

CHAPTER – 1: INTRODUCTION

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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.

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