

RADICALISM IN POLITICS OF BIHAR

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Abstract : The present paper attempts an analysis of the movement in the Bihar Politics. Elsewhere we have discussed the fighting potentialities of the peasantry.' They had participated whole-heartedly in various forms of agitation launched by the Indian National Congress. They had vindicated the faith reposed in them and surprised everyone by their devotion and sincerity to the larger national interest. Whitehall was aware of the notoriety of landlords and the abysmal poverty of the peasantry,' and Wedgwood Benn had given a warning in the Cabinet Meeting of June 22, 1931, when he spoke of an 'agrarian revolt' if matters were allowed to drift.' They had become very suspicious of the Congress, which they found had moved closer to the peasants. It is a well known fact that in the initial years of its existence the Kisan Sabha worked in close-cooperation with the Congress, having common leaders and ideals. By the 1930s socialistic ideas had come to influence many people, within and without the Congress : the Congress Socialist Party was established in Patna. There was the spread of anti-untouchability campaign and its close links with the Congress. The overwhelming majority of the landlords came from the 'twice-born' castes, who looked upon the emancipation of the lower castes as a serious challenge to their traditional socio-economic hegemony in the semi-feudal set up since Harijans have always. Constituted a significant proportion of the landless labourers' Landed' aristocracy faced a crisis of the first order.

Keyword : Radicalism, Colonial, Bihar, Politics

The colonial Government knew very well that "the prestige and influence of the Chiefs can be best upheld by letting the peasantry see that there are not two sets of Rulers the British and the Native ... working either separately or in co-operation, but a single Government" .3 So they had planted a new conception of land-ownership and property in Bengal—the Permanent Settlement' As a result of the Round Table Conference, some constitutional reforms introducing elections with an extended franchise were on the threshold. The leading Congress leaders had been imprisoned and the movement seemed to have fizzled out. The Bihar Government thought that it must take advantage of the abeyance of the Congress movement and built up a rival political organisation. It looked towards zamindars, who were too ready to oblige, in their characteristic style. Such a movement could emerge only by championing the causes of the poor peasantry.' The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha had been formed in December, 1929. Sardar Vallabhai Patel, the hero of Bardoli, addressed quite a few Kisan Sabha meetings in Bihar in late 1929, just before the Lahore session of the Congress. Swami Sahajananda Saraswati, who was emerging as the most important figure of the Kisan movement in Bihar, accompanied Patel in his tours.

The Swami, candidly admits that Sardar's tour gave enough encouragement to Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha. It was, however, not before long that Sahajananda realised the duplicity of Patel and the ruling coterie of the Congress. At the national level, though Subhas Base's resolution, that "Congress should aim at setting up a parallel Government in the country, and to that end, should take in hand the task of organising the workers, peasants and youth", was defeated in the Lahore session of the Congress, yet it marked the emergence of an extremism, hitherto unknown. The Congress could no longer be used as the 'safety valve'. In the course of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Congress had come to realise that the "one peculiar feature of the province is that the movement is practically in the hands of the village people. They have taken it up in right earnest and are working with great enthusiasm and success. They do not care for the result but go on gladly working the programme with ample resourcefulness. People who have no idea even of the map of Hindustan are heard saying that they are fighting the battle of Bharat. The so-called educated and towns people are fond of mere demonstration only a few lawyers here and there and a few students have joined the movement and are working for it"? Bihpur Ashram's sustained defiance caused enough alarm in Government circles since they found the apparition of Midnapur in it. And all these had been done by "these uneducated village folks, that our workers are drawn and they form the real backbone of the movement". Raja Raghunandan Prasad, one of the founders of the Aman Sabha at Monghyr and substantial contributor

to its funds resigned his membership of the Legislative Assembly "ostensibly as a protest against the Simon Commission Report but to no small extent because of the insistent pressure of his tenants whose support of the Congress movement is whole hearted".

This incident gives us an idea of pressure exerted by the peasantry. At the same time we have the interesting and revealing case of the circular issued by the Chowdhuri of Bakhtiarpur, a local zamindar in Monghyr threatening his tenantry with a fine of Rs. 150/- and confiscation of their lands in case they were found helping Congressmen." In the entire gamut we find only one evidence of 500 people complaining to the Sub-divisional Office of Kishanganj, against a zamindar of Gunjaria, Ilaji Ahmed Hossein for illegal realisation, then he had to conduct an enquiry into the grievances". The landlords knew the seriousness of the situation; they had to mend their old ways for the time being. To improve their image and give a wide publicity to it and provide support to the Government, the Maharaja of Darbhanga brought out a newspaper—"The Indian Notion" which appeared in February 1931, which had the blessing of the Government, since the latter wished that "should it succeed a loyalist paper of this type should be great asset to the province"" After a year, the Government seemed to be flattered at the success of 'The Indian Nation' since it had been excellent in tone and matter in recent issues; and directors of this paper are very ready to cooperate with and give assistance to Government".

The Maharaja of Darbhanga was the heart and soul of the Bihar Landholders' Association. Even during the plenary session of the Round Table Conference the Maharaja of Darbhanga "advanced the landlords' claims for adequate safeguarding of their rights—advocated Second chamber in provinces and urged that the Sanads under Permanent Settlement should be regarded as solemn and inviolable pledges". "The Co-operative department of the Government tried its utmost to "secure a general co-operation of the zamindars, to uplift the condition of the rayyats..." A similar step was taken by Sir Malcolm Halley, the Governor of the United Provinces, when he set his Publicity Department to widely publicise the work being done by his 'rural uplift' scheme (borne on Government expenditure) so that the landlords can claim credit for it, so that they can prove that they were "an essential factor in rural life".

The most disturbing reports kept on coming to the Government in Patna. In Monghyr, Congress workers had now started asking people not to pay rents, enhanced by the Civil Courts. In Shahabad, Swami Bhawani Dayal of South Africa fame was active and thought to be organising a no-rent campaign." Patna, Gaya and Palamau saw a great deal of Kisan Sabha activities criticising illegal demands from tenants, remission of rents, and preparation for no-rents, no-tax campaign. The Shahabad District Congress Committee requested the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee to start an agitation for reducing the water-rate of canals to what it had been 20 years back. In Patna, the Kisan Sabha's future seemed to be bleak because leading zamindars were putting their affairs in order but the zamindars in Palamau were found to be "getting nervous over it". "A new dimension was added to the problem when few centres were started by the Congress to train volunteers in use of lathis, sword and spear in Sitamarhi, Dhaka (Champran) and Bareilly (Saran). The Superintendent of Police, Saran, correctly realised the gravity of the situation since he apprehended a "fairly strong revival of the Civil Disobedience Movement manned for the most part by loafers and unemployed". (The memory of Bihpur was too fresh). While "loafer" was an indispensable imperial verbiage to describe anything anti-establishment, there is little doubt that unemployed must have been eager participants. What Government thought about unemployment in North Bhagalpur can be equally true of certain other areas. In the circumstances it was natural that zamindars will go all out to support the Government.

BPCC report gives some instances of zamindars making common cause to the Government like the employees of Sheohar Raj and Banaili Raj in providing much help to the punitive police force stationed in their areas and harassing the people." There is, thus, no-doubt that both Government and Landlords had realised the threat posed by the Congress Kisan Sabha agitation. Rajendra Prasad being a conservative is being partisan. He overlooks the role played by the left wing—the socialist party which was in an embryonic stage at that time. In 1932 we find increased interest of Congress (?) in the agrarian problem. Kisan Sabha also preached non-payment of rent and chowkidari tax, wholesale cutting down of the jungles and forcible resistance to the landlords' tehsildars. There was an incident when a group of Congress workers persuaded some aboriginal villagers to attack the police by announcing that the police were now powerless and that on the advent of Swaraj they would have to pay no more rent. There was also a threat of a no-rent campaign from Sonbarsa Diara with the assistance of Congress workers." The mention of Congressmen fighting for the peasantry might have been the members of this left wing section which was latent at this time.

Acharya Narendra Deva's call in his Presidential Address at the inaugural meeting at Patna in 1934 had underlined the necessity to broaden the social basis of the movement. Rajendra Prasad expectedly has nothing to say about this. Recently, it has been rightly pointed out that. "the extension to a considerable section of the peasantry was a second crucial feature ; quantitatively of the highest significance, it remained however politically subordinate as the bourgeoisie proved skilful enough to cash in on popular discontent and yet retain an ultimate control over it". This is an hypothesis which sounds very natural in the circumstances. Government distinguished between the "moderating influences" exercised by leaders like Rajendra Prasad and Braj Kishore Prasad over a younger section in the Congress which wants to follow U.P." and more extremist leadership. Some of the Kisan Sabha leaders also knew that the Congress did not at all like this show of apostacy on their part ; the latter being committed to nationalism transcending class and group interest. Congress symbolised the 'United Front' and its leadership was not going to brook this serious deviation. Sahajananda, who was emerging as the most important figure of the Kisan Sabha. having played the role of a sectarian leader earlier, cautioned his followers against allying themselves with Congress and he did it very rightly."

The Bihar Government found as oily as March 1933 that Sahajanand who took charge of Kisan Sabha, strongly expressed the view that the Congress should not be allowed to make use of the Sabha for its own purpose. Kisan leaders had come to realise that the ruling coeterie of Congress was apathetic and hostile to genuine Kisan demands in light of Rajendra Prasad's exhortation to the peasants to remain peaceful and pay the zamindari his due," and Sahajanand's firm warning mentioned earlier. This is further proved by the circular issued by Satya Narain Singh, the provincial dictator of the Congress movement expressing the hope that Kisan Sabha will concentrate on the Congress Programme. "The Congress evidently intends to use the agency of the Sabha in reaching the cultivators". An-other circular issued the following month exhorted the peasants to remain with the Congress. The Congress wanted to concentrate only on the freedom struggle and was not prepared to do anything to alleviate the sufferings of the peasants.

The threat to the landlords had been growing very fast and this assumed serious proportions as untouchables were being infused with a new sense of dignity by the anti-untouchability campaign started by Gandhi. It is a well known fact that there is a "very high correlation between caste ranking and superior and inferior rights to land" in Eastern India—specially Bihar. By the late 1920's there is evidence of growing caste consciousness among the so-called lower castes and their attempts to improve their status in the social hieracrchy by claiming the right of wearing sacred thread, refusing to do begari and other menial jobs for the higher castes who formed the majority of landlords. This led to caste riots on a number of occasions since the so-called higher castes saw in this "a menace at once social and political"? A tentative hypothesis may be hazarded here. The Congress which had initiated this noble movement found itself in a tight corner since an important section of the landed gentry, being very sensitive about their existing privileges saw in this egalitarianism a serious threat to their unchallenged supremacy.

As illustration one can cite the leadership provided to Santan Dharma Sabhas, established to fight the anti-untouchability movement. In one such meeting Raja of Surajpura presided." Maharaj Bahadur Hathwa presided over the Sanatan Dharma Conference in Sonapur? There was a more serious development which created immense apprehension in the minds of landlords. Because, it was at this juncture that some of the earliest attempts were made to organise the agricultural labourers, the bulk of whom came from the Harijans. It is interesting to note that Jagjivan Ram in his younger days gave a lead to both these movements—anti-untouchability and agricultural labourers? It was only after few years that he established the Bihar Khet Mazdoor Sangh in 1937? when the realisation came that the leadership of the Kisan Sabha had been generally in the hands of the comparatively well-to-do cultivators and not those of the most neglected members of rural society—the agricultural labourers which Sahajananda himself accepted later on.

Landed aristocracy seemed to be on the verge of losing what in socio-logical terminology would be described as "decisive dominance". Rural society and economy, it seemed was about to crumble under the impact of such developments. It was then, that The United Party was established and as expected, Maharaja of Darbhanga took the chair in its inaugural conference in January 1933. In U.P. also the Government had to set up the 'National Agricultural Party' for the same purpose. The Bihar Government not only encouraged and patronised the United Party with the avowed objective of taking the winds out of the sails of the Congress, and Kisan Sabha, but also set up a rival Kisan Sabha, comprising of some puppets, handpicked sycophants of the landlords and Government. It was to be a two-tier system ; the new Kisan Sabha of Government was to be the second line of defence to provide against any eventuality. An intelligent Government does not want to take chance, specially when faced with a serious threat to its very survival. The threat was real and the plan chalked out to counteract it appeared excellent on paper, but its authors were to be sorely disappointed soon. Its fate is beyond the scope of this paper but the United Party's

miserable failure gave an added strength to the freedom movement and Kisan Sabha's struggles by scuttling the imperialist—comprador manoeuvre.

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