

Spontaneity, Resistance and Radicalism: Revisiting the Quit India Movement in Burdwan and Birbhum

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Abstract:Quit India Movement in Burdwan and Birbhum added a new dimension to the anti-British movement in colonial Bengal. Both districts witnessed radicalism and spontaneity in the concerned movement. Usually, the local leaders guided the movement. Student leaders also played important role in anti-British actions. Procession, meetings, picketing, snapping of telegraph and telephone wire, hartals, attacks on the rail stations etc. were the important programme of the movement. However, in Birbhum district there was the spontaneous participation of women and tribal community like Santals. Subsequently, the intensity of the movement reached to the climax in Birbhum due to their spontaneous and radical anti-British actions. In both districts, a number of students actively participated in the movement. Due to their role, the movement became more intense and radical. Thus, this paper will be the concise deliberation on the nature of the movement in both districts. At the same time, it will also highlight the mapping of the intensity of the resistance in the concerned districts.

Keywords:British, Benal, Colonial, Fighter, Leadership, Movement, Student etc.

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Introduction

The districts of colonial Bengal which belonged to the middle portion did not lag behind in Quit India Movement. In this respect, Burdwan and Birbhum were the most important districts where anti-British actions reached to the climax in 1942. Picketing, attack on railway stations, circulation of leaflets, hartals, snapping of telegraph wires, attacks on government institutions etc. occurred. To raise funds, dacoities were also committed to some extent. In case of both districts, active participation of students in the movement acquired a new

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dimension. On the other hand, in both districts, a number of unsung local leaders came forward to provide the leadership in the movement.

While the resistance in Burdwan became noticeable due to the radical role played by unsung local leaders, in case of Birbhum district it was important due to the participation of marginalized section of the society especially the women and tribal people. Indeed, it was the Birbhum where the process of mobilization was successful for the active role played by these sections of the society. In both district, common people spontaneously participated and nature of resistance against the British rule was radical.

The Movement and its valiant Fighters in Burdwan

In Burdwan, the movement was organized on both violent and non-violent lines. Indeed, Burdwan with its band of valiant fighters struck mightily against imperialist exploiters and created effective disturbances in the day-to-day administration.¹ The movement was carried out in two different ways. Thus, it had a dual character. The first trend was the traditional one through which, the movement was organised and here, emphasis was given on processions, meetings, *hartals* etc. On the other hand, the second trend was visible when the movement took a violent turn. Almost all types of radical anti-British actions occurred in that phase. However, the first phase was short-lived as it was visible only in the month of August. An interesting feature was that often these two trends overlapped. On 17 August, a *hartal* was observed by closing the shops till 4 p.m. At about 9.30 a.m., a small batch of demonstrators was noticed. They passed by the Grand Trunk Road in front of the court compound shouting slogans but there was no picketing. At about 11.30 a.m., a procession that appeared in front of the main gate of the court compound started shouting slogans and wanted to get inside the court compound. The police at first did not allow them to get in but when, the processionists gave an assurance that they would pass through the court compound peacefully, the authorities allowed them to do so.² After passing through the court compound the processionists stopped in front of the Town Hall and held a meeting.

The movement gradually drifted from this path from mid-August 1942 when people turned violent. On 17 August 1942, the Burdwan court was picketed. The picketers lay down before the cars of Superintendent of Police and District Judge separately. Attempts were made to persuade the crowd to disperse but, instead of doing so, the crowd became furious

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and began to throw brickbats from all sides at the police. In reaction to this, the police began *lathi* charge on the crowd taking order from Superintendent of Police. It was also reported that cooking-sheds in the Relief centre at Barakar, Kulti was burnt down.³

However, the attack on railways and railway stations was an important feature of the movement in Burdwan. In the beginning of the movement i.e. from 18 to 24 August, the rebels attacked the Gushkara (Ausgram police station) Railway station (East Indian Railway). There were authorized collections and destruction of tickets. Although men coming from the Bolpur side were chiefly responsible, some local agitators joined hands with them. In course of time, attacks on railways became frequent and its intensity increased also.

Violent outbursts of the movement and the Local Leaders

A number of leaflets found in Burdwan town described the destruction of government institutions, fight between Indian and British soldiers and bombing by Britishers (25th/26th Aug, 1942). Thus, radicalism and violent outbursts of the movement were visible throughout Burdwan. In these circumstances, certain leaders emerged in Burdwan who had played a prominent role in the movement. In this respect, one Dasarathi Ta⁴ played an effective role. On 26 August 1942, he issued leaflets asking students to devote themselves to India's freedom. This leaflet was printed in Raina Bazar of Burdwan. As a result, small batches of demonstrators, mostly school boys were seen occasionally parading the streets shouting slogans. Picketing was resorted to by the students in front of Raj College, Medical school and Town School.⁵ From 30 to 31 August, the local liquor shops were raided by about 20 volunteers and students. Thus, student's participation in the movement of Burdwan was significant.

Usually, the full-fledged anti-British actions began take place from September 1942 and almost in all the cases, Dasarathi Ta played an important role. On 1 September 1942 he organised a *hartal* at Jamalpur and Kalna. At the same time, he attracted the attention of the government employee as on 4 September Dasarathi addressed several *thana* officers to give up jobs and join the movement or, at least, not to disturb it. Hence, the intensity of the movement in the concerned area reached its zenith in the mid-September. It was understood that on 13 September when the B.D.R Railway line was tampered with, between Bowai-Chandi (Khandaghosh) and Seharabazar (Raina).

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Several areas of Kalna town were now deeply involved in the movement. In Kalna town, following the arrest of Ananda Prasad Mondal, B.L., in connection with the movement, a procession of 250 persons was taken out who attacked the jail gate, assaulted the warden and damaged windows etc. and demanded Ananda's release. On being told that Ananda was not there, they proceeded to the *Munsiff's* court, destroyed furniture and burnt records of the post office, damaged telegraph instruments and cut wires. Finally, they raided the railway station and set fire to it. On 19 September 1942, in Jamalpur, the police station, post office, the railway station (B.P. Railway), the excise shop and the *Pachai* (one kind of local liquor) shops were raided. The agitators came mainly from Raina Police Station. The incident was described in the government reports. It was said:

...at about midday about a dozen men who gave no cause for suspicion came to the police station, suddenly attacked the sentry and snatched away the gun. In the meantime about 100 men poured in, dragged the sub-inspector to the District Board Road and confined him. Seeing this, the sentry threw away his ammunition in a bush (later recovered). Two other constables who went to help were detained by the culprits who then entered the *thana*, set fire to records and broke open the empty iron safe of the post office embedded there. After this the sub-inspector and constables were let off. Cash of Rs.10 or Rs. 12 looted from Jamalpur Railway Station simultaneously. Records burnt and telegraph instruments damaged. In the raid on the post office cash and stamps worth Rs. 100 were stolen. Cash Rs. 300 was stolen from the excise shop. *Santhal* passerby were given free drinks from the *pachai* shop raided. The mob was armed with *lathis*, axes etc. It was apparent from a judicial confession obtained that Dasarathi Ta led the raid in *lungi*, false beard and a Muslim cap.⁶

Disturbances like burning of post offices, *Pochai* shop, Dak Bungalow and dacoity also took place at Memari, Raina, Kusumgram (Manteswar), Kanakpur (Jamalpur), Mangalkote etc. The technique of setting fire to government buildings, were continued in December also. On 4 December the Union Board Office and Debt Settlement Office of Kaichor under Mangalkot p.s. were set on fire.⁷

In order to halt these disturbances, the British used ruthless repressive policy in Burdwan. Mass arrests, looting, searching and imposition of collective fines were applied on a large scale in different parts of Burdwan. Due to suspicion of the involvement in sabotage activities, the police force arrested Nabin Kole, Joy Kole, Suren Ghosh, Kartik Kole, Chandi Mondal, Radhaballav Mondal and Hemchandra Thorat. All of them were residents of Bola village under Raina P.S.⁸

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Spontaneous Resistance in Birbhum

During Quit India Movement, the Birbhum district saw application of a number of distinctive techniques in the organization of the resistance. Processions, meetings, picketing, non-payment of taxes and rents, travelling by trains without ticket, attacking rail stations, looting of paddy from rich landlord etc. spontaneously occurred in this district. Indeed, programmes like travelling by trains without ticket were motivated from Bihar where in front of ticket counters of almost every station it was written that 'Travel is prohibited with tickets'.⁹ On the other hand, from the point of view of social compositions of the participants this district maintained similarity with other districts as a large number of students spontaneously participated in this movement. However, in many cases the spontaneous involvement of *Santals* was also mentionable. In this district, anti-British propaganda was conducted mainly by the Congress leaders. Therefore, British started to arrest the ring leaders.

The movement in this district was started through processions. Against the arrest of Congress leaders protest was organised in different parts of Birbhum. On 14 August 1942, processions were led at Jajigram, Paikar and Murarai. The processionists rallied at Murarai where a meeting of about 250 people under the presidentship of one Rajendranath Singh, son of Gour, of Paikar, declared that India had shaken off British domination and the Britishers had no power to resist 40 crores of Indians each of whom was a second Gandhi. Hence, some leaders wanted to organise the movement in a radical way. Like with non-payment of taxes and rents, one Lal Behari Singh also suggested starting of manufacture of salt at suitable places. However, on 15 August the anti-British propaganda was carried out in a different way. The Congress leaders on that particular day propagated their view in several rail stations. This new technique was applied in the stations between Santhia and Murarai. The description of this event was well reflected in the Government report:

In 15th August Lal Behari Singh, Rajendra Singh, Mrs. Sandhya Singh and others numbering about 20 came to Sainthia, coming down at each railway stations uttering slogans such as 'Don't Obey British Laws', 'Travel without ticket' etc. They urged the people to observe *hartal*. The group moved up to Dubrajpur on the same afternoon where Congress workers from Tantipara headed by Amiya Nanda Das, Ahalya Dasi, Balaram Ruj, Sreenibash Purohit of Bolpur, Radhashyam Mandal of Ahmedpur and others joined hands with them.¹⁰

During this period, Lal Behari Singh declared independence of Birbhum. He incited the masses to approach the rich for providing men with foodstuff and in case of refusal to loot

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away so much of the paddy as was necessary for their consumption. The Congress workers also urged the students to participate in the movement. As a result, the students of Dubrajpur and Hetampur schools and also of Hetampur College came out and joined the movement. A number of processions were organised by the students and here, the Congressmen also participated. Processions were held in several places by other school and college students also. Processions were held at Panchra, police station Khairasol, by 50 Congressites, at Panchahar, police station Murarai by 20 youths and Congressites, at Rampurhat by about 100 students including girl students and at Bolpur by 20 Congressites. In Rampurhat and Bolpur partial *hartal* occurred. At Rampurhat, demonstrators created a scene by intruding into the sub-divisional officer's court and reading him a lecture on the necessity of resigning from his job. They also took off a few hats of the Railway workers and flung them down on the station platform. The girls' school at Rampurhat was closed at the initiative of Miss Maya Ghosh, the Head Mistress who and a few girl students and Congressites were able to bring out a number of students from the Rampurhat High English School as a result of picketing. During this period, Suri also played an important role. Two processions were held at this place in which the students of Vidyasagar college actively participated and here, prominent Congress workers like Durgapada Das of Das Palsa, police station Moureshwar guided the students. Besides, Devi Prasad Neogi, the anti-fascist communist also provided the leadership. At Rampurhat it was led by Badyanath Panja and Maya Ghosh.

In this district, the students played an active role in conducting the movement. Various educational institutions were picketed by them. As a result, only 35 percent students of B.M. Institution and 50 percent of the Zilla school of Suri could attend their classes.¹¹ Partial strike occurred at the R.T. Girls' school and the Middle English School at Suri. However, from this time incidents like strike, picketing and meetings were organised in various schools of this district.

Sl. No.	Date	School	Nature of incident
1.	18.08.42	R.T. Girls School and the Middle English school at Suri	Partial strike
2.	19.08.42	Rampurhat High School	Picketing at the gates
3.	20.08.42	Kirnahar High English School	Partial strike and hoisting of national flag over the school building
4.	20.08.42	Nalhati High English, Bistupur High English and Mollarpur High English School	Processions and meetings

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5.	20.08.42	Kirnahar High English School	Hoisted a national flag over the school building
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Table 1: Several programmes of school students in Birbhum district in the month of August.

Source: District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances consequent upon the All-India Congress committees resolution of 8 August 1942 and the arrest of Congress leaders thereafter, August, 1942 to middle of March, 1943, Alipur, Supdt., Govt. printing, 1943, p. 6, National Library, Kolkata

From this date, the students adopted a different technique to disobey the government rules. They started a campaign of travelling without ticket on the railways. Birbhum observed *hartal* on August 18 when a number of students of the local educational institutions abstained from their classes and paraded the streets of the town in procession shouting slogans.¹² There was an influx and exodus of volunteers to and from Rampurhat and Bolpur. They persuaded the low class people, principally the *Santals*, to travel without ticket. This campaign was carried through the loop line as also along the Sainthia-Ondal Branch Line. On the other hand, during this period the Congress leaders persuaded the people to join the movement. In many cases, they combined the troubles of common people with nationalist issues. Like in the middle of August 1942, local leaders like Sukumar Ray and Anil Chakravarty visited Raipur police station, Bolpur and its adjoining villages which were affected by flood. Along with giving assurance of relief, they persuaded the low class people to join in the picketing at the Bolpur Railway goods shed. The intensity of the movement thus increased.

Role of Birbhum Leaders in Disturbances

A number of leaders emerged during this period and they made an effective effort to paralyse the administration in the district. The leaders, however, had built up strong political organizations almost in every village and thus, involved the villages in this movement. Lal Behari Singh played an important role. He organized a procession of 30 Congressites at Nalhati school compound and here, the students and Congress workers were urged to declare from village to village the news of India's securing of independence. He encouraged the people by providing the news of the trouble of the British authority. He said that the soldiers were turning traitors and the police were unwilling to abide by the orders of the authorities in different places of India and exhorted the students to join the movement in thousands as soldiers of freedom. Often, the district witnessed the picketing at the excise shop and in these cases especially two leaders namely Balaram Ruj and Amiya Nanda Das played a leading

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role. On the other hand, picketing at *Munsiff* court was mainly organized by one Dhurjati Das Chakrabarty who organized a picketing at Bolpur *Munsiff* court where the picketing was reinforced by about 30 volunteers from Guskara and Bhedia side of Burdwan district. Picketers in Bolpur often tried to stop the export of rice bags from this area.

During this Movement, Birbhum district witnessed the tremendous role of women leaders in respect of mobilization. Women had leaved their household and professional lives and provided leadership to the movement of 1942. It must be remembered that at that time also Birbhum was famous for Santiniketan, the land of creations by Rabindranath Tagore. It was confirmed by a secret report that the younger section of the teaching staff and all the adult students, both boys and girls of Santiniketan had joined the movement.¹³

In the middle of August, however, in Santiniketan and Sriniketan area, Mrs Rani Chanda¹⁴, wife of Mr. Anil Chanda, principlal, Santiniketan College, and Adhir Banerjee, Assistant Director, Sriniketan played prominent roles. They organized a batch of some male and female students of Santiniketan and Sriniketan and worked in the adjacent areas:

They formed a batch and started for Laldaha to carry on anti-British propaganda in the rural area with Laldaha as the centre of activities. The batch was subsequently strengthened by a few workers headed by Mrs. Nandita Kripalini, wife of professor Krishna Kripalini.¹⁵

The leaders of Santiniketan tried to assemble the peasants in several areas against the British. Towards the close of August, Rani Chanda, Adhir Banerjee and others organized a meeting of about 400 persons at Adityapur, police station Bolpur and advocated non-payment of taxes and rents. Rani Chanda declared that if the Indians could manage to drive out the English the Japanese would not resort to bombing. On 7 September 1942 she was arrested. Later she wrote a book titled *Jenana Fatak* (Quarter for imprisoned women into the jail) where she expressed her experiences as a prisoner into the jail custody. The book revealed an interesting fact that the women leaders of Birbhum desired to starvation and engaged themselves on spinning wheels into the jail custody as Gandhi also started starvation for 21 days from 10th February 1943.¹⁶ Thus, Quit India Movement in Birbhum district became spontaneous and radical. Indeed, it was the unsung local leaders of Birbhum who had the greater role to mobilize the common people very effectively. At the same time, the movement had spread throughout the district with radical forms of protests.

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Conclusion

So Quit India Movement of 1942 appeared in Burdwan and Birbhum with spontaneity. Both districts witnessed counter resistance against the British rule. As the front ranking congress leaders were behind the bars, the unsung local leaders played significant role in this movement. To some extent, the participation of peasants and tribal community like Santals in Birbhum revealed the subaltern form of this movement. Besides, women leaders had the greater role to organize the movement in Birbhum. In both districts, the anti-British actions were conducted on the radical line. Though, the Gandhian ideology acquired an important place to mobilize the people.

Notes and References

¹ Government of West Bengal, office of the D.I.G of police, I.B., File no. 1801-42, Council of Action, B.P.C.C Instruction to workers and organizers, West Bengal State Archives (hereafter WBSA)

² *The Advance*, Calcutta, Thursday, August 20, 1942, Microfilm reel no. 67, National Library, Kolkata

³ District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances consequent upon the All-India Congress committees resolution of 8 August 1942 and the arrest of Congress leaders thereafter, August, 1942 to middle of March, 1943, Alipur, Supdt., Govt. printing, 1943, p. 1, National Library, Kolkata

⁴ During Quit India Movement under the guidance of Dasarathi Ta the movement was organized in Burdwan. He was the son of late Prafulla Kumar Ta, the resident of p.s. Raina, Burdwan. Usually, he led the movement in a violent way. After independence, he became M.L.A. See Government of West Bengal, Office of the D.I.G., IB, West Bengal, file no. 1701-42 (1) (DUP), WBSA

⁵ *Hindustan Standard*, Tuesday, September 8, 1942

⁶ District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances. *op. cit.*, p. 3

⁷ *Anandabazar Patrika*, Thursday, 24 Aghrayan, 1349 BS., December 10, 1942

⁸ *Ibid.*, Saturday, 3 Poush, 1349 BS., December 19, 1942

⁹ Bhaduri, Satinath, *Jagari*, a Bengali novel, Prakash Bhavan, 15 Bankeem Chatterjee Street, Calcutta, 1352 BS., p. 154

¹⁰ District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances. *op. cit.*, p. 4

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6

¹² *Hindustan Standard*, Tuesday, September 8, 1942, *Bhadra* 22, 1349 BS.

¹³ Santiniketan students joined the movement, August 25, 1942, extract from C.I.O. Calcutta report no. C.B.I. dated 30.08.42.

Chopra, P.N. (ed.), *Quit India Movement -British Secret Documents*, New Delhi: Interprint, , 1986, p. 97

¹⁴ Rani Chanda was famous disciple and student of Rabindranath Tagore. Her mother was Purnashashi Devi and father was Kula Chandra Dey who was a dear friend of Rabindranath. She unveiled her talent in music, dance and arts at Visva-Bharati. In course of time, she became a regular member of Tagore's dance drama recitals. Later she married to Anil Chanda, the Principal of Santiniketan College. In 1942, she played an important role to organize the movement in adjacent areas of Santiniketan.

¹⁵ District Officers' chronicles of events of disturbances, *op. cit.*, p. 8

¹⁶ Chanda, Sri Rani, *Jenana Fatak* (in Bengali), Prakash Bhavan, 15 Bankeem Chatterjee Street, Calcutta, 1365 B.S., P. 123