



Union Board Movement in Midnapore

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Abstract

In the history of the national movement of India the Midnapore Union Board Boycott Movement is an event of tremendous political significance and of unique historical importance. Leaving aside all controversies and differences of opinions as to its intensity, gravity and autonomous nature it has been said that the Midnapore Movement was by far the most successful first Satyagraha in India as it was an effective assault on the colonial state at the grassroots. Besides there is no denying the fact it was a direct challenge to the governmental authority. In other words it was a very powerful crunch which made the authority withdraw the Bengal Village Self Government Act that was very astutely designed by the government to strengthen administration at the grassroots. The Anti-Union Board Movement in Midnapore (1920-1921) started by the middle of 1920 with hopes to redress the pernicious designs of the British government to crush the national spirit of the people. Just about a century ago the heroic occurrence of the movement in Midnapore transformed the discourse of national history of the whole country. This paper is a humble attempt made to honour the heroic activities of the then valiant people who fought under leadership of Birendra Sasmal abnegating all the government atrocities in Midnapore.

Key Words – *Union Board, Satyagraha, Self - Government, Local, Movement, Rent, Government, people.*

Introduction

The union board movement was organised when the Bengal government, in pursuance of the provisions of the Bengal self-government Act of 1919, was induced to introduce Union Board System in Midnapore district. The main provisions of the act which infuriated the

people deserved special attention. In accordance of the provisions the said act each union board would be constituted of the nine members of which six members would be elected and three members would be nominated by the Government.ⁱ The primary duty of the union board would be to supervise the works of the *Chowkidars* and *Dafadars* who would be appointed by the district Magistrate. The *Chowkidars* and *Dafadars* would be attached to the local police station. They were directed to report to the Officer-in Charge of the local police station about the entry and the movement of any person suspicious and bad character in the areas under union board. The act also chalked out the extent of power and duties which each union board would exercise and perform.ⁱⁱ

Initially the board was empowered to undertake taxation for its expenditures like the payment of the salaries of the employees of the board, *Chowkidars* and *Dafadars* and the cost of the stationeries as well as the cost of the equipments used by *Chowkidars* and *Dafadars*. The board was also empowered to impose taxes for defraying expenses to be incurred in discharging various types of duties and responsibilities by the board. According to the Act, the amount of the taxes which the union board was empowered to on a person in a year might be increased upto Rs 84/2. In case of default the board was authorized to levy, by distraint and sale of the sufficient portion of the movable property of the defaulter, the amount of the arrears together with a sum of equal to the half of the amount of such arrears, by the way of penalty.ⁱⁱⁱ

The most duty of the board would be to make all sorts of arrangements for the maintenance of the public health which included the cleaning of the garbage, cleaning of the roads, and prohibition on the use of the open air privies.⁴ Besides this, the union board had to perform multifarious duties. The board could undertake programmes for rural developments which might include development of cottage industries, supply of water and public services promoting health, comfort and conveniences of the rural people. The board performed the task of constructing roads, bridges, waterways, etc. As additional tasks the board could frame plans for small irrigation project, establishment of primary school and dispensaries, public library and reading rooms etc., which, of course would be conducted by Board itself.⁵ Then again the Union court and the Union Board could be attached to the Union Board for settlement of petty rural disputes.⁶

It should be pointed out that the Bengal Administrative Committee recommended the introduction of the Union Board to involve newly enfranchised rural population in the

administration. In that sense the Union Board was an administrative organ to ensure justice. But all sorts of business concerning the Union Board totally were controlled by the government. It was the responsibility of the district Magistrate to settle the dispute relating to the election for the first time.⁷ Thereafter appeals could be made to the commissioner whose decision should be treated as final. Besides, the Union Board had to supervise and to pay the salaries etc to the, *Chowkidars* and *Dafadars*, but the Board had no power in their appointment. Then again, the government did not allocate funds for the Union Board. Besides it the union board in Midnapore would be instituted with 50% increase of the existing *Chowkidari* tax.⁸ Thus through the Bengal Village Self-government Act of 1919 was promulgated to extent benefits of Local Self-government to the rural people. It actually strengthened the surveillance of the government in the rural area.⁹ In fact the flaws of the act were soon detected by the congress leaders like Birendra Sasmal who launched against British Government a vigorous agitation.

The congress leaders of the village, the person like Zamindars, Jotedars, Mahajan and traders took great delight in the expectation that they would be offered scope for entrance into the Union Board. Moreover it would be the direct link between the ruler and the common people they would get the chance of administrating the rural people. In fact the introduction of the union board had brought before them the scope to obtain power the favour of the government by the way of establishing link with the administration as well as the scope to show favours to others.¹⁰ Then again, at the village level they would not have to compete with the outsiders who practically confined their activities within the limits of urban areas. As a result Zamindars, Jotedars, *Mahajan*, traders and wealthy persons were trying to win the favours of the government through the Union Board and expected to emerge as a new political power in the rural of the district. So, these people entered with great eagerness the Union Board very quickly when the 227 Union Boards were instituted in Midnapore in April in 1921.¹¹

But the common masses reacted very badly because they realized that institution of the Union Board would entail a 50% increase of the existing *chowkidari* tax which was beyond their knowledge, at least at the initial stage. In fact the issue of the enhancement of the *chowkidari* tax greatly excited the people. Spontaneous mass protest in the different parts of the district was seen.¹² The agitation in the eastern part of the district became intense. The president and the members of the different union board of Tamluk appealed to the district

Magistrate to withdraw the Union Board.¹³ Sometimes clashes were then everyday occurrences in some areas of the district. The nationalist apprehended that it would be impossible for them to keep their organisation in the rural areas in the district of Midnapore if the Union Board would last long.

The nationalist thought that the introduction of the Union Board was the two edged weapon that would destroy the congress organisation in the rural area. On the one hand they thought that the docile members of the union board would displace the recognize leaders of the rural areas by the virtue of the patronage of the government and these docile members would be, in course of time, the virtual leaders of the locality. On the other hand they thought that a network of spies would be formed in the rural areas with the help of these docile members and *chowkidars* and *dafadars* who were to work under strict control of local police station. Hence the local congress leaders also organised the mass movement by taking the issue of the introduction of the union board as a symbol of the oppression of the British Government.¹⁴ In the meantime the union board movement became very intense. Taking this advantage of the situation the local congress under the leadership of Birendra Sasmal launched the No-Tax Movement which was assimilated with the Union Board movement. At last, the government decided to withdraw the union boards from Midnapore by it notification no 5025 dated 19th December, 1921.

Therefore the people of Midnapore practically compelled the British Government to withdraw the Union Board and under the leadership of the congress it was, in fact, the first successful mass movement which was organised before seven years from the Bardauli saryagraha in Gujrat under the leadership of the Ballav Bhai Patel. In evaluating the success of the no-tax or union board movement Subhas Chandra Bose remarked; ‘the success of the no-tax campaign gained considerable strength and self confidence to the people of Midnapore.’¹⁵ Indeed the success of the union board movement created a great hope in the minds of the people in Midnapore that they would be successful in any struggle against any type of oppression and exploitation by their agitation in unity.

References:-

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