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Birendranath Sasmal and Freedom Struggle in Midnapore: A Historical Study

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Abstract

The role of the masses in India's struggle for freedom is a fascinating topic of modern Indian History. In fact the history of Midnapore is the history of sacrifice and valour for the national cause. The character of the Nationalist movement in India was drastically changed by the Non-Cooperation movement. Mahatma Gandhi's arrival on the political scene introduced various new dimensions to the nationalist politics India's freedom struggle was no longer confined to bhadraloks only, but was expanded to incorporate new social groups which so far remained marginal. Congress workers were sent into rural areas to establish local Congress committees which became the nerve centers of the political work of the Congress at the grass-roots level. Deshapran Sasmal was a great freedom fighter, political thinker and social reformer. Sasmal immensely contributed to the mental, moral and material growth of a nation named India. The most notable character of Sasmal were Individuasism, dynamism, rustic simplicity, humanism, straight forwardness, manliness, realism and also materialistic outlook. To have a clear idea about freedom struggle in Midnapore we have to peep through the life and activities of Deshapran Birendranath Sasmal. Sasmal was called Deshapran for his devotion and sincere love for his motherland.

Keywords: *Midnapore, Non-Cooperation movement, Bhadraloks, Deshapran*

As we know Birendranath Sasmal came to the forefront of active politics since 1921, but he started his activities since anti-partition movement of Bengal in 1905. Before joining active politics Birendranath made his mark as a successful member of the Calcutta Bar. But his successful career at the Bar could not keep him away from participation in the national liberation movement. Birendranath Sasmal belonged to the Mahishya caste, dominant in Medinipur district, and he had worked in that district to provide relief to flood victims in 1913 and 1920; At the time of the demographic study of the district it has been shown that the Mahishya's¹, who formed the bulk of the population, particularly, of the Eastern-part of

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Midnapore i.e. present Purba Medinipur District), in spite of having considerable amount of wealth and influence did not take much interest in English education and service before the beginning of the twentieth century and that they had to launch a movement to rise to the level of higher castes in the Hindu community. With the beginning of the twentieth century, the wealthy and influential members of the Mahishya community belonging to the Eastern portion of Midnapore endeavoured to appear as a political force in the arena of politics of the district. The scope was afforded to them when the British Government decided to concede some amount of power to the local leaders in the name of local Self-Government for establishing the basis of a democratic rule.² It was at this time when Birendranath Sasmal of the well known Sasmal family of Chandiveti under Contai Sub-division returned to India in 1904 after obtaining the degree of Bar-at-law from the Middle Temple of England and completing his visit to the U.S.A. and Japan where he enlightened himself about the application of democratic ideas and principles in actual practice.³ Birendranath was the first among the Mahishyas of the Eastern Midnapore to sail for England and he was also the first barrister among them. He involved himself in politics⁴ after his return from abroad. He started his legal career as a barrister in the Calcutta High Court and District court of Midnapore at different times. While he was at Midnapore he associated himself with all sorts of people oriented activities. Within a very short time he became a competent lawyer as well as a popular social worker. When the Swadeshi movement affected Midnapore to a great extent, Birendranath himself organised and led the movement.⁵ In course of time he became the member of the District Board and Municipality. By 1919 he became the foremost leader of the Congress in Midnapore Town.⁶ The rise of B. N. Sasmal in the arena of politics of the district was very significant from two view points. On the one hand, his rise brought down the influence of 'outsiders'⁷ over the politics of Midnapore, on the other, his active participation in social works brought him nearer to the rural people who subsequently helped B.N. Sasmal to organise the Congress at grass-root level. In pre-Sasmal era the outsiders like lawyers, teachers, doctors, Government employees etc., who came to Midnapore in connection with their services and settled in Midnapore, had great influence over the politics of the district as well as over the local bodies of Self-Government like the District Board, Local Board, Union Board, Municipality etc.⁸ For instance, Barrister K. B. Datta, who was originally an inhabitant of Hoogly, exerted a great influence over the politics of Midnapore. But by 1919 B. N. Sasmal attained that position which K. B. Datta enjoyed previously. B. N. Sasmal had to compete with K. B. Datta for attaining eminence as a Barrister.⁹ Hence it may be presumed that B. N. Sasmal had also to compete with outsiders like K. B. Datta in attaining a leading position in the Congress Organisation of Midnapore. Meanwhile B. N. Sasmal had stepped into the contemporary politics of Bengal. It was Chittaranjan Das, the then leading personality of politics of Bengal, who practically brought Sasmal to the

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Provincial politics.¹⁰ Subsequently B. N. Sasmal played a significant role in the provincial politics. But Sasmal always maintained some links with the district.¹¹ He was the Convener of the Provincial Political conference held in Midnapore in 1907. Birendranath also endeavoured to raise the rank of the district to the level of the provincial politics. In 1919 the Bengal Provincial Political Conference was held at Moymensingh in which Birendranath participated as a delegate representing Midnapore. He also submitted a proposal to the Conference for the summoning of the next Conference at Midnapore. The proposal was accepted and the Conference was held in 1920 in Midnapore with A. K. Fazlul Hague as its president.¹² Thus by 1920 Birendranath became a very prominent figure in Midnapore as well as in Bengal. No such personality would be found in Midnapore before the rise of B.N. Sasmal in the politics of Midnapore. But Birendranath belonged to a landlord family. Besides, upto 1920 he confined his political activities within Midnapore and Calcutta. The nature of his works was mainly 'City- centric'¹³ politics, which involved such persons who were generally called the 'Bhadraloks'. In the context of such a situation it is not yet known how far the Congress Organisation of Midnapore was overhauled under the leadership of B. N. Sasmal before 1920. But it may be presumed that the rise of Sasmal in the politics of Midnapore might have some positive effects on that of Midnapore as well as on the Congress Organisation of the district, because Sasmal had gained much popularity in the district for his social works, the sphere of which extended from village to village, sometimes, lying on the remotest part of the district. Indeed, the type of popularity, Sasmal gained, was then a necessity to both politics and the Congress organisation of the district for a better change. The basis of Sasmal's popularity was his service to the people at the time of adversity. That a man like Birendranath Sasmal belonging to a land-lord family and also to the Bhadrlok-dominated Congress Organisation could carry on such type of strenuous relief works, was 'beyond the imagination' of the rural people of the district. Thus Sasmal was the first man who by his extensive relief works came in close touch with the rural people of the district at a time when they were panic-stricken and were in great need for their mere existence. His success in relief works perhaps transcended his limitation of being a 'Bhadralok'. Indeed he became a friend of the people in need. This sort of friendship, of course, was not due to the fact that he belonged to the Mahishya Community. Sometimes it is thought that Sasmal was easily identified with local people probably because of his Mahishya caste background. But the merit and success of his social welfare works should not be judged from any parochial point of view. This can be proved by citing the example of C. R. Das chose him to lead the Congress in Medinipur and he was successful in linking local issues and grievances with the wider political strategies of the provincial party. Birendranath was elected the treasurer of the Bengal Tilak Swarajya Fund where he proved his worth by tracing the loop-holes in the accounts. His first local issue was Anti-Union Board movement.¹⁴ In 1921 he successfully led

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the Contai anti-Union Board movement. Bengal village self-Government Act was passed in 1919. According to that law, 227 Union Boards were formed in the district. People were kept in the dark about the whys and wherefores of their introduction. Very few people took part in the election. Generally people regarded the new law as a plea to fleece them. Naturally resentment brewed all through the district. The Congress first consented to a movement against this law but then withdrew the consent. The Uncrowned king of Midnapore took up the cause of his people, and plunged into Boycott Movement. The whole district rose up, but the movement was fiercest in Contai. Birendranath declared that he would walk on bare feet until the Union Boards were not done away with. The boycott movement gained momentum day by day. People refused to pay tax. Police seized articles of movable property, but nobody was found to carry or buy them. Even the Chowkidars (the village guards) refused to serve the government. At last on 17th December, 1921, 226 Union Boards were abolished and the last one was abolished the next year. Birendranath himself commented in his article entitled 'Beware of Union Boards' ¹⁵Sasmal was campaigning about the ill effects of this Act. The district Magistrate reported that, "The subtlety of the whole campaign lay in the fact that Sasmal as a lawyer was interpreting the sections of the Act.... (and the people were) convinced that Sasmal was right."¹⁶The unique leadership provided by Birendranath Sasmal was unparalleled in the contemporary history of mass movement in Bengal. He, in collaboration with a few others, organized the movement through propaganda, mass meetings, extensive tour of the villages and personal contacts in the National School established in his house and other volunteer organizations. His strong personality and deep-seated sympathy for People's misery enabled him to enlist the active support of the rural masses and command respect from the public in general. For all these reasons he was hailed by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray as the 'uncrowned King (Mukutheen Raja). Of Midnapore.¹⁷The anti-Union Board Movement is certainly a break with the past in the sense that it brought new actors on the political scene.¹⁸About the success of Birendranath Sasmal, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose commented that 'Under the leadership of Mr. B. N. Sasmal, the people of Midnapore started an agitation for the withdrawal of the Bengal Self-government Act from this District and refused to pay the taxes imposed by the newly-established Union Boards . . . The success of this No-Tax Campaign gained considerable strength and self-confidence to the people of Midnapore and popularity to their leader, Mr. B. N. Sasmal.'¹⁹Involved in the anti-Union Board agitation, the local Congress did not also pay an adequate attention to the growing resentment in the Jungle Mahal area. Although Sasmal was aware of the tribal agitation he was however not particularly interested in integrating the tribal agitation with the Congress-launched anti-Union Board Movement probably because of the apprehension that such an agitation would alienate the nationalist zamindars like that of Jhargram who was also a target of the tribal attack of being oppressive. Some scholars have

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endeavored to explain the anti Union Board movement purely in terms of internal factional rivalries and personal antagonisms, a quest for mobility and status, and an appetite for power.²⁰ Birendranath was also a champion of National Education. He felt that education should be made free and imparted to all irrespective of caste and creed. Sasmal founded a national School in his house at Contai. By December, political unrest in urban Bengal reached a climax on the issue of the boycott of the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. Birendranath along with great leaders like Chittaranjan Das, Abul Kalam Azad and Subhas Chandra Bose and others were arrested on 10 December on the charge of organizing the boycott. He was sentenced to six months simple imprisonment. Azad writes that 'The Government retaliated by arresting leaders throughout county. In Bengal, Mr.C.R.Das and I were among the first to be arrested .Subhas Chandra Bose and Birendranath Sasmal also joined us in prison. We were all placed in the European ward of the Alipur Central Jail which became a centre for political discussion.'²¹ In jail Birendranath came in touch with great leaders like Chittaranjan Das, Abul Kalam Azad and Subhas Chandra Bose. In jail he wrote an autobiography *Sroter Trina*. The time which Sasmal described in *Sroter Trina* that is the turbulent phase of nationalist politics. The political ideology of Sasmal and his immense love for his motherland has been reflected in *Sroter Trina*. While he was in prison, his advice was sought by the leaders of the Congress, particularly by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, when he opened up negotiations in Calcutta with Lord Reading for a round table Conference to discuss and settle the terms of the future constitution of India and the fate of the interned prisoners. Birendranath had deep respect about his political guru Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das. Birendranath had also deep admiration for Subhas Chandra Bose. Subhas Chandra Bose and Birendranath Sasmal had been made co-accused in the same case, and both had to suffer the agony of a uselessly long trial. It was a brilliant autobiography for knowing a true patriot of our country i.e. Birendranath Sasmal.

After the success of Anti-Union Board movement Birendranath was very much popular among the people of Midnapore. He had now shifted his attention towards district board. In 1923, Birendranath elected as chairman of Medinipur District Board. Birendranath worked for the development of Midnapore. His main concern was -a.) Protection of health.b.) Supply of water. c.) Spreading education. d.) Development of roads. In the sector of protection of health, the contribution of Sasmal is noteworthy. Establishment of dispensaries had increased up to from 7 to 19 during the chairmanship of Birendranath Sasmal. Birendranath performed outstanding job in the supply of drinking water. He excavated 86 tanks out of 89 sanctioned. Birendranath spent Rs. 1,28,213,00. During Birendranath's earlier only a sum of Rs.51,000,00 was allotted for the development of the District Primary education. He sanctioned a sum of Rs.60,000,00 for building of Primary,

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Middle and High Schools. For the encouragement of education he also introduced 20 district scholarships for meritorious students.

Birendranath Sasmal aspired to be the Chief Executive of the Calcutta Corporation. The conspiracy about Sasmal and factionalism within the congress was evident in the newspaper of Capital. In this connection we recall here a statement which has been published in 1st may, 1924, 'On the Command of Mr.C.R.Das , the Mayor, the Swarajists in the Calcutta Corporation at the meeting last week elected Mr.Subhas Chandra Basu, his well-behaved discipline ,as chief Executive Officer on Rs, 1,5000 Per mensem. There have been many faces played in the Hall of Calcutta Corporation, but none so droll as this. It had been originally decided by the Swarajist causes to reward the services of Mr.Sasmal with the glittering job of chief Executive Officer. Later on it was discovered that his preferment would offend the 'Kayastha clique', a risk Boss-Dass could not afford to run. So the strong man of Midnapore was pushed out of the way to make room for the Ex-Civil servant who boldly left the celestials to become a non-co-operator.'²²The internal contradiction between Deshabandhu and Sasmal was a tragic event of Bengal politics. The factionalism within the Swarajya party was led to rift between Deshabandhu and Sasmal. In 14.1.1926, the letter of Motilal Nehru was a great evidence in this connection. Motilal Nehru remarked that,

'I am surprised that you who in the words of Deshabandhu, quoted by you, are expected to lead Bengal should allow yourself to be so perturbed at the threats of mischief – makers as to think of retiring from the Executive.'²³ Prafulla Chandra Roy was very much anguished about the overthrow of Sasmal from Calcutta Corporation. The pre-eminence of the Calcutta based high caste politician reduced the sphere of a mass political party at the cost of a smooth but speedy alienation of the provincial politician particularly of low castes in origin. Humiliated Birendranath Sasmal became angry, left the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and went back to his legal practice and his control of local politics in Midnapore. But he was again elected to the Bengal Legislative Council as an independent candidate and this shows the high esteem in which his countrymen held him. Sasmal was elected President of the Krishnagar session of the BPCC in 1926. But his remarks about terrorism and violence in the Presidential Address led to the passing of a motion of no-confidence against him. With the censuring of Sasmal from the presidentship of the BPCC the fate of Bengal pact was sealed. Birendranath Sasmal was thrown out the political scenario from the Krishnagar Conference of the Bengal Congress. Here he voted for the Bengal pact and took an anti terrorist stand. In this connection we think that J.Gallagher's opinion on Sasmal's departure. He stated that Birendranath departure had created one stereotypes of political behavior in the 1920s that the low caste and mufosil background of Sasmal was responsible for his overthrow from Bengal Congress by the upper caste bhadralok leadership of Calcutta.²⁴ An anti-Muslim group gained the dominant voice in the BPCC and in protest Sasmal, his friends

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and the Muslim member's resigned. The consequence was disastrous. Veteran nationalist Muslim leaders went out of the congress. During the civil disobedience movement of 1930, while serving as a member of the non-official committee appointed to enquire into the atrocities perpetrated by the Midnapore administration, he courted arrest. Magistrate commented that "The presence of Mr. Sasmal has always been a source of excitement and encouragement to the illiterate masses who look up to him for inspiration, lead, guidance."²⁵ During the time of Midnapore partition. Birendranath played an important role and vehemently protested against it. It has been said that in 1913, the Bengal Government decided to divide Midnapore. But it was only through the endeavours of Sasmal that the Government was compelled to withdraw the proposal of Midnapore partition by strong mass-agitation. Openly for administrative reason, but covertly for a political one, Midnapore District was proposed to be divided into two. The southern part of the district including Contai was to be named Hijli District and Kharagpur was to be the administrative center. Birendranath toured from one end of the region to another and organized the protest movement. Again in 1931, the Government engineered a heinous plot to divide the revolutionary district of Midnapore. But Birendranath boldly started mass movement from one end to another. In successive issues of the advance an English daily published from Calcutta, he wrote several articles against the partition which he published as a pamphlet 'Midnapore Partition'. Besides, he sent telegrams to the British Prime Minister and Gandhiji, then attending the Round Table Conference in London against the proposed partition. However, the Bengal Government was at last compelled to withdraw the proposal. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Birendranath asserted in every meeting- 'I won't allow any Government to cut off any limb of mother Bengal. If it occurs over my dead body.' Birendranath stated that "Midnapore refuses amalgamation with Orissa to a man. There is no cultural and linguistic unity between the two."²⁶ The Midnapore partition plan was withdrawn.

One aspect of the Changing political scene in Bengal can be highlighted by focusing upon the consequences of the passing of the Tenancy Act of 1928 in Contai subdivision of southwestern Bengal. Once again non communal leaders from both the communities were seen to speak in the language of sectarian politics when the Bengal Tenancy Bill was placed in the house in late 1928. He asked those who were interested in having him speak on this issue to contact him directly; he would bear his own expenses for travel. This unusual method of organizing meetings itself suggested that Birendranath did not have the support of the organization on this matter.

In October, Birendranath held a meeting in Contai where he criticized the Swarajya Party for having sided with the government in passing the Act. He objected to the Act mainly on two grounds: the 20 percent transfer fee and the right of preemption. However, he admired the courage and sacrifices of the young revolutionaries and held a brief for those involved in

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Chittagong case, needless to say, without taking any fee. In connection with the attack on the Armoury, Ananta Singha, Loknath Ball, Ganesh Ghosh, Ambika Chakraborty and others were arrested. Bar-at-law Birendranath went to Chittagong and pleaded in favour of the accused. Again in 1932, Douglas murder case too, he defended the cause of the accused.

Later Birendranath joined the Calcutta Conference held under the auspices of the congress Nationalist party to oppose Ramsay MacDonald's 'Communal Award'. He was totally against the communal Award and advocated the message of Hindu-Muslim Unity. By Birendranath and Debendra Lal Khan's initiative, a Midnapore worker Association was founded in 1933. Kishorepati Roy was elected as president and Ramsundar Singh as its secretary. The number of working committee member of Midnapore workers Association was 14. The working agenda of the Association as follows:

1. To work related with the social, political and economic at the grass root district level.
2. To build up a unity and brotherhood among the district workers.
3. To help the poor political workers of district level.
4. To abide by the ideals of Indian National Congress.²⁷

In 1933, Deshapran Sasmal contested the Corporation Election of Calcutta. He won the election by overwhelming majority of votes against Sri Ram Taran Banerjee, an eminent advocate of Calcutta High Court. He was selected Chairman of the Mayor-Selection Committee of Calcutta. By Birendranath's support A.K.Fazlul Haque was elected first Muslim mayor but forced to tender his resignation from the post of the Mayor of Calcutta. In 1934, at the request of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya Birendranath led Bengal Nationalist party.²⁸ In the election, Birendranath had won it by ninety-five percent majority despite strong opposition from the Congress. In November 19, 1934, on his way from Midnapore to Calcutta, Birendranath was attacked with thrombosis and became senseless. He was taken to his Calcutta residence where he passed away on the 24th November, 1934. According to his direction, written in a will, his dead body was burnt with his head held up towards the blue sky at Keoratala Burning Ghat on the Ganges.

We think the statement of Rajat Kanta Ray regarding Sasmal is very much relevant. He writes that Sasmal was a fine patriot but lacked in the qualities of diplomatic fineness and urbanity.²⁹ The Big Five i.e.(Sarat Chandra Basu, Tulsicharan Goswami, Nirmal Chandra Chunder, Bidhan Chandra Roy and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar) of Bengal politics had tried to utilize the Birendranath for their own self interest. In this connection Birendranath sadly told Nripendra Banejee, a nationalist of his time "politics had become a sorry pastime of the unscrupulous rich and that he would stage a comeback after amassing lakh."³⁰

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