-addicts were prevented from entering into shops meant for selling intoxicating drugs. It is pity that these attempts of the Congress and also of the picketers had little effect¹⁹.

The Non-co-operation Movement was withdrawn on February 12, 1922. All India was disillusioned, and dismayed on thinking of what worse would happen. But Contai did not lose heart on the basis of her experiences. She felt that only the first battle was lost and the war of independence would continue. It was because since the fifteenth century she had been dashed and ravaged times again by Muslim invasions, Maratha inroads and Bargi incursions. She withstood all those attacks. So after this historic 'retreat' Contai stood again with new hopes for a new bright future. Particularly like the fabulous phoenix that burns itself out of its own accord and creates its new form out of its ashes, Contai with new hope and new faith on the foundations of its newly constructed form and newly awakened national consciousness born out of the revolutionized millions of fighters of freedom devoutly dedicated herself to attain *Swaraj* which was deemed as the sovereign remedy for all their ills. The strength, solidarity and coherence of

their dedication to the service of the nation was historic, and this was repeatedly proved during the movements of 1930-32, and 1942. It was from the Non-co-operation Movement they learned the lessons of conquering the fear for the Raj and of marching ahead towards the path of attaining *Swaraj*. It may therefore be unhesitatingly opined that the Non-co-operation Movement revolutionized the people of Contai and also of India with the hope of bright *Swaraj*-days. The three Parallel Governments formed by the Contai people at Patashpur (October, 1942 – December, 1942), Khejuri (October, 1942 – December, 1942), and Contai (July, 1943 – December, 1943) were ample proofs of their revolutionary zeal and conviction. Truly speaking, this was the great contribution of the Non-co-operation Movement to the people of Contai.

II

Anti-Union Board Movement --- Currents and Crosscurrents (1920-21)

In the history of the national movement of India the Contai Union Board Boycott Movement is an event of tremendous political significance and of unique historical importance. Leaving aside all controversies and differences of opinions as to its intensity, gravity and nature it has been said that the Contai Movement was by far the most successful first Satyagraha in

India as it was an effective assault on the colonial state at the grassroots. Besides there is no denying the fact it was a direct challenge to the government authority. In other words it was a very powerful crunch which made the authority withdraw the Bengal Village Self Government Act which was very astutely designed by the government to strengthen administration at the grassroots.

By the middle of 1920 the Government in accordance with Section V of the Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1919 issued orders regarding the establishment of 227 Union Boards in the district of Midnapore. In consequence two Union Boards were introduced in Contai and Ramnanagar *thanas* of the Contai sub-division on the recommendation of the District Board of Midnapore and also of the Local Board of Contai.

The Union Board was the lowest unit of administration and as such it was vested with some powers and duties. Each Board consisted of nine members – six elected by the village people and three nominated by the government. The Board worked through *chowkidars* and *dafadars* who were attached to the police *thana* within which the Board was situated. The Board was to pay their salaries and the cost of necessary equipments, but it had virtually no power over them. They acted only as pivots of rural administration as they reported regularly to the governmental authorities the

ins and outs of villages relating to the maintenance of its normal health and social discipline.

The Union Board was bestowed with the task of performing some services relating to public well-being. It was indicated in the provisions of the Act that the Board was to promote health and comfort of the village people. It was to maintain roads and bridges and waterways. It was to look after the promotion of primary education in villages, and to settle the disputes of villagers.

At the initial stage of its introduction it seemed that the Act was to modernize the Bengal village life by giving it better municipal, sanitary and other arrangements of the West. For all these the upper strata of the village society and even the common people welcomed the Act and expected its quick implementation. Two local journals *Nihar* and *Medini Bandhab* and also the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* supporting the Act spoke high of its seemingly beneficial provisions. But very soon they spoke ill of it as it became evident to them that the primary objective of the Act was only to assert the governmental authority at the grassroots. The publicity of public well-being through utility services seemed to them only a hoax as it did not sanction money for the Boards to undertake works for rural improvement. To the contrary it empowered the Boards to raise their resources locally by

the imposition of taxes on the village people. It was at this juncture people thought that the BVSG Act could in no way benefit them. That is why they became prone to resist the introduction of the Act in spite of their having no proper leadership and necessary organization. First of all they made repeated appeals to the government to repeal the Act. But on seeing that their appeals bore no fruit they started organizational activities caring little for dire consequences with which some of the 'honoured' members of some Union Boards threatened them.

It was at this situation Birendranath Sasmol, a highly renowned learned lawyer of Contai, felt the pulse of the people and the nature of their agitation, and then he planned to utilize the anti-union board sentiment of the people with a view to giving it a positive content to the campaign for non-co-operation.²⁰ First of all to register his protest against the institution of the BVSG Act. Sasmol published articles in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on October 21 and 22, 1921.²¹ Besides he wrote a letter of protest to Jnanankur De, the then S.D.O. of Contai in which he detailed the flaws and inconsistencies of the Act.²² He wrote, the BVSG Act was "a direct negation of Self-Government" as it did not allow the Board to spend all the incomes of the state within its jurisdiction. As such the Act could in no way be taken as a measure of Self-Government but of "self-civilization" in the European

sense.²³ Nevertheless the whole spirit of the Act to civilize the village folk of Bengal at their own expenses impels one to name it as “Bengal Civilizing Act”.²⁴

Sasmol wrote, the Government did make no provision for rural improvement by sanctioning money for the Board. But it allowed each Board to raise Rs. 600 as the amount of its new taxation. Strangely enough an average union consisting of 20 villages would then get only Rs. 30 per annum i.e. two rupees and a half per mensem for its public utility works. The picture of rural improvement would thus seem ridiculous.²⁵

Sasmol wrote, the Union Board could make only 50% increase of the existing *Chowkidari* tax. It was likely that the increase would go on and on until it reached the maximum of seven times of the present figure.²⁶

While detailing on the implications of the provisions of the Act Sasmol wrote that the Act would artfully erode the traditional autonomy of village administration through its system of penetration of foreign bureaucracy into the rural area.

With these pointed arrows in hand Sasmol started campaigning against the institution of the Union Boards, particularly against the imposition of tax-increase and union rates. He made an extensive tour over the Subdivisions of Contai, Tamluk and Ghatal. Everywhere he was warmly

welcomed by the people who were dead against the introduction of the Union Board and its new tax system.²⁷ In one meeting held on August 14, 1921 Sasmol declared that he himself would not pay the Union Board taxes caring little for any punishment for his non-payment of the taxes. Then it was felt that Sasmol was right in his explanation over the Board system, and so he was to be followed thoroughly.²⁸ As a result in the villages of the Contai Sub-division and in other places anti-union board *samitis* were organized. In most cases the villagers being assembled in *Haribasars* took the vow in the name of God Hari that they would not pay new union rates paying no heed to what worse might come upon them for this their anti-government activity.²⁹ They were determined not to pay taxes except the *Chowkidari* tax and that they would pay *chowkidari* tax only under a receipt under the *Chowkidari* Act.³⁰ As a counter propaganda the sub-divisional officers of Contai and Ghatal made it publicly known that defaulters would be arrested and their movable belongings would be attached.³¹ It is strange to note that wherever the attach-parties went women blew conch-shells and men villagers raised *haridhvani* to inform the people that they would submit to the attach-parties their articles without any opposition as this was the advice of their *deshapran*. Again in reply to the attachment-activities the *satyagrahis* displayed posters in *hats* and *bazaars* and even along public

thoroughfares threatening all concerned with the collection of taxes. Along with fearful posturing social boycott and ostracism went on. It was at this situation presidents and vice-presidents and a large number of members of the Union Boards resigned, and their number was daily on the increase. This was not all. A large number of *chowkidars*, *dafadars* and *tahasildars* also resigned.³² Therefore the authority fell difficulty in cases of attachments. No one was found there to carry the attached belongings to the Board's office or to the police station. Besides the auction of the attached goods became a mockery as nobody gave any bid for things put to any auction.³³ Referring to such an incident S. N. Ray, Joint Magistrate, Midnapore reports: "the far-reaching impact of the 'poisonous agitation', led by 'the Fact Sasmol' on the villages" and that "there is a stubbornness which is unusual and which springs from the belief, however it might have been inspired, that these boards mean extra taxation which they are not prepared to pay". It was in this situation the authority postponed the auctioning of the attached belongings of the defaulters.³⁴

The 'poisonous opposition' to the Union Boards led by 'the Fact Sasmol' became a bewildering problem to the authority.³⁵ Hence the authority began to ponder over it. Shortly after the institution of the Union Boards in the district of Midnapore Mr A. W. Cook, the District Magistrate

remarked that the government was now 'to defend a weak case' in the teeth of an organised opposition under the apprehension of increased taxation. And it was then he felt that by the implementation of the Act the authority was trying to turn the Bengal villages into Yorkshire towns, and that that was absolutely impossible and impracticable at the then condition of the villages which were in a process of disintegration.³⁶ Satyendra Nath Roy, the Joint Magistrate of Midnapore on November 11, 1921 wrote to the District Magistrate that the Sasmol-led agitators had throughout respect for the government, and that they were ready to pay *chowkidari* tax if they were granted old receipts. Therefore "I firmly believe that there are stormy times ahead and it is of utmost importance that we should choose our ground carefully before that times" i.e. before the agitators were thrown into the arms of the non-co-operators.³⁷

In view of the reports of top government officers pleading for the withdrawal of the BVSG Act and the anxiety over the merger of the Anti-Tax Movement with the Non-Co-operation Movement the Government had to withdraw the Union Boards in December 1921. Accordingly the newly instituted 227 Union Boards were dissolved in the districts of Midnapore, and by government notification the people concerned were allowed to get back their attached goods. This was how the Union Tax Boycott agitation, a

very typical agitation by its nature it was typical because it was conducted with all peacefulness and without any violence, came to an end.

The withdrawal of the Union Boards meant a loss of prestige to the Government and an enormous gain in prestige to Sasmol and his party. All through its tenure the anti-tax agitation was a passive movement. But it being a direct challenge to the government authority, the movement was not less vehement than any other active action. By nature, intensity and gravity it was a unique movement. It made the mighty colonial state surrender to the local pride. Bidyut Chakrabarty is cent percent right when he writes “...it brought new actors to the political scene” and those actors after their victory in the national front fought against vested interests in their socio-economic front in the villages and they were crowned with success.³⁸ At the initial stage the BPCC(Bengal Provincial Congress Committee) did not support Sasmol’s idea of the movement and even Gandhi by-passed Sasmol by saying that ‘Satyagraha is a complex phenomenon’. In spite of both these active and passive oppositions Sasmol did not flinch from his idea of launching on the Anti-Union Board Movement and started the movement at his own risk with an iron will and firm determination. Ultimately it was found, it was Sasmol’s ingenuity and able stewardship that overcame all desperations, and finally begot victory to the Anti-Tax Movement with the

withdrawal of the Union Board. It thus becomes a memorable incident in which the crust of the British administration in the lowest level of the administration was crunched. In this connection it is worth-quoting what Subhas Chandra Bose in his Indian Struggle writes: "The success of the No-Tax Campaign gained considerable strength to the people of Midnapore and popularity to their leader B. N. Sasmol". In fine one cannot but note that this crunching at the crust of administration inspired later days oppositions and movements against the government's illogical and insidious attempts to assert its authority over people.

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CHAPTER – 6
THE *SWARAJ* PARTY AND ITS IMPACT ON
THE CONTAI MASS.

Chapter – 6

The *Swaraj* Party and its impact on the Contai Mass

Part-I

Swarajya within a year --- this promise of Gandhi was evaporated with the withdrawal of the Non-Co-operation Movement on February 11, 1922. As a result the soaring expectations of the nation were doomed in an abyss of frustration, and a sense of inconceivable disillusionment swept over the country. There followed demoralization in the nationalist ranks. Viceroy Lord Reading who was very much disturbed since the launching of the Non-Cooperation Movement, now breathed a sigh of deep relief when he came to know the Bardoli Resolution of the Congress Working Committee in respect of the dropping of the Civil Disobedience Movement. This is evident from what he writes, "The Bardoli Resolution left the organization without any clearly defined and intelligible objectives. From that moment disintegration and disorganisation set in, enthusiasm evaporated, disillusionment and discouragement prevailed in the ranks of the Congress party". So the Viceroy now felt no hesitation in giving orders to arrest Gandhi on the charge of spreading disaffection against the Government.

The active phase of the Non-Cooperation Movement virtually came to an end with its withdrawal on February 11, 1922; and this end was

confirmed with the arrest of Gandhi on March 10, 1922. All the nation was now struck dumb. In this crisis people asked about the efficacy of the Gandhi-strategy and also about the future course of the movement. Now the grave pertinent questions were: would the Congress give up non-cooperation and return to the much criticized moderate policy of political mendicancy towards the Government? In this context it was the question of much importance what would stir up the spirit of the nation now getting lapsed into passivity and how this stirring up would be done. At this stage there ensued a debate over fixing the future course of action of the movement. One section of the Congress headed by C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru advocated the programme of entering into councils and thereby exposing the sham reforms of the government. They were sure that this would stir the people, and keep up their spirit of resistance to colonial rule. The other section of the Congress headed by Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad and C. Rajagopalachari were in strong favour of no-entry into council and of continuing the non-cooperation programme thoroughly. At the Gaya session (December, 1922) the Congress was divided into two factions viz the council-entry faction and the council-boycott faction. These two factions were later came to be known respectively as 'no-changers' and 'pro-changers'.

But this division made no noticeable change in the Congress in its essential character and in national thinking and belief. Both the groups were then as imperialist as before; they remained loyal to Gandhiji. They remained all along alert to keep the unity of the Congress; and they did not do anything that might threaten the unity of the party. But in one respect there was a radical difference: the pro-changers were not content with the Gandhi-strategy of constructive programme bearing the sole objective that would slowly prepare the nation for the resumption of the suspended civil disobedience. Now they were intent on opening a new front in the movement by entering into the councils, as they had now the firm conviction that they would thus transform them into arenas of the councils political struggle by continuous and consistent obstruction if and when their proposals for reform were rejected. On the other hand the No-changers were dead against council-entry lest that should be detrimental to the constructive programme among the masses as a result of which the preparation of the nation for the second phase of the movement might be neglected. After the split of the Congress in two contending factions C.R. Das, the fountain-head of the Pro-changers took prompt steps in respect of council-entry. Das, Nehru and their close associates resigned their respective offices in the Congress, and on January 1, 1923 they formed the Congress-Khilafat *Swarajya* Party within the

Congress. And though they had very little time to organize the party for contesting the elections of November they attained a brilliant result in the Central Legislative Assembly and also in some Provincial Councils. It is really noteworthy that the *Swarajists* captured 42 seats out of 101 seats. In the Central Province they won an absolute majority and in the Bengal Council the *Swarajya* Party became the largest party.

From the very release of the Election Manifesto (October 14, 1923) the *Swarajya* Party attracted the attention of the nationalists, and since then it was expected that the *Swarajists* would fight hard for the redress of the wrongs done so long to the Indians by the British. In the first session of the newly formed Central Legislative Assembly the *Swarajists* raised a number of reform-proposals relating to self-government and civil liberties, and also proposals for the release of political prisoners and the repeal of repressive laws. There were also proposals for the development of indigenous industries. But it is a pity that in most cases the proposals were left unheeded though in every case they raised tumultuous uproar. This was the common picture of the activity of the *Swarajists* in the Councils.

Gandhiji was released from Jail on February 5, 1924. An uncompromising No-Changer as he was he did not believe in the efficacy of the Council-entry of the *Swarajists* and also in some of methods of their

Council-warfare, yet considering the gravity of the situation and the service, however wrong, that the *Swarajists* had been rendering to the nation he brought the strife between the two factions to an end, and permitted the Pro-changers to carry on their work in the Councils as an integral part of the Congress, in addition to this they were given a majority of seats in the Working Committee.

Part – II

The Non-Cooperation Movement virtually came to end with its withdrawal on February 11, 1922. All India was then dismayed and struck dumb thinking about the future course of the national movement. In this crucial stage C. R. Das, the dear '*deshabandhu*' of Bengal, as President of the *Swarajya* Party asserted that they were not giving up non-cooperation; on the contrary they would continue it in a more effective way by continuous and consistent obstruction to every work of the government in the council and thereby they would make the government work through the Council impossible. Das also added that the council-entry of the *Swarajya* Party was outwardly a sort of co-operation with the government, but practically it was a very different form of non-cooperation much more powerful and effective and even much superior to the Gandhi-method of non-cooperation. This was how Mr Das, the dear son of Bengal, made it clear to all the disillusioned

and demoralized nationalists that the *Swarajya* Party would open a second front in India's struggle for independence. This assertion of Das created a sensational awakening of the nationalists, particularly those of Bengal. Now in all Bengal there started ebullient discussions as to the future course of the Movement in the following non-active phase which in the words of Das, the President of the CKSP would open a new front in the battle for independence. A greater section of the Bengal nationalists and the Congress Committees of all levels supported the Congress Khilaphat *Swarajya* Party (CKSP) whole heartedly. All Midnapore welcomed the CKSP with high expectations. It was expected that striking additional forces would now be added to the movement which was now getting lapsed into passivity, and that something truly beneficial might come to Bengal. Midnapore cherished high hopes in *Deshabandhu* C. R. Das, the President of the CKSP and in *Deshapran* Birendranath Sasmol, the Secretary of the Bengal Branch of the Party. Meanwhile Sasmol had already earned a great name in Midnapore for his humanitarian and relief services during the devastating flood and recurring epidemics in Contai, and for his leadership in the anti-Union Board agitations and heroic success. Sasmol laboriously endeavoured to organize the party in the *thanalevels*. He explained the aims and objectives of the party in their proper contexts. These endeavours of Sasmol infused a great

enthusiasm among the people of Contai, and brought about a solid transformation that prepared them for a cool and calculated gallant fight in their struggle for independence. This was how Contai was being changed into a new Contai during the so-called non-active days of the *Swarajya* phase of the Movement.

The aims and objectives of the CKSP and particularly its novel method of continuing a new type of non-cooperation movement through entry into the Councils drew the attention of the nationalists. So discussions went on in respect of the organisation of the Congress committees and the exposition of the *Swarajya* ideology to the people, and also in respect of appealing to them to support the new party and co-operate with it for bringing about a new movement to transform the colonial administration.

Contai was all along a hot-bed of nationalist activities, and the Contai-people were all along sensitive and responsive towards the changes in nationalist politics. The Bardoli incident and the consequent suspension of the Non- Cooperation Movement was to the nationalists a bolt from the blue. Yet they were sure that the abrupt suspension of the movement did not mean the total extinction of the fire of nationalism. On the contrary it was the beginning of a more effective movement than the former resembling the mythological phoenix that burns itself to be reborn out of its own ashes.

Since the formation of the CKSP it became a question of great importance to the nationalists which one of the two factions of the Congress --- the Council-entry faction or the Council-boycott faction --- would be beneficial to the nation. In a meeting held at Saraswatitala in the Contai town one Iswarchandra Jana, a staunch follower of Sasmol and an advocate of *Swarajist* principles and ideology, forwarded the argument that it was a great necessity that the Council-entry group only would be able to prevent the undesirable elements from capturing vantage positions and thereby weakening the Congress and the movement; besides this group would put pressure on the government to pass reform laws for the benefit of the people¹. On the other hand the Council-boycott group forwarded the logic that Council-entry would lead to the neglect of the constructive work programme of the masses and that the Councils would only be turned into co-operative machines of the government for petty reforms and piecemeal legislations. In the meeting the debate over entry or no-entry into the Councils went on for a while but it reached no clear cut conclusion. Practically it was difficult to decide which one of the groups was to be favoured and supported as both the groups were anti-imperialist and truly national in thinking and belief, and both were loyal to Gandhiji and true followers of his ideals and principles, and both had the firm conviction that

it was not immediately possible to embark on a general mass civil disobedience movement; and to both the groups the unity of the Congress was deemed as a sacred matter. But in spite of all these similarities there was only one grave difference of paramount importance --- the difference of the questions of Councils-entry which according to the 'pro-changers' was to open a new front in the struggle for independence. It was deduced from the general impression of the meeting that all Contai was in favour of accepting the policy and method of the pro-changers in continuing the movement². That is why at the end of the meeting Mr. P. N. Banerjee, president of the meeting appealed to the audience to support the *Swarajya* Party and to elect their *Deshapran* Sasmol and his close associate Mahendranath Maity to the Bengal Legislative Assembly³.

From the beginning of the *Swarajya* phase of the movement Contai made no distinction between the two groups of the Congress as there was practically found no difference of one from the other in respect of their basic characteristics except on the question of Council-entry; besides both the groups were always aware of the fact that they would not do any such thing that might threaten the unity of the Congress⁴. Above all both the groups fully acknowledged and accepted the essentiality of the unquestionable leadership of Gandhiji⁵. That is why the national movement of Contai during

the *Swarajya* phase was practically a part and parcel of the national movement with some regional variations.

The split of the Congress into two groups made no noticeable impact of the nationalists of Contai as it was fully known to them that the *Swarajya* Party was formed within the Congress, and they were proud of the fact that their *Deshaprana* Sasmol was the Secretary of the Bengal Branch of the *Swarajya* Party. As a result the Contai Congress started to reorganise the existing committees of all levels, to recruit new members, to explain the *Swarajya* ideology and the aims and objectives of the Party⁶. In this situation there was formed the *Swaraj Karmi Sangha* i.e. the *Samiti* of the *swarajist* workers⁷. The *samiti* was to disseminate the true essence of *swaraj*, and to prepare the people to make them collectively alert in respect of the ensuing election of the Councils⁸. The *samiti* would also implement the objectives of the Party in respect of creating villages free from social wrongs and inequalities⁹. In addition to this there was formed an Advisory Committee consisting of some distinguished persons of the subdivision to supervise the activities of the *Karmi Sangha* and to guide the members of the *Sangha* in respect of discharging the duties as were entrusted to them¹⁰. Besides the Contai Congress committee divided the big *thana* committees into at least two branches with a view to giving direct attention to the fact that the *Swaraj*

ideology was being properly propagated and followed and the recruitment of new members for the *Swarajya* Party was going on¹¹. In this connection it is to be noted that the wearing of *Khadi* was now made a condition of membership of the Congress. The Contai Congress now took the attempt to introduce two thousand charkas in the Villagers, and it was resolved that charkas and monetary help would be given to those persons who were willing to spin in charkas¹².

The Contai Congress Committee directed the *thana* committees including their branches to restore and reorganise the existing village committees, and to see it that they were following the *Swarajist* ideology and the multi-faceted Gandhi-programme of social reconstruction properly and whole heartedly¹³.

In Gandhi's words "Swaraj of a people means the sum total of the Swaraj of individuals. And such Swaraj comes only from performance by individuals of their duty as citizens"¹⁴. Gandhi makes it clear when he says that Swaraj refers to a nation's ability to manage its own affairs. This Swaraj is no philosophical obstruction; on the contrary it is a concrete geometrical square with four inter-related sides and four right angles. The four sides of the Swaraj-square are political independence, economic independence,

social equality and moral elevation. This Swaraj can be attained and established by awakening the mass into a sense of their power and dignity.

The *Swarajist* phase of the Non-cooperation Movement, though a short-lived passive phase, was highly remarkable for its striking socio-political and socio-economic activities. The Contai *Swarajists* learnt from Gandhi that Swaraj i.e. self-rule, in other words self-government was better than being in a constant state of servitude under the British rule. They had also learnt that they had all the ability to manage their own affairs and to strive against all odds to solve their own problems. It is interesting to note that this their learning had behind it the bearing that all their nationalist activities got conditioned by their traditional religious beliefs. Politics was not bereft of religion --- this belief of the Contai nationalists all along propped them to advance with a heroic religious ardour in the subsequent movements. This religious nationalism of Contai and the works of the *Swarajists* in respect of the implementation of the socio-economic regeneration of the villages drew the attention of the national leaders. On January 16, 1924 Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray came to Contai. He made an intensive tour over Contai. In the public meetings he asked the people to sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of the country. He eloquently made it clear to all that they must have to remove the poverty of the villages

through the revival of the cottage industries. And for this they must have to devote themselves to cotton production, to charka-spinning and weaving and to the restoration of various cottage industries. Besides Ray stressed that the *Swarajists* must have to take every care for the spread of a balanced system of education through national schools¹⁵.

The *Swarajist* activities also attracted Gandhi to come to Contai. Gandhi along with Dr. Rajendraprasad and his close associate Mathuraprasad came to Contai on July 4, 1925. This auspicious arrival of Gandhi made Contai a new land and with it the Non-cooperation Movement in Contai took a new turn. Practically henceforth the Movement assumed a new character. In the meetings held in the Contai town, Midnapore town and at Kharagpur Gandhi advised the people to stick wholeheartedly and sincerely to the works related to the social construction¹⁶. Gandhi assured the people that the construction programme would start anew with the restoration of the *khadi* industry. He said point blank with the avowed assurance of an economist that all other industries would follow from *khadi*. Gandhi writes: "I would make the spinning wheel the foundation on which to build a sound village life; I would make the wheel the centre round which all other activities will revolve"¹⁷. Gandhi meant to say that *Khadi* i.e. the charka-spinning and *Khadi*-weaving industry would be the leading sector

towards the restoration of all other village industries and this would lead towards the regeneration of village economy, and would ultimately lead towards the restoration of the formal normal health and soundness of village life. Gandhi's in his writings and speeches over and over again pointed that charka was, the symbol of self-help, freedom, dignity of labour and also of social equality and unity. In Gandhi words it was 'the symbol of non-violent economic self-sufficiency'¹⁸. The charka would alleviate the wretchedness and misery of the people brought about by recurrent floods and droughts and famines.

The swarajist *samaj* bespoke of a voluntary form of socialism in which every one would fulfil his wants and enjoy his rights without hampering those of others. This *samaj* was just a contrary to a communist *samaj* which advocates violence to achieve its ends.

The Contai *Swarajists* devoted themselves to the general welfare of women and the restoration of their basic human rights and also to the eradication of caste-distinctions and caste-inequalities. They held before the society that men and women complement one other, but it is the domineering of men that has developed a sense of inferiority in women¹⁹. As a result of the domineering attitude of men women had been reduced to second-class citizens. According to the *Swarajists* this is very much

disgraceful and harmful to both the society and the nation. To ward off this disgrace and to awaken a sense of superiority in women they organised several meetings and arranged for *Swadeshi Yatra* performances. Mukunda Das's yatra party of Barisal staged in Contai from January 4 – 7, 1924 the *swadeshi* plays, 'Adarsha', 'Karmakshetra', and 'Brahmacharini'. The subject matter of the plays delineated the prevalent social wrongs. Their clear indication of the remedies of the maladies deeply attracted the people²⁰. In this respect the *Nihar* writes that Mukunda Babu engendered a new life in Contai society²¹. Besides in the meetings there were going on discussions in respect of the uplift of the women from their present degenerated state. In a meeting held at Saraswatitala on April 13, 1924 the speakers eloquently analysed the deplorable place of women in families and society, and pointed out how this depravity could be abated²². The *Swarajists* made protest agitations against child marriages and against the dowry system in marriages. This their protest in the *Swarajist* environment was highly favoured in the society²³.

In their programme of social construction the *Swarajists* gave an important place to the eradication of caste distinctions and caste inequalities. In their ideal picture of society and social organisation the fourfold division of the society on the basis of birth was a misnomer. They sought to defend a

purified functional system of caste division. They held the firm conviction that birth cannot determine one's superiority and inferiority as God did not create man with any such badges. To *Swarajists* the division of the Sudras into *jalchal* and *achaljal* was very much shocking and brutal. So they pleaded for inter-caste marriages, and with their initiative some such marriages were arranged. They also introduced the system of inter-dining. To the historians (both Indians and Western) this venture of the *Swarajists* was indeed revolutionary²⁴.

The *Swarajists* favoured national schools and the national system of education. According to them this education would be a balanced system of education and this would be vocationally oriented. This should be different from the western system of education which is materialistic and activist. On the other hand the *Swarajist* system of education must be a contemplative and spiritually oriented education in consonance with the religious and ethical ideals of the civilisation of the country. It would cater to the needs of the people, and it would not create any barrier between the pupils on the one hand and on the other the members of their families, society and country²⁵.

The *Swarajists* with the help of the local bodies like municipalities took attempts to raise the quality of life of the people and to promote the constructive programme of Gandhi. Practically in respect of sanitation

clearance of locked waters, health and anti-untouchability their beneficial works aroused popular enthusiasm²⁶.

The *Swarajist* phase was by nature a passive phase; but it is striking that in one sense it was not much less active than all the active phases of the national movement. It is so because during this period the Gandhian constructive works programme constructed the socio-economic and psychopolitical structure of the Contai people. Particularly during this phase the Contai people became economically self-reliant, socially organised and politically much trained in respect of participating in the national movement and also in respect of discharging their duties as fighters of freedom in the coming events like the *Lavan* Satyagraha in which the heroines of Pichhabani, the second Dandi came to the forefront of the movement. Nay, this was not all. Their heroic participation in the national movement is a long history. This startling and even romantic participation of the people is evident in the *SwarajPanchayats* i.e. Parallel Governments formed by the nationalists at Patashpur (October, 1942 – December, 1942), Khejuri (October, 1942 – December, 1942), and Contai (July, 1943 – December, 1943).

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CHAPTER - 7

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

(1932—1934)

I)EARLY PHASE ... SALT SATYAGRAHA

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

Chapter – 7

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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CHAPTER – 8
CONCLUSION

Chapter – 8

Conclusion:

The present study is a study of the history of the national movement of the Contai sub-division in the district of Midnapore. In respect of its origin, growth and character the movement of the Contai people was akin to and an integral part of the all-India freedom movement. But in respect of its general issues and dimensions and dynamics the Contai movement was mainly a regional movement.

Chapter II of the present study *The Renascent Mahishya Samaj* analyses how the leading members of the *Mahishya Samaj* organised a movement for fixing their caste-identity. The movement made the Mahishyas a well-knit community, and assured their caste-identity. It is worthwhile to note that the movement made the community socially coherent, economically secure and culturally advanced. In a word the movement crystallized the caste-peasant identity of the Mahishyas. The ‘crystallization of peasant-pride’ i.e. Mahishya caste-pride made a serious impact on the future political mobilization in Midnapore.

In Chapter III an attempt is made to show that the people of Contai had felt that the boycott-*swadeshi* programme could not achieve the desired

end. Yet this time it was hoped against the hope that though the first upsurge of the movement was gone the nationalist sentiment of the Contai people did not disappear. True, the stream of *swadeshi* had lost its life-force in the desert of failure and frustration; at the same time it was true that the stream would again flow with all vehemence and forcefulness in proper times.

Chapter IV A New Wave: The War and Movement in Contai reflects the changes which gradually took place in the colonial policy of the British rule, and also in the varying attitudes of the people of India towards the British rule. During the *Swadeshi* movement the attitude of the Indians towards the alien rule remained the same as before. But during the War the Indians became very much loyal to the government. The *Nihar* gives a date-wise list of the meetings in which the speakers put before the people the necessity of joining the British Army, and of giving war-loans to Britain and of remaining loyal to the government. It was then expected that the War would soon come to an end and then the Indians would attain Swaraj i.e. liberty and self-government, and development in all respects. This time it was found that the Indians started donating to the Imperial Relief Fund through Post Offices and they felt eager to enlist themselves for being recruited for the Army.

In chapter V (i) an attempt is made to refer to a changed India when people did not remain loyal to the British rule. After the brutal massacres and inhuman wrongs and the belying of the war-time promises of the government of India the attitude of the Indians towards the alien ruler was almost totally changed, and the Indians now devoutly dedicated themselves to attain *Swaraj* which was deemed by them as the sovereign remedy for all their ills. The strength, solidarity and coherence of their dedication to the service of the nation became historic. It was from the Non-co-operation Movement the people learned the lesson of conquering the fear for the *Raj* and of marching ahead towards the path of attaining *Swaraj*.

Chapter V (ii) The Anti-Union Board Movement in Contai stresses the history of the movement 'the most successful first *Satyagraha* in India'. The *Satyagraha* was so vehemently direct against the authority that the Bengal Village Self Government Act was at last withdrawn. Really it is strange that the BPCC at the initial stage of the movement did not support the idea of the boycott of the Union Boards and even Gandhiji bypassed the idea of the movement by saying that '*Satyagraha* is a complex phenomenon'. In spite of various active and passive oppositions B.N. Sasmol, the veteran Mahishya leader of Contai, started the Union Board boycott movement at his own risk, and ultimately the movement was crowned with success. The withdrawal of

the Union Board was a great historic event. It gained considerable strength to the people of Contai, and so also of Midnapore.

Chapter VI stresses the *Swarajya* phase of the national movement of the Contai people. It was a short-lived phase of the national movement. Yet it was memorable for the thorough implementation of the Gandhian Constructive Works Programme. The Programme was thoroughly and wholeheartedly followed it constructed the socio-economic and psychopolitical structure of the Contai people. As a result during this phase the Contai people became economically self-reliant, socially organised and politically much trained in respect of participating in the national movement and also of discharging their duties as fighters of freedom in the coming events.

Chapter VII (i) The Salt *Satyagraha* in Contai was the religionized phase of the movement of the Contai people. This phase of the movement made the heroes and heroines of Contai sure of their success in their *dharmayuddha* with the British. In this phase they learned that their years-long sorrows and sufferings and sacrifices would surely bring forth good days of deliverance.

Chapter VII (ii) The Epilogue of the Contai Salt *Satyagraha* Stresses a very striking phase of the national movement in Contai. It was in this phase

the village Congress committees were re-organised with the sole objective of expunging the prevalent ills and abuses of the villages. Now the village society and economy was re-structured. This was how Contai was made a solid unit for facing any and every national problem and responding to the call of the Congress to participate in the fight for freedom.

The Contai Congress was all along loyal to the AICC. It had every faith in Gandhi ideals. It supported whole heartedly the all India national movement and it had the strong feeling that if the Gandhi ideals and the programme of constructing the nation would follow whole heartedly the *pararaj* would surely collapse and India would surely attain *swaraj*. In spite of this faith and feeling the Contai Congress never became a satellite of the AICC. To conduct the national movement it very often devised its own strategy to stand against the alien rule. The Anti-Union Board Movement, the Non-co-operation Movement and the Quit India Movement were ample proofs of this attitude and feeling of the Contai Congress. This is the distinctiveness of the Contai Congress and its uniqueness too.

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APPENDIX

Appendix

Partition of Midnapore: A chiaroscuro in Bengal politics

The history of the partition of Midnapore had an earlier history. Long before the announcement of Mr. Hare, the Divisional Commissioner of Burdwan, in 1907 it was a widespread rumour that the District of Midnapore would be divided into two districts. In his address to the town people of Midnapore, Hare pointed out that Midnapore Main (North) Ghatal and Jhargram would form one district with Midnapore as its headquarters, and that Midnapore south along With Tamruk and Contai would form the other with its headquarters at Higli near Kharagpur¹. 800 bighas of land was acquired for the proposed Higli district.² But it is learnt from the *Nihar* that before this announcement of Hare regarding the partition of Midnapore the people of Midnapore were informed by the district authority that the notables and the zamindars of the district must inform the District Magistrate and the Collector of their opinion about it³. It is also stated in the *Nihar* that so large a district with an area of 5,186 square miles and a population of 27,89,114 was too heavy a charge for the administrative authority⁴. That is why the partition of the district would be a satisfactory and wholesome solution of all their civil and judicial problems. In this

connection the *Nihar* writes that the Subdivisional Magistrate of Contai was directed by the District Collector to acquire 300 bighas of land for the setting up of the new district.⁵ Hatabari, a place close to Contai town might be the suitable spot for the purpose.⁶ This caused a sensation and agitation too in different places of the district. Public meetings and assemblages were held to discuss the pros and cons of the governmental design relating to the partition of the district.⁷ The general tone of the meetings was that the government would thus inflict an arbitrary and inhuman punishment on the people of Midnapore, and so this vindictive attitude and sinister design of the government had to be protested with all sorts of vehemence.⁸

Meanwhile the government gained the experience that the anti-Bengal-partition movement though mostly an elite movement in character, had made the people of Bengal politically much sensitive to and mentally furious and uproarious against the government intentions. Probably that is why the plan for the partition of Midnapore was not implemented. In this connection the *Nihar* writes 'The Government at last has repealed the partition of the district.'⁹

The question of partition came up again after a few years. After the first Midnapore Bomb Case Lt. Governor Lord Carmichael on the

recommendations of the District Administrative committee announced after his visit to Contai in 1913 that Midnapore was to be partitioned and that the headquarters of the new district town of Hijli would be located at Kharagpur¹⁰. Narendranath Das writes in this connection, "The Government of Bengal was then engaged in working out the scheme in detail behind the scene, while outwardly the costly buildings were being erected on the outskirts of the Kharagpur Railway Settlement."¹¹ As a result the district roared in protest. Strangely enough the government of Lord Reading and the then Secretary of State dropped the partition scheme without expressing the government's intention.

Later in January 1915 the Bengal government again raised the issue and in accordance with the recommendations of the District Administrative Committee took the decision to partition the two districts Midnapore and Mymensingh as an essential part of the government's anti-terrorist strategy.¹² The Midnapore partition plan was made public on January 26, 1915.¹³ The announcement of the partition provoked widespread resentment among zaminders, lawyers, businessmen and so on.

A critical assessment of the anti-partition movement reveals that it

had no popular basis, and it never became a serious threat to the administration. Yet the government could not stick to its plan of partitioning Midnapore. Only just a year ago the government pleaded that the most appropriate step for the introduction of local-self-government in India was to divide up larger districts. But during the heyday of the Non-Cooperation Movement the Bengal government shelved the partition scheme principally for financial reasons. And since then the district became assured of its territorial integrity and solidarity.¹⁴

In 1931 the Midnapore partition question was presented before the people of Midnapore in a newer and stronger form. Now the question was the incorporation of Midnapore with the newly proposed Orissa Province. The question gained much weight and gravity when it was placed before the Federal Structure Committee.¹⁵ Sasmol and other leaders of Midnapore felt the seriousness of the situation. Protest-meetings were held, Sasmol sent protest letters and telegrams to higher authorities of the British Empire and also of the British India in which he pointed out "Midnapore refuses amalgamation with Orissa to a man. There is no cultural and linguistic unity between the two".¹⁶ Besides he prayed in a telegram to the Prime Minister, to see that Midnapore was properly represented in the Boundary Committee.¹⁷ The writings of Sasmol pregnant with facts and figures and logical arguments bore fruit; the policy of incorporating Midnapore with Orissa withered away.

Thus the rebellious spirit of Midnapore i.e. the spirit of fighting against all odds at all phases was crowned with heroic success, and Midnapore as a result remains to day in her old territorial grandeur holding her heroic ballads to future generations.

The partition of Midnapore resembles the partition of Bengal. But in depth and gravity and by nature these two were poles apart: because one was a district affair and the other was a provincial political matter. The protesters including lawyers, zamindars, businessmen and others against the Midnapore partition plan were guided by material interests, and the defenders gave weight to the partition plan only for regional interests. Here one may be reminded of Sasmol who at one point of time defended partition thinking that it would allow the people of Contai to enjoy the benefits of a district town.¹⁸ In the case of the partition of Bengal, despite the prevalence of sectarian and separatist attitudes, such a thing as one notices in the partition of Midnapore was inconceivable. Though weak in character this agitation against partition had definitely certain important bearings which greatly influenced the anti Union Board movement and the violation of the Salt-Law in Midnapore. It is thus evident that the history of anti-partition movement in Midnapore is a history of histories in the chiaroscuro in Bengal politics.

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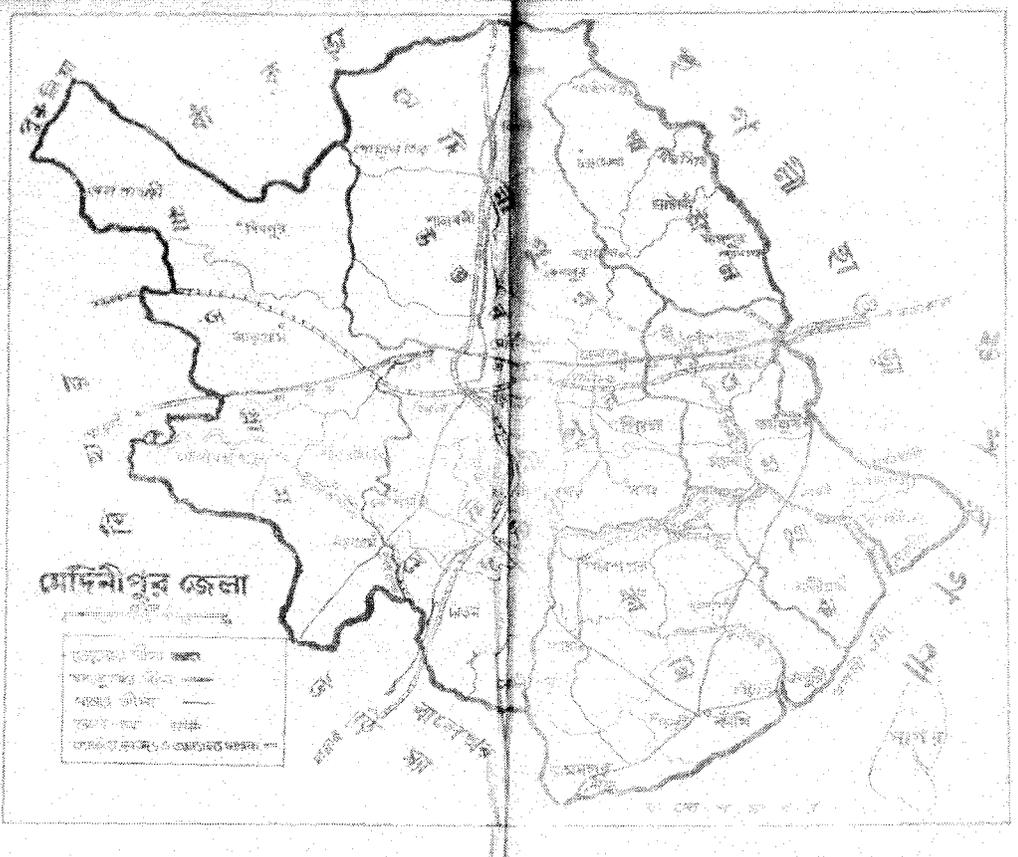
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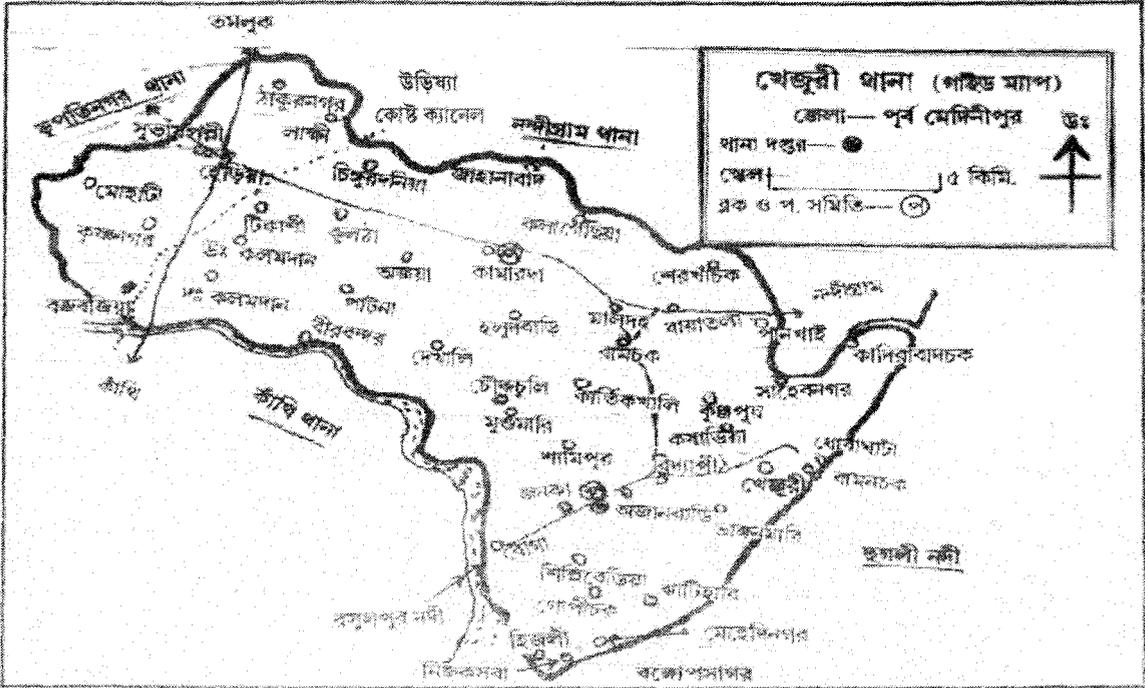
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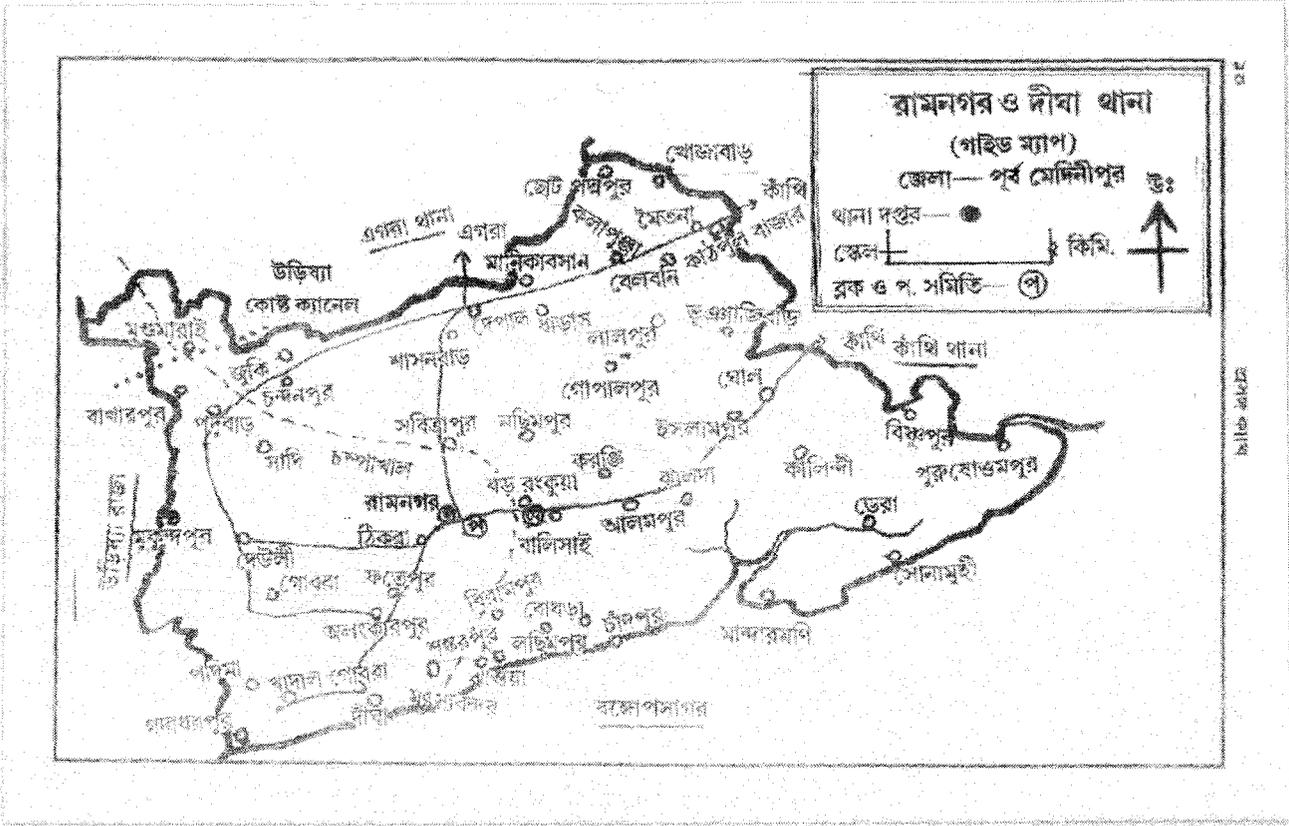
Map of undivided Midnapore



Map of Present Khejuri P.S.



**The Earstwhile Bhagbanpur P.S. now divided
Bhagbanpur and Bhupatinagar P.S.**



The Earstwhile Ramnagar P.S. now divided Ramnagar and Digha P.S.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustrations



Hemchandra Kanungo Kshudiram Bose



Deshapran Birendranath Sasmol

