

Union Board Boycott Movement in Midnapore and B.N. Sasmol: A Historical Study**Arabinda Kumar Maity**

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Abstract

The history of the freedom struggle is a glorious chapter in the history of modern India. This chapter was glorified by the direct participation of the people, through self-sacrifice, blood and life. The contribution of Medinipur district of Bengal province was no less to mark the chapter of national struggle more striking. In fact, the history of Medinipur was a history of sacrifice and heroism in the national interest. The Union Board Boycott Movement is an episode in the history of Medinipur during the national struggle. The present work attempts a detailed study to explain the history of the Union Board Boycott Movement in Medinipur and the role of the Deshapran Sasmol, the main mastermind behind the success of the movement. After in-depth analysis, based on available primary and secondary sources, it is safe to say that, the way in which B.N. Sasmol led the Union Board Boycott movement and succeeded in the parallel program of the national movement without any approval of National Congress during the non-co-operation movement, not only did Medinipur increase the momentum of the non-co-operation movement, but the far-reaching effects of this movement greatly affected the National movement. According to professor Samar Guha, ".....Birendranath was the first pioneer from all over India to introduce the tradition of mass movement of Gandhi era.this movement was the first anti-government, civil disobedience movement in all India."

Keyword: Midnapore, Non-Cooperation Movement, Deshapran,

Introduction:

Midnapore, a district of south western part of colonial Bengal and situated between 21°36' and 22°57' north latitude and between 86°53' and 88° 11' east longitude. Consisting of plateaus, plains and jungalmahls, costal Medinipur has a struggling history. From the beginning of the colonial rule till independence, this district maintained the trend of anti-subjugation movement. One of the episodes of this anti-subjugation movement was the Union Board Boycott Movement. In the history of the national movement of India, Union Board Boycott Movement is an event of tremendous political significant and of unique historical importance. In parallel with the national movement, the Union Board Boycott Movement in Medinipur has taken its place in the history of India's freedom struggle. Famous freedom fighter Birendra Nath Sasmol, a son of Medinipur, sacrificed his life to make this glorious work a success.

Gandhi's emergence in Indian politics started a new dimension in national politics. The national struggle was not only limited to the gentleman's (Bhadralok) but also extended to include new social groups. To leave successful career Sasmol was involved active politics and all activities of the Congress. With his qualities of individualism, dynamism, rustic simplicity, straight forwardness, manliness, humanism, realism and also materialism, he quickly took place in the hearts of the people of Medinipur. Just as the role of Birendranath was important in the freedom struggle of Midnapore, so was the anti-union board movement and Sasmol complementary. The first all-India national struggle in the history of national struggle was the non-cooperation movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. In Dec.1920, the Nagpur Congress approved a resolution for a non-cooperation movement and Gandhi was given the task of outlining and directing the movement.

Gandhi's swadeshi propaganda was included, particularly the revival of hand-spinning and weaving, removal of untouchability among the Hindus, promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity, prohibition of drinking and collection of a crore of rupees for the memorial of Tilak (in the shape of a Swarajya fund). The boycott of government-run and government-aided educational institutes, low court, legislatures etc was also part of the movement. The mass movement of the period was marked not only by the development of non-cooperation but also by other forms of struggle in all parts of the country.¹ In this situation, the decision of the union board boycott movement was especially important.

Background of Anti-Union Board Movement:

When the non-cooperation movement started on 1st August 1920, the movement started with renewed vigour in Medinipore, which was awaiting movement like all over India. Midnapore enthusiasm was a little more because of this announcement that for administrative convenience and also for financial considerations the Midnapore partition scheme would remain suspended,² that was the success of this district. In such a situation, the announcement of setting up a Union Board in Midnapore District by the Govt. Pushed the people of this district towards a new movement. The Union Board Boycott movement led by Sasmol was associated with the warm current of the all India Non-Cooperation movement led by Gandhi. Although the movement had nothing to do with the national movement, its success had profound effect on Indian politics.

To make Non-Cooperation movement a success, Congress Committee was formed from the Bengal province to the village committee. In Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, C R Das and B N Sasmol were elected president and secretary respectively. In Medinipore District Congress Committee, B N Sasmol elected as president and Kishorepati Roy elected as secretary. Sasmol realized that a strong democratic political arena for the national movement would be possible only, if the socio-economic conditions of the rural people could be changed through constructive programs. He was assisted in this work from P N Banerjee, Headmaster of National School Of Contai, S N Das, Mukter, B.B

Adhikari, Pleader and many more.³ Sasmol found in the movement a chance of a social Upliftment of Mahisyas.

At the time when the National Congress was moving the non-cooperation movement at full speed by mobilizing the people at the grassroots level with the full organizational strength, the British government took a decision on Medinipore which shocked the people of the district. By the middle of 1920 the Government in accordance with Section-V of The Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1919, issued the order regarding the establishment of 227 Union Board in the district Midnapore in consequence two Union Board were introduced in Contai and Ramnagar Thana's of Contai subdivision also of the local boards of Contai.⁴

In April 1920, 227 Boards setup in the district. The govt. authorities of local level prepared a voter list. Govt. announced the date for submission of nominations for the board election in 30 November 1920 and the date of election is from 15 to 29 January 1921.⁵ Regarding the purpose of setting up a Union Board, the govt. had propagated that, a union board elected by the people would carry out public works, like successfully advance rural development through free health and education of rural people, construction and maintenance of new roads, bridges, construction, conservation and maintenance of waterways. The district resident was initially happy with the govt. move for rural development. Local newspapers (like, Medinibandhab, Nihar, Amritbazar) welcomed the govt. move. But within a few days, the people of the district made a mistake knowing that the govt. would not get any money to board for rural development through the Union board. Boards have to create wealth locally by levying extra taxes and in that sense rural development has to work.⁶

Before learning about the anti-union board movement, it is importance to have a good idea of the low. Actually the union board was the lowest unit of administration and as such it was vested with some powers and duties. Each board with Nine members, Six members will be elected by the people and Three members will be nominated by the government. The boards will work through the 'Chowkidrs' and 'Dafaders', who were attached to the police Thana within which the Board was

situated. The Union Boards will be obliged to pay their salaries and others benefits. But it had virtually no power over them. They acted only as pivots of rural administration as they were to report regularly to the govt. authorities the ins and outs of village relating to the maintenance of its normal health's and social discipline.⁷

Board Boycott Movement:

Although the initial publicity of the Bengal Village Self Government Act (BVSG) may have given a glimmer of hope to the people at first, they are soon able to understand the nature of low. It is feared that the union boards will be the centres of British colonial power in the countryside. The amount of tax will increase, outsiders will gain social leadership, in fact under this low, the residents of the district are likely to be taxed at Rs. 84 instead of Rs. 12. The financial condition of the district was so bad that, they could not pay the 'Chowkidari' tax on time and the govt. very often restored to attachment of the movable goods of the defaulters. Local newspaper like Nihar, Medinibandhab, Amritbazar etc. started roaring against the government. Fearing impoverishment, the people demanded the government to repeal the low, but some members of the union boards, with the connivance of the government authorities were threatening the people with dire consequences if they did not consent to the plundering acts of the union boards.⁸ ignoring threats from govt. and non-govt. representatives supporting the boards, spontaneous outbursts as well as organizational activities against the low began.⁹

Union Board Boycott Activities and B N Sasmol:

When people of the district were outraged over the Bengal Village Self Government Act (BVSG), then Sasmol realized the need to agitate against the illegal low of the govt. According to Sasmol, "...after reading these lows well, I could easily understand that, it could not be of any benefit to the country but could be a nuisance to the ignorant and the poor.¹⁰ Guessing the consequences of forming a union board in such a situation, Sasmol organized on anti-union board movement with the angry people of contain. Parallel to the non-cooperation movement, the 'Chowkidari' tax ban

movement or the Union Board Boycott movement was accepted by Sasmol.

In the period of the All India Non-Cooperation Movement led by Gandhiji, it has not easy for him to lead a parallel movement centred on any provincial issue, because he was a prominent and faithful leader of congress. So he stood in front of the question mark. Though Sasmol had not on iota of doubt as regards the futility on the Union boards, he could not decide whether on anti-union boards movement should be organised on behalf of the Congress.¹¹ At the Nagpur Congress in 1920 he tried to move a resolution that the union board's provisions in the village self govt. act in different provinces should be fought but he was not successful.¹² He tried to get permission from Gandhiji to start a union boycott movement in his district by adopting non-violent, non-cooperation approach, but on the pretext of complex tactics and all India policy, permission was denied.¹³ At the conference of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) at Barisal in 1921, it was unanimously decided that everyone should cooperate with the BVSG Act. It was not possible to take part in the anti-board movement, but he was convinced of the low that, "the BVSG Act would not only benefit the district but also weaken the economically weak Medinipur rural economy."¹⁴ Though sincerely believing in Gandhian Congress thinking, despite not wanting to oppose the decision of the Congress, he organized and led the anti-board movement in response to the people's pleas, thinking of the plight of the people of the Medinipur. Against the AICC & BPCC views, the union board decided to boycott the movement at its own risk. He started the movement by calling on the people to stop the increased taxes of Contai and Tamluk sub-divisional union boards. Relevantly, at the beginning of the resistance movement, he announced at public meeting that, it had decided not to wear shoes while the district union board was in operation and he left his shoes in the presence of the crowd. Inspired by his decision, resident of Contai as well as whole Medinipur spontaneously participated in the anti-board movement. Contain sub-division was the first to start the movement which later spread to Tamluk, Ghatal, Sadar sub-division. The first meeting was held on 9th June 1921 at Kantala bazar of contain, with the local

businessman. Sasmol and his associates PN Banerjee, Satish Chandra Jana, Surendra Nath Das and others have been holding meetings in various places to gather public opinions on the newly formed union board.¹⁵ Birendranath, Pramathanath, Nagendra Chandra Baksi organized a meeting at Kathi Bazar of Contai Sub-division. The main aim was to make the public aware of the arguments for and against the Board and to decide what to do with them. The leaders of the pros and cons of the meeting presented their views before the people. The people present at the end of the meeting raised their hands against the establishment of the union board and agreed to start the movement.¹⁶ The leaders of the movement successfully fathomed the anti-union board feelings of the people and elaborately discuss from the time to time the demerits of union boards and showed how indiscriminately and inconsistently taxes had been assessed.¹⁷ The leaders meet at different places and discussion taken at the meeting were sent to DM, SDO, Chairman of the District Board, Chief Secretary of Bengal, and Minister in charge of local self govt. they appalled to the govt. to revoke the notification regarding the extension of union boards to Conti subdivision. They also request the newly elected board members to resign from the board, and in response to the appeal of the people, Kedarnath Das, Taraknath Paul, Ganendranath Maity, Upendranath Das, Amar Nandi resigned from the union boards.¹⁸ Sasmol as representative of the people, barefoot for the welfare of the people, visited various places in the sub-division and highlighted the bad aspects of the boards in his speeches. Crowds can be noticed in his meetings, irrespective of race or religion. Leaders of various Muslim Organizations were invited to various meetings and they joined. Moulavi Rayhan Uddin Ahmed comes from East Bengal and gave a speech in the movement against board at Contai sub-division. Latter, govt. filed a sedition case in his name.¹⁹ On 14th August 1921 declared a meeting at Swarasati Tala of Contai Thana that, he himself decided not to pay the union boards taxes and was ready to bear any punishment that govt. would inflict on for non-payment of taxes.²⁰ Influenced by Sasmol's decision, the resident of Contai sub-division decided not to pay union taxes. In such a situation, in Fatehpur village of Ramnagar Thana

under this sub-division, Seven villagers agreed to pay 'Chowkidari' tax but did not agreed to pay additional union tax. Police arrested the seven villagers on charges of making hateful remarks against the Fatehpur Union Board President for not resigning and breaking the pillars of his farm house. Police purposefully filed a sedition case and seven people jailed in the trial. This are the first prisoners of the anti-board movement.²¹ As a result, the situation of Ramnagar and Contai police station become increasingly dire and being able to guess that, authorities released the convicts before their sentences were completed.

On the day of release of seven prisoners of Fatehapur, ignores national disasters, the leaders of anti-union movement organize a reception meeting at Swarasari Tala of Contai. Wearing new Dhoti and Karta and garland around the neck of seven released warriors marched with the Sasmol and Dr.Guharoyfrom Congress office of Contai to towards the reception meeting with Bandemataram and the sound of Gandhijis name. Then the sky trembled with the sound of Bandemataram allured in a humorous voice. The volunteers sang in unison- 'we meet today at the call of mother' and 'Call your mother once, let Himadri pashan cry', and so many patriotic songs they sang. In the presence of thousands of people, Birendranath urged the people to be ready for grief. The newly introduced union board has to take a pledge not to pay tax without being disturbed by any kind of oppression. He said that in Swarasati Tala, I have a house, which is taxable and I will not to pay tax, when the tax collector arrives, I will keep the door open to take away the property. I will do same if my Chandiveti or Fulbari village house collects tax. I will pray to God in the village Temple while doing Harinam with the villagers. Sasmol led his movement through Gandhi's policy of non-violence Satyagraha. He directed the working method of the movement in front of the people present at the meeting that day. He appealed to the people that, we should the door of house so that the property can be seized for non-payment of tax, we will not get involved in any kind of trouble with the authorities. If the property is auctioned, we will not buy the property at a lower price. We will not assist the authorities in any way to transfer the seized property. Thus he presented the

aims and objectives of the movement to the people one by one. After hearing his heart-touching speech, the crowd at the meeting shouted in unison, assuring him that, they would listen to him, so that if he had to endure the persecution, he would endure it but not pay taxes. He announced in a statement that, he was ready for the first shot to be fired at his chest. Emotional crowds swear they will be fearless, will not pay a penny of tax, will not retreat despite persecution. At the meeting, Dr. Guharoy requested to give up foreign cloths for the promotion of swadeshi. Then there was a huge in the public meeting and people through all their clothes into the fire except the minimum clothes they wear.²²

Although the anti-union board movement started in Contai sub-division, it gradually spread like wildfire throughout the district, especially in Tamluk, Ghatal and Sadar sub-division. By October, the movement had begun in other parts of Medinipur. Sasmol toured the district and promoted the anti-board movement. All union of Tamluk sub-division, people resolved not to pay taxes and let their properties to be attached and removed by the 'Tahasildars' and settled not to supply labour for removal of the articles and not to bye them. The villagers bowed to the threat and not agreed to help the 'Tahasildars' of the 'Chowkidars'. Even the 'Tahasildars' were refused shelter within the unions. Most of the union board inform their SDO that, they are unable to collect taxes due to growing opposition. But the people on the whole were quiet and gradually adverse to violence.²³

There were no one found in Daspur Thana of Ghatal sub-division in favour of Union Board. Sympathizers of the board were forced to change their mind towards the threat of social boycott. Most of the members were out of the village under the pressure of the villagers. People were absolutely reluctant to hear anything in favour of boards. Ghatal SDO said that, 'it was seen that, they would not pay union revenue till Sasmol gave them order'. The govt. had problems in recruiting a large number of 'Chowkidars' and Dafadars, in 27 unions of Daspur Ps. Most of them resigned from their post. But the SDO of Ghatal, succeeded in inducing them to 'go back their work.'

Some members of Medinipur Sadar union boards were not willing to resign. Opponents of the

boards refused to provide all necessary work for their families, such as farming and others. In Pingla, Datan, Sabang, and Keshpur Thana's of Sadar sub-division, anti-union boards movement is gaining momentum. In Pingla and Sabang Ps, the collection of revenue fixed by union boards was stopped. They vowed not to pay the Chowkidari tax until the BVSG Act was withdrawn.²⁵

Govt. took several steps to curb the influence of the anti-board movement. In order to create pressure on the tax collection to increase the number of tax collectors to and began to torture the forces. On Sept. 1921, the govt. partly including the circle officer, the sub deputy Magistrate, the Nizam, and Tahasildar went on attached operation. Wherever they went villagers blew conchshells and raised 'harinam' and help to acquire property peacefully. Even poor old men can attach all her daily necessities, in protest of this low. Up to 23rd September, the property attachment was continued. During this period the property almost 400 defaulters in Contai Thana were attached. Approximately more than 13 thousand peoples properties were attached.²⁶ But no labour was able to carry this properties. Went of labours, carts and cart men were being repeated in the whole sub-division.²⁷ Aggressive policy was adopted by govt. in attached the property, but to no avail. Each family help the collector team to attachment and at the time of attachment operation local Congress man keep track of assets and they sent a copy to the SDO and movement organizer. Not only has that govt. not been able to get any buyers to bye higher priced property at a lower price of attached property in auctioned. The tax payers were of the opinion that they did not went the union board and therefore they would not accept the revenue receipt fixed by the board low till the low was repealed.

Withdrawal of Union Boards:

The repressive policy of the govt. failed due to the collective resistance of the people if the district under the able leadership of Sasmol. As the movement gained momentum, the union boards began to become obsolete as members of the boards began to resign. Assuming that the situation is gradually getting out of hand. District Magistrate A.W.Cook and ADM, S.N.Roy visited Contai sub-division. Due to their arrival, property attachment

operation was temporarily suspended. ADM, S.N.Roy with SDO of Contai visited so many village and talked to villagers. After a thorough investigation, they said that according to their observations, 'it would not be wise to keep the union board running in Contai'.²⁸ On 27 November 1921, in the fifth session of the Bengal Legislative Council Dr. A. Surawardy, Chairman of Medinipur District Board, moved a resolution recommending on the govt. that operation of BVSG Act be suspended in such areas where local condition was not favourable to the growth of self-governing institution. In this regard, he specially mentioned Contai sub-division. He mentions the publication of article by Sasmol of Amrit Bazar Patrika. He also said the people of Contai were strongly condemning the low, saying they had not benefited from it. Hundreds, thousands of people in Contai sub-division refused to pay according to this low and help to add more valuable property attachment. Surawardi observed in the fine that he was opposed to the idea of any measures, however beneficial being thrust upon an unwilling people. In reply Sir Surendra Nath Banerjee, the then Minister of Local Self Govt. said that 'if in any particular locality circumstances are unfavourable and then in accordance with the spirit of local self govt., we must give the almost consideration to the circumstances and take note of them and deal with them in accordance with the principles of local self govt., however reluctant we may be to do so'. He also added that ".....if we feel that circumstances are so unpropitious to the continuance of this institutions, we shall reluctance, suspend them".

In such situation, the district Magistrate of Medinipur should inform the members (Elected & Nominated) of all the union boards of the district that the entire member's should express their views on behalf of the union by 12 Dec. 1921. After receiving the opinion, the district magistrate submitted a report to the Bengal government stating that, only 10 union boards, 16 members had given their opinion in favour of boards. In this circumstance, secretary to govt. of Bengal, Wood, declared in the Calcutta Gazette that, in accordance with section 1(3) of the Act V of 1919 the government revoked the notification of the extension of the Act from all places of Medinipur except Gopalpur Union with the jurisdiction of Panskura

Thana. However, within a few days, based on the report of the SDO of Tamluk, District Magistrate of Medinipur, was withdrawn Gopalpur Union Board. The government issued a notification recently announcing the return of the attached property to people. As a result 227 Union Boards were dissolved in the district of Medinipur.³⁰

Conclusion:

The success of the long struggle comes through the withdrawal of the government from setting up the Union Board. In the anti-government movement, the people of Medinipur were overwhelmed by the mighty British government and caused a nationwide uproar. The movement led by Birendranath Saamol, was successful without the permission of the Bengal provincial congress committee and even Gandhiji. The achievement of the people of this district in this movement is undoubtedly memorable but this achievement belongs to Birendranath who gave more leadership to the people of the district than him. Gandhi avoided Sasmol about this movement and said that, 'Satyagraha is a complete phenomenon.' But Sasmol showed how implement the words of Mahatma Gandhi. In fact, the anti-government struggle in the post-World War economic climate is truly commendable. This was shown by the people of Medinipur under the leadership of Birendranath. After the success of the movement of the Union Board, the exuberant people organized a ceremony to take the shoes of 'Deshpran Sasmol.' Birendranath, the son of the district man, the respect he received from the people present at the event, pushed towards the next big movement. Birendranath's sacrifice, bravery and patriotism in this movement, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy Called Him the 'Uncrowned King' of Medinipur. According to B. Chakraborty, ".....it brought new actors to the political since" and those actors after their victory in the national front against vested interests in their socio-economic front in the villages and they were crowned with success.³¹ S. C Bosu wrote in his book Indian Struggle, 'the success of the No Tax campaign gained considerable struggle and self-confidence to the people of Midnapore and particularly their leader Mr BN Sasmol.' There is no doubt that the success of the movement led by

Birendranath alone brought momentum to the subsequent anti-British movement. The success of the No Tax movement makes it clear to the people of Medinipur that if the movement is properly led, the mighty imperialist government will be forced to retreat.

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