

## Women Freedom Fighters of Midnapur

Sankar Kr. Das

Department of History  
University of North Bengal

British officials branded Midnapur as a serious district of rebels, rebellions and also of revolts. There were actually no women- revolutionaries in Midnapur in the proper sense of the term except Rani Krishnapriya of Tamluk and Rani Siromoni of Karnagarh who revolted against the English East India Company respectively in 1781 and 1794 for securing their rights . During the national movement the women of Midnapur both the aristocrats and the commoners played various laudable roles which in some way or other were of tremendous significance and of vehement importance.

During the Swadeshi Movement the women of Midnapur though very few in number, came out of their secure and secluded apartments, and participated in bon- fires of their valuable *bilati* clothes and donated their precious ornaments<sup>(1)</sup>. This time they inspired their kith and kin and also the women of their neighborhood to participate in the movement<sup>(2)</sup>. The observance of *Rakhibandhan* and *Arandhan* made them aware of the gravity of the situation. They cherished the desire to participate in the protest and demonstrations against the partition proposal along with all Bengal. This is true that their modest and sincere attempts bore little fruit in the primary phase; but it cannot be overlooked that this was just the humble beginning of a high drama. The *Swadeshi* songs of Mukunda Das, Atul Prasad sen and of Rabindra Nath Tagore deeply influenced the mind of the people of Midnapur. The tragic news of hanging of Kshudiram inspired as well as infuriated them as well. It was thus the women society of Midnapur realised that their protest, no matter how little it was, had the immense possibility of putting pressure on the overmighty demon like colonial British government.

The economic crisis of the inter- war and post- war years made the Indians, particularly the people of the undeveloped regions feel that the colonial rule was the root cause of their hunger, poverty, desperation and so on. The same was the feeling of the Midnapurians particularly of the people of the hilly regions and coastal regions. The launching of the Non-cooperation movement held high hopes before the Indians. The women of Midnapur who had already learnt the primary lesson of launching protests against the government came out to take part in the movement. In the subdivisional towns of the district they started picketing in front of liquor shops and shops of Lancashire clothes. They participated in *prabhat ferries* , led processions, attended meetings and shouted slogans against the government and also against the *bilati* goods<sup>(3)</sup>. They also did two other things : they spread the ideal of *Satyagraha* and explained the significance of *Asahayog Andalon* and asked others to join the movement. For these acts in many cases they were brutally tortured. Yet they did not lose heart, and flee from participating in the movement. On contrary they gained much more mental strength than that they had gained earlier. After the withdrawal of the *Asahayog Andalon* a good number of Midnapur women engaged themselves in village reconstruction and *charka* –*spinning* and *khadi-making*<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Midnapur women participated in the Civil –Disobedience movement in a very large

number and this time they ignored openly all sorts of social and customary prohibitions. Even the angry eyes of their parents and guardians failed to keep them confined to their homes.

In the words of a local journal '*Nihar*' the Civil – Disobedience movement as it was running on, became the movement of the breaking of the salt-laws by the women of the Coastal areas of the Contai and Tamluk Subdivisions<sup>(5)</sup>. From *Nandigrame Swadhinata Sangram* of Bangabhusan Bhakta, a veteran freedom fighter, it is learnt that in the year 1932—33 in Nandigram P.S. out of 104 processions 75 were led by women, 90% of the salt-making centres were run totally by illiterate women and in 75% cases they were beaten severely and tortured and humiliated inhumanly by the British Police<sup>(6)</sup>. In the Contai Subdivision during the movement 1137 women were arrested with specific charges and 40 women were sentenced with short term and long term imprisonments<sup>(7)</sup>.

The participants in the Quit India movement were inspired with the message of Gandhiji 'Do or Die'. All over the country people participated in this last battle spontaneously. Midnapur joined the battle whole heartedly. The devastating cyclone and the tidal wave of October 16, 1942 in which 14,443 people were killed was a sort of deterrent to the progress of the movement<sup>(8)</sup>. But shortly afterwards the District Congress organized itself astutely. On December 17, the Tamluk Subdivisional Congress formed the *Tramalipta Jatiya Sarkar* ( 17 Dec., 1942—1 Sept., 1944), a parallel government. The Contai Subdivisional Congress formed another parallel government named *Swaraj Panchayet* ( 15 April, 1943 – Dec., 1943). The Thana Congresses of Khejuri (Oct., 1942 – Dec., 1942) and Pataspur ( Oct., 1942 – Dec., 1942 ) also did the same. Thus in the history of the national movement Midnapur ushered in a new era of fighting tactics. This time the Tamluk Congress organized its *National Militia Bidyut Bahini* and its auxiliary corps *Bhagini Sena*<sup>(9)</sup>. The *Bhagini Sena* was a militarily organized disciplined army that had to perform various duties. Its leading cadres were asked to implement plan-wise the directions of the district Congress. The second tier of the *Sena* acted as a link between the leading women cadres and the village women who had no political training, no formal education, and even no clear cut idea about their opponent. Yet they joined the movement keeping the firm idea in mind that they were fighting to make the British government quit India, their motherland.

The women fighters of Midnapur played a heroic role during the movement. This time they were three in one: they were trained active fighters, they were dependable supporters and they were sincere sympathizers who acted as coverages for the male fighters and volunteers. They were those women who gave shelter to fighter-volunteers, gave them food and nursed them in cases of their injury. And if it so required they went out in groups with their vegetable-cutters and long daggers against the British police. They were very particular to defend themselves against any sort of molestation. The *Bhagini Sena* distributed 10,000 daggers among the women of the Tamluk Subdivision to protect themselves against all sorts of physical onslaught<sup>(10)</sup>. It is a pity that they could not defend themselves in all cases from the bestial lust of the police and of other miscreants. Yet they did not lose heart. To them chastity was a matter of mind, not of the body<sup>(11)</sup>. So they did not care for what the society would think of them. This sort of their moral courage has made these '*biranganas*' ever adorable to us. These fighters had no sufficient or even no educational or organizational background and equipment. Yet it was their love for the country, and desire to make Mother India free from the clutches of the foreign Tatars that impelled them, nay prompted them to respond to the call of the nation. It was their vow 'Do or Die' i. e. '*karo eya maro*', in other words 'finish the *firingness* to make your country free', and

if this vow can not be realized , then face a spiritual death at the altar of the nation and inspire others to proceed on and on towards the golden dawn of a free India.

### Sources

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