

Non-Cooperation Movement and Contai

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During the First World War, 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 to 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 hundreds 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 handcuffing 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 accordingly the Greek and Italian army landed in Turkey which foreshadowed the destruction of the Empire and the Caliphate and also 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 thereby 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-co-operation against the ruling power. Early in 1920 deputations of the AIKC 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-co-operation' 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. The nationalists including a section of the 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 weeklies 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 on the basis of the Bengal Government Act 1919 and on the recommendations of the District Board of Midnapore and also of the local Boards of Contai and Ramnagar *thanas* of the Contai sub-division Union Boards were introduced in the said two thanas 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 weeklies. 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, organized powerful agitations through general meetings and the local weeklies against the introduction of the Union Boards. In the meetings Sasmol held out before the public that the taxes likely to be imposed under the 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-payers in September 1921. The attaching operations went on unabated for about three months. During the operations the tax-payers submitted to attachment their articles without any violence as this was the dictate of their leader Sasmol. The operations met a ludicrous end as the 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 it 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 gladder 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 was 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 bestial indignities and inhuman humiliations led discontented India towards the stage of a volcano before eruption. In addition to all these there were 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 reptition 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 by means of *asahayoga* i. e. by no co-operation with 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 NCP 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 propagation of 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 Contai 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.

It was 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 implementation of 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 Sub-divisional 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 over 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 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 (*Sutrayanga*) 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* wrote: 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. 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 4, 1921 at Saraswatitala of Contai Sasmol declared that his palatial building at 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 mention may be made of two national schools of importance, one at Kalagachia P.S. Khejuri (March 1, 1921) set up 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 agricultreual 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 a 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 told 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*', '*Asprsyatabarjan*' 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 castes 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 was 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 a 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.

Notes & References:

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3. *Medini Bandhab*, July 14, 1913, WBSA Report on Native Newspaper (hereafter RNP), Bengal, July 26, 1913.
4. WBSA, Bengal Political Proceedings, December 1921, Nos.-20-5.
5. *Nihar*, February 15, 1921, V-20, N-23.
6. *Ibid.*, December 27, 1921, V-21, N-20.
7. Basanta Kumar Das, *Swadhinata Sangrame Medinipur*, Vol.- I, Medinipur Swadhinata Sangram Itihas Samiti, Calcutta, 1980, pp.328-330.
8. *Ibid.* p. 300.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 326-27.
10. *Ibid.* pp. 306-7.
11. *Ibid.* p. 308.
12. *Ibid.* p. 318.
13. *Ibid.* pp. 318-24.
14. *Ibid.* pp. 307-8.
15. *Ibid.* pp. 326-27.
16. *Ibid.* pp. 331-32.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.* pp. 307-8.
19. *Ibid.* pp. 308 & 310-11