

The Great War and the Movement in Contai (1914-1919)

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Abstract: *The War and the national 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.*

Key words: War, national movement, *Nihar*, British Army, Swaraj, Imperial Relief Fund,

The history of the freedom movement in Contai, the south-west sub-division 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 Zamindari in Midnapore 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

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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 police administration of the Company established peace and social solidarity. The economic experiments and newly introduced measures, particularly the land and land revenue measures gave both 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 was Bengal awakened.

The awakening of Bengal was first felt in Calcutta, Howrah, Serampur and some other towns, particularly the prominent district towns and 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 awakening and there started a new lease of life. Schools of English education were set up. Religious reform movements particularly the Brahmo movement shook 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 devised 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 Contai. 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. It was in this context in 1913 there opened 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.¹

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 any 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 government neglected 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 control². 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 gruels after *aman*-harvest was very much perplexing to them³. 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 took proper steps and necessary measures there would have been no flood, no famine and no flood generated epidemics. There is no doubt that this 'puran – katha' 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 that there were 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 some-how 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.⁴

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 INC 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 necessity was Indian'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 BellyHall at Midnapore to assure the government that the Midnapore-people would render loyal services to the government with all sorts of help⁵. 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 district⁶. The prominent members of the committee were some big zamindars and the teachers of the ContaiHighEnglishSchool 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 country⁷. 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 others⁸.

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 government⁹. 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 sayings 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.¹⁰

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 live¹¹. The *Nihar* reports (Sept. 21, 1915) that in the Khejuri P.S in 1915 there was almost no cooking of rice in ninety per cent houses¹². Again on October 12, 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 beggar¹³. At this stage of crisis when a householder found a rent-collector at his door he could not but go on shedding tears.¹⁴

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 Kheda 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. It was in this context the advent of Gandhi in the arena of national politics held before the disillusioned Indians bright promises relating to the fulfillment of their expectations.

Notes and References:

1. *Nihar*, August 12, 1913, V- 12, N-52.
2. *Ibid*, September 9, 1913, V- 13, N-4.
3. *Ibid*, November 4, 1913, V- 13, N-10.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Ibid*, August 25, 1914, V-14, N-12.
6. *Ibid*, September 22, 1914, V-14, N-6.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid*, March 20, 1917, V-16, N-27 & September 18, 1917, V-17, N-5 & December 11, 1917, V-17, N-17.
9. *Ibid*, April 2, 1918, V-17, N-29 & June 25, 1918, V-17, N-41 & July 9, 1918, V-17, N-43 & August 27, 1918, V-18, N-2 & September 3, 1918, V-18, N-3.
10. *Ibid*, March 13, 1917, V-16, N-26 & March 20, 1917, V-16, N-27 & May 22, 1917, V-16, N-36.
11. *Ibid*, December 15, 1914, V-14, N-18 & February 9, 1915, V-14, N-26 & February 23, 1915, V-14, N-28 & September 21, 1915, V-15, N-6 & March 28, 1916, V-15, N-30 & June 5, 1917, V-16, N-38.
12. *Ibid*, September 21, 1915, V-15, N-6.
13. *Ibid*, October 12, 1915, V-15, N-9.
14. *Ibid*, March 28, 1916, V-15, N-30 & May 30, 1916, V-15, N-38 & July 25, 1916, V-15, N-46.

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