



## Non-Cooperation Movement and the Response of Birbhum District

**Md. Golam Murshid**

Research Scholar, Department of History,  
Aliah University, Kolkata, W.B.

**Dr. Md. Shamim Firdous**

Assistant Professor, Department of  
History, Aliah University, Kolkata, W.B.

### **Abstract**

*The Non-Cooperation Movement had been a very significant phase in the history of Freedom Movement in India. Gandhi's emergence as the leader of India's Freedom Struggle opened a new trend in the history of India's Freedom Movement. It was for the first time that the Congress decided to follow a policy of direct action. The Non-Cooperation Movement was a unique phenomenon of India's Freedom Movement because this movement was a large-scale united action of the Hindus and the Muslims communities against the British Government. Every section of the Indian society and every man and woman in the country vibrated by the Non-Cooperation Movement and utmost possible contribution of self-sacrifice to the national movement. The participation of the people of Birbhum was remarkable. Birbhum had a long tradition to fight against the British imperialism. The momentum at which the Non-Cooperation Movement in the district was started did not far behind to the other districts of Bengal. The people of Birbhum district responded extremely to the call of the Non-Cooperation Movement by Gandhiji, which had yawning impact in almost all the parts of the district. The movement was able to influence a new life into the heart of rather dormant people of the district.*

**Keywords:** Birbhum, British, Freedom, Gandhi, Khilafat, Movement, Non-Cooperation.

The twentieth Century witnessed the full acme of national political consciousness and the growth of an organized national movement in India. The year 1921 is a very significant phase in the development of India's Freedom struggle. During this period, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi emerged as the conclusive leader of the Indian National Congress and took the decision to launch a Non-Cooperation Movement against the British rule. It was actually a world-shattering pace. The Non Cooperation movement had been a significant phase in the history of India's Freedom Struggle. Gandhi's emergence as the leader of India's freedom struggle opened a new trend in the history of India's Freedom Movement. It was for the first time that Congress decided to follow a policy of direct action. The genesis of Non-Cooperation Movement was because of the British Imperial Authorities stubborn decision on several parameters.

The First World War created a new situation. Nationalism has gathered its forces and the nationalists were expecting major political gains after the war. During the First World War, People of India expected that India would be granted Self-government

after the war, but the provision of Montague-Chelmsford Reform (1919) could not be able to provide solution of the aspiration of India's people. The introduction of the Rowlatt Act (1919) by the British Government which curtailed the minimum freedom of the Indian. It was strongly opposed by all section of the people, which was culminating in the tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh. But in 1920, the Hunter Commission Majority Report was published and it did not take initiative strong enough in condemning General Dyer's role in Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and it's report deeply affected the Indian mind. The Khilafat crisis was other big issue for the Non-Cooperation Movement in India. The Khilafat movement was the product of the resentment a harsh treaty which was imposed on the defeated Ottoman Emperor who was still regarded as the caliph or Khalifa, the spiritual head of the Islamic world.

In the year 1919, the Khilafat Committee launched the Khilafat movement in Bombay. There had three main demands of the movement – the caliph or Khalifa must restore the control over the Muslim holy places, he must be left with pre-war territories so that he could maintain his position as the head of the Islamic world, and Jazirat-ul-Arab<sup>1</sup> must not be under control non-Muslim authority. The result was that Gandhiji was sure of Muslim support if the Congress started the Non-Cooperation Movement. It is therefore, all the more starting to find Gandhi giving the call for Non-Cooperation Movement. Gandhi issued his first manifesto on Non-Cooperation on the 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1920 and he stated, "Non-Cooperation is... the only remedy left open to us".<sup>2</sup> The Movement started by the Khilafat Committee and the Congress under the guidance of Gandhi. The Non-Cooperation Movement is a unique Phenomenon because this movement was a large-scale united action of the Hindus and the Muslims communities against the British. The Movement was much larger in volume and much greater in intensity than any other popular agitation which came before it. Jawaharlal Nehru said "Non-Cooperation was led by a man of commanding personality. And Gandhi was the man. There was a new sense of freedom. Fear retired into background. The peasantry straightened their backs. They raised their heads."<sup>3</sup> Under Gandhi's leadership, the Character of Congress instigated to wear a new aspect.

In June 1-2, 1920, the Allahabad Conference of the Central Khilafat Committee decided to launch a four stage Non-Cooperation Movement – Boycott of Titles, Civil Services, Police and Army and non-payment of taxes.<sup>4</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> August, the whole movement was to begin with hartal and boycott. Gandhi inaugurated the Non-cooperation movement on the 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1920 by returning his Kaiser-I-Hind gold medal, Zulu War Medal, Boer War Medal with a letter to lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India. He wrote in the letter, "... Valuable as these honours have been to me, I cannot wear them with an easy conscience so long as my Musalman Countrymen have to labour under a wrong done to their religious sentiments... The attitude of the Imperial and your Excellency's Government as the Punjab question has given me (an) additional cause for gave dissatisfaction..... I can retrain neither respect nor affection for such a Government."<sup>5</sup> Gandhi succeeded in establishing the unity in India and in bridging over the differences, specially between Hindus and

Muslims. He shaped for the first time a real Indian Nation, all united in a uniform national sentiment. He regarded the union between Hindus and Muslims as a fundamental condition for free India. A special session of the Indian National Congress was held at Calcutta on 4 September to 9 September, 1920, articulated and adopted the resolution of Non-Cooperation Movement. It also be noted that a large number of Muslims delegates attended in the session. In December 1920, at Nagpur Congress, the resolution on Non-Cooperation was repeated again. This session garnered greater support in favour of the resolution.

After the Nagpur Session of the Congress, the Non-Cooperation Movement started throughout India. Every section of the Indian society and every man and woman in the country joined in the Non-Cooperation Movement. The People organized committee in each village or group of village with provincial central organization in the main towns and or cities of each province to accelerate the progress of Non-Cooperation Movement.

The Non-Cooperation Movement began in January 1921. Thousands of students left schools and colleges and lawyers gave up their legal practice. More than 1500 lawyers suspended their practice. The peasants refused to pay taxes to the Government authorities. Specially in Bengal, the campaign of non-taxes achieved 'Considerable Success'. The Movement became more militant with the beginning of boycott and hartal. The people publicly fire of foreign cloths. During the movement, a nationwide strike was observed on 17<sup>th</sup> November when the Prince of Wales arrived in India. At that time a series of meetings were held. The Government adopted severe measures to suppress the movement, the people were heavily tortured and arrested the people who supported the Non-Cooperation Movement. In 1921, thirty thousands (30,000) Satyagrahis were taken into prisoner.<sup>6</sup>

The most significant features of the Movement were its uneven in the country and wide regional variations. Both Hindus and Muslims were actively participated in the national movement. The joy and enthusiasm of those days was something special for the sleeping giant was beginning to awake. Gandhi spread the Non-Cooperation ideas to the India masses by touring the various provinces of India along with Saukat Ali. Every section and every single man and woman in the country was deeply influenced by the Non-Cooperation Movement and utmost possible contribution of self-sacrifice to the national movement. Women in the movement played a significant role. They freely offered their jewellery for the support of the movement with great zeal. The years of 1921 and 1922 witnessed with a new spirit of freedom and fearlessness and an unprecedented movement of the Indian people. The Tilak Swaraj Fund was started to finance the Non-Cooperation Movement and within the six months, over 10 million rupees were collected.<sup>7</sup> Twenty thousand Charkhas were manufactured. First of all, it was marked by the involvement of regions and classes that did not participated in the past in any movement initiated by the congress.

Birbhum is one the important districts of Bengal. Birbhum had a long tradition of struggle for Independence and to fight against the British imperialism. The momentum at which the Non-Cooperation Movement in the district was started did

not far behind to the other districts of Bengal. The people of Birbhum district responded extremely to the call of the Non-Cooperation Movement which had yawning impact in almost all the parts of the district. The nationalist activities of Non-Cooperation Movement could break the state of 'isolation and separation' in Birbhum and filled the district with a new spirit of patriotism.

Birbhum was the northern most district of the Burdwan Division. The district Birbhum was bounded on the north and west by the Santal Parganas and the Murshidabad district; on the east by the district of Murshidabad and Burdwan; and on the south by Burdwan, from which it is separated by Ajay river. The principal town, which is also the administrative headquarters of the district is Suri which is situated two miles south of the Mor (Mayourakshi) river.

According to B.R. Nanda, "During his brief stay, Gandhi inspired an experiment in Self-help at Santiniketan.<sup>8</sup> There was great variations in the character of Non-Cooperation Movement in the district. The programme of Non-Cooperation had two aspects e.g., Construction and Deconstruction, the district rightly followed Gandhi's method that was based on non-violence but in some parts of the district were showed violent. Unparalleled scenes of fervour, devotion and sacrifice were witnessed in Birbhum District.

The movement was spread all across the Bengal including the district. The people of the district boycotted British goods, students left their colleges and schools, farmers did not pay the taxes and observed hartals. The Non-Cooperation Movement started in the district when a group of students of Krishna Chandra College left their college on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1921.<sup>9</sup> In 24 January, the students of Benimadhab Vidyalaya also left their school and joined in the movement. During the national movement the people of Birbhum continued boycotting and picketing the foreign goods. 'Swaraj Ashram' played great responsibility in the spreading Non-Cooperation Movement in the district. Swaraj Ashram was established in many parts of the district to spread the message of Gandhi's method of Non-Cooperation.<sup>10</sup> The volunteers of the Ashram picketed liquor, boycotted British goods, spreading national education and appealed to the people to use Swadeshi clothes. Swaraj Ashram took an initiative to introduced Charka all over the district. In Suri, the Ashram also published pamphlet and directed to the people the way they can successfully spread the Non-Cooperation Movement. In some places of Birbhum, the volunteers of Ashram collected money for their motherland and tried to spread the Non-Cooperation Movement in the district. The Ashram also appealed to the common people to boycott liquor. In 1921, the Ashram was established in many parts of the district such as at Suri, Saithia, Rampurhat, Margram, Bashuya, Bolpur. The Non-Cooperation Movement spread with much enthusiasm in the places like - Murari, Nalhati, Rampurhat, Mayureswar, Mahammad Bazar, Rajnagar, Suri, Sathia, Labpur, Bolpur, Illambazar, Nanur, Dubrajpur, Khayrasol. In short, the district had a very immensely active during the Non-Cooperation Movement. There were many works taken into consideration for increasing the patriotism among the people of the district at that time.

Both Hindus and Muslims leaders of Birbhum were actively participated in the historic struggle. The Non-Cooperation Movement vibrated the Birbhum district and it was possible for the spontaneous support of the people and their leaders. The leaders of Birbhum played a significant role in the national movement. They led the movement in their own region and organized meetings and explained the country's worst situation to the people. They encouraged the people to join in the national movement and to save their motherland from the British imperialism. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das deeply influenced the people to take part in movement in Birbhum District. Abdul Halim was one of the great nationalist leaders of the district who devoted his whole life for the cause of the country. He was a clerk in a ship company at Calcutta and during the clerkship of the company, he was mourned and was depressed by seeing the situation of labours and peasants. He resigned from his post and took part in the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921.<sup>11</sup> He joined in the movement under the leadership of Chittaranjan Das. At that time, many nationalist leaders of the district joined the Non-Cooperation Movement under the guidance of Chittaranjan Das. Abdul Halim spread the Non-Cooperation Movement in the district with the Jitendralal Bandhopandhay, Gopikabilas, Kamadinkonkar, Saradindu Chattapadhyay and so on.<sup>12</sup> The British authority tried to crush the Non-Cooperation Movement in the district. As a result they arrested many nationalist leaders of the district including Abdul Halim. He was sentenced to six months in jail.<sup>13</sup> But after his release from jail, he once again involved with anti-British activities. He came to contact with Muzaffar Ahmad and became associated with the publication of Kazi Nujrul Islam. Then he wrote an article in 'Anandamoyir Aghaman' in *Dhumketu* which was edited by Kazi Najrul Islam, against the British rule.<sup>14</sup> Once again he was arrested by the police because he encouraged the people to stand up against the British rule. He was sentenced to one year in jail. Gopikabilas Sengupta was one of the great patriotic leaders of the district. He was a teacher in Mitra Institute. He came in contact with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Chittaranjan Das during his teaching at the school. He was very motivated and inspired by the two great nationalist leaders. When Gandhiji launched Non-Cooperation Movement, he left his profession and actively participated in the national movement. Then he came to Suri and built patriotic organizations which helped to spread the national movement in district of Birbhum.

During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Kamdakingkor Mukherjee inspired and motivated the people by his nationalistic speech. Because of his motivational and nationalistic oratory, he was arrested by the police and sentenced to jail. But the courage and devotion for the country was not stop, after released from jail he again joined in the national movement and tried to save the motherland from the alien bondage. The contribution of Ashwani Das in the Non-Cooperation Movement was also remarkable. His idea of patriotism was inculcated from his father. Mr. Ashwani Das took actively participated in the national movement by boycotting the British goods. He also appealed to the people of Birbhum to boycott the British cloths and to use only Swadeshi cloths.

Rezaul Karim was a great political activist and the champion of Hindu-Muslim unity in the district. Rezaul Karim was deeply influenced by Gandhian politics and his involvement with the Non-Cooperation Movement delayed his formal education. For the support of the movement police tortured and thrown out him into jail.<sup>15</sup> He was deeply influenced by a public address by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das and took active part in Non-Cooperation Movement. As a part of the national movement, Rezaul Karim took a job in a national school in Salar, Murshidabad. He did not receive any kind of remuneration from national school as it was the part of the movement. He endeavoured to spread the nationalist ideas and consciousness through his writings.

Md. Syed Ali was a great patriotic leader of Birbhum District. He came to contact with Rabindranath Tagore during his study at Santiniketan. Then the ideas of nationalism grew up in his mind. He was very influenced by Tagore and Gandhiji. He joined in the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920.<sup>16</sup> During the Non-Cooperation Movement, he boycotted the British goods and also encouraged to the people of Nalhati in particular and Birbhum in general to boycott the foreign cloths and fascinated to use swadeshi goods. He wore only Khadi cloths until his death. He spread the nationalistic ideas in the district. He led the anti-land movement in Nalhati. Nalhati became one of the very active places during the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Mr. Tarakumar Chakraborty, the leading nationalist leader of the district was arrested for his participation of a meeting which was held at Rampurhat in 1921. In this meeting Tarakumar Chakraborty gave burning oratory against the British and requested the people to boycott the British goods. Great enthusiasm and excitement prevailed in this meeting and police took action by lathi charged and arresting a number people including Biswanath Gupta, Harinanda Prasad, Tarapodo Bandhopadhy and sent to jail for one month. Samsuddin Hossain, the brother of Abdul Halim, was an important nationalist leader of Birbhum district and played an active role in the national movement. He organized Kishan Sangatan in the District and led the national movement with Jitendranath Banerji.<sup>17</sup> Not to pay taxes was one of the agendas of the Non-Cooperation Movement and when it flourished all over India, Birbhum in general was not also exceptional. There was an association of farmer led by the Samsuddin Hossain in Kirnahar region of the district decided not pay the taxes and carrying on the Non-Cooperation Movement in the district.<sup>18</sup> He also joined in Sriniketan and led to the Samabai Movement which also part of Non-Cooperation Movement with one of his partner Kalimohan Ghosh.<sup>19</sup>

The people of the district supported and spread the Non-Cooperation Movement in their own way which was unique feature of the movement. Jitendralal Banerji one of the important nationalist leaders of the district. He organized the anti-Union Board with Moulavi Mohammad Ali.<sup>20</sup> The newly introduced Union Board was established by 1919 Act and aim of the board to increase the land taxes. When Board tried to measure the land and increase the taxes, the peasants of the district led by Jitenralal Banerji effectively agitated against this evil work. In the winter of 1921-22, peasants

resisted Settlement operation in Pubna, Bogra, and particularly in the Rampurhat Sub-division of Birbhum, where the movement was led by Jitendralal Banerji.<sup>21</sup> Basically anti-tax movement was very active around in Rampurhat thana circle. There was a reasons, Rampurhat sub-division is mostly Muslims populated region of the district and for the khilafat crisis they were became more anti-British. In this situation, Jitendralal tried to united them and led the anti-taxes movement in the region. So, Jitendralal Banerji spread the Non-Cooperation Movement in his own way and mostly Muslim leaders like Moulavi Akram Khan, Moulavi Din Mohammad were associated with him. The following another important nationalist leaders of the district played a significant role during the Non-Cooperation Movement - Mihirlal Chottopadhyay, Moulavi Modeshwar Hossain, Jagadish Chandra Gosh, Dukoribala, Moulavi Akharam Khan, Dijopodo Dutta, Pannalal Dasgupta, Moulavi Din Mohammad, Yugulpodo Das, Saratchandra Mukopadhyay, Abdul Rahaman, Satyabala Devi, Surendranath Sarkar, Damodar Brajrobasi.

On 5<sup>th</sup> February 1922, the angry crowd attacked and burnt the police station causing the death of 22 policemen in the Gorakhpur District of Uttar Pradesh. Gandhi viewed the Chauri Chaura tragedy as a red signal, a warning that the atmosphere in the country was too explosive for a mass movement. As a result, Gandhi withdraw the Non-Cooperation Movement on 12 February, 1922. Gandhi explained this decision as arising out of his discovery that Indians had not yet learnt to be non-violent. His action shocked and bewildered his closest colleagues. Their reaction is best expressed in Romain Rolland's words: "It was dangerous to assemble all the forces of a nation and to hold the nation panting before a prescribed movement, to lift one's arm to give the final command, then at the last moment, let one's arm drop and thrice call a halt just as the formidable machinery has been set in motion. One risks ruining the brakes and paralysing the impetus." The Viceroy, Lord Reading, cheerfully confided to his son that Gandhi "had pretty well run himself to the last ditch as a politician by extraordinary manifestation in the last month or six weeks before his arrest".<sup>22</sup>

In spite of its failure, the Non-Cooperation Movement has great importance in the history of India not only in relation to political sphere but also in terms of social aspects. In processions, meetings and jails people of all castes and communities worked together which weakened the caste separateness and accelerated the pace of social mobility and reform. Non-Cooperation Movement demonstrated the willingness and ability of the masses to endure hardships and make sacrifices. The movement showed remarkable unity among the Hindus and Muslims.

The Non-Cooperation Movement greatly affected the people of Birbhum. The movement was able to influence a new life into the heart of rather dormant people of the district. The whole area of Birbhum heartedly responded to the call of Non-Cooperation Movement. It was the real mass movement with the participation of different sections of Indian society such as peasants, workers, students, teachers and women. The movement created a new upheaval, a new awakening, a new self-reliance and new starvation for Freedom among the people of the district.

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