

Roles of Various Peasant Organizations and Movements in National Freedom (With Special Reference to Twentieth Century)

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Though, many groups were formed and various activities were conducted by Indian peasants in 19th century against the British Government but this paper, covered the various peasant movements of 20th century those have started after suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement. After the movement when Gandhiji was arrested, the peasants formed the various organizations to keep moving the political spirit of the movements. In this connection many peasant organizations played significant roles those are also covered in this paper such as: Oudh (Awadh) Kisan Sabha, Eka Meetings, Mappila Peasants (Muslim) Movement, All-India Kisan Sabha, Peasant Movements in South India, Peasant Movements in Bihar, Peasant Movements in Punjab and Peasant Movements in Bengal are explained nicely.

[Keywords : Peasant suspension, Organizations, Ideology, Mappila peasants, Kalipraja (dark people), High caste, Ujalipraja and incorporated]

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1. Introduction

The Peasant Movement was a familiar feature of the 19th century but in 20th century, this movement emerged with new essence as the ongoing national movement had made deep imprints in the hearts of the Indian people. Since annexation of Awadh in 1856, because of exorbitant rents, illegal levies of fees or nazrana, ejection or bedakhli made the life of farmers miserable. It was continued even after establishment of the Congress. After World War-I when atrocities of the British Officials increased then the more active members of the Home Rule League in U.P. initiated the process of organization of peasants of the United Province on modern lines into Kisan Sabhas. The U.P. Kisan Sabha was set up in February 1918, through the efforts of Gauri Shankar Mishra and Indra Narain Dwivedi, with the support of Madan Mohan Malaviya. In this year (1918), the members of the Kisan Sabha participated in the Congress Session of Delhi. The U.P. Kisan Sabha extended its activities and by June 1919, it established approximately 450 branches in 173 tehsils of the U.P. Thus, in 1919, a huge number of kisan representatives from U.P. attended the Congress meeting in Amritsar. In last quarter of the 1919, a Nai-Dhobi Band of Pratapgarh district also called for social boycott. In this sequence Mr. Thinguri Singh and Durgapal Singh called a village panchayat in the villages of taluqdari those are popularly known as Awadh Kisan Meetings. After this Baba Ramchandra who left his home when he was 13 years old became labourer in Fiji, came back to Faizabad in 1909 and emerged as the leader of peasants in Awadh in the mid of 1920. He demonstrated in favour of the farmers in front of the Government. When he met Gauri Shankar Mishra and Jawaharlal Nehru, he asked them to visit and see the conditions of the villages. The Jawaharlal Nehru made several visits to these areas and developed the close contacts with the Kisan Sabha.

In between the British Government succeeded to arrest Baba Ramchandra with 32 kisans by charges of theft on 28th August and sent him behind the bars in Pratapgarh in 1920. When news spread about his arrest then approx. 4,000-5,000 kisans gathered in front of the jail and dispersed after assurance of release. After 10 days, a rumour spread about the arrival of Gandhiji to get release the Baba Ramchandra. Within very short span of time approximately, 20,000 kisans came to Pratapgarh to see him and they went back after

Darshan of Baba Ramchandra from a trees top of sugar-cane field. But till then crowd reached to the strength of approximately 60,000. By the time, in Calcutta Session of the Congress the path of non-cooperation was adopted and nationalists of U.P. started to follow it. This led the Kisan Sabha and the Eka Movements (U.P.) the Mappila Rebellion in Malabar (Kerala) and the Bardoli Satyagraha in Gujarat.

2. Oudh (Awadh) Kisan Sabha

After adopting of non-cooperation movement, the Oudh Kisan Sabha (Awadh Kisan Sabha) came into being on 17th October, 1920 in Pratapgarh with tiring efforts of the Gauri Shankar Mishra, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mata Badal Pande, Baba Ramchandra, Deo Narayan Pande and Kedar Nath. This new Sabha spread so fast that within very short period, it raised its strength to over 330 Kisan Sabhas. This sabha said to kisans not to accept bedakhli of land and also refuse haari and begaari and try to solve their personal confrontation and problems through panchayats. The first ever big rally was held at Ayodhya, on 20th -21st December, 1920 in which approximately, 100,000 peasants were present. The main activities of this sabha were organised in Rae Bareli, Sultanpur, Faizabad and its nearby area.

3. The Eka Meetings in Awadh

In between the Government brought Awadh Rent Amendment Act which provoked the peasant of Hardoi, Sitapur and Bahraich. Hence they raised their voice again at the end of the year of 1920. For all these, the initial thrust was provided by the Congress and Khilafat leaders and the movement grew under the name of the Eka or unity movement. The Eka meetings were organised and set some rules those have to be followed by all members of Sabha. Such rules were like; to make payment according to the written records, rent but pay it on time, will not leave when ejected, will refuse for forced labour work, will not support the criminals and abide by the panchayat decisions. This Eka Movement, spread in other caste also and soon developed its own leadership. In fact these low caste leaders (Madari-Pasi-Bahelia-Khatik) were have believe in non-violence as urged by the Congress and Khilafat leaders. In March 1922, the Eka movement came to end.

4. Mappila Peasants (Muslim) Movement

The peasants also started raising their voice against the Government in the Malabar region (Northern Kerala). Here the Mappila Peasants (Muslim) tenants rebelled. Initially it began from the Congress Conference of Malabar District which was held at Manjeri in April 1920. The leadership supported the tenants and demanded legislation to regulate landlord-tenant relations. Soon the Manjeri conference led to establish the Peasants Association at Kozhikode (Calicut). Later it spread its wing in other parts of the Kerala. These rebellious attacked the landlords and burn their records. Some of the rebel leaders, like Kunhammed Haji, took special care to see that Hindus were not molested or looted and even he punished rebellions those attacked the Hindus. Kunhammed Haji also did not discriminate in favour of Muslims. He ordered the execution and punishment of a number of pro-government Mappilas as well. The repression of the Government was unable to stop the movement. This also stopped after long struggle like other movements by December 1921. In this approximately, 2,337 Mappilas Muslim lost their lives officially while unofficially toll was above 10,000 and total 45,404 rebels were arrested. The extremist Mappila Muslims were completely crushed.

It is observed that the peasant movements of north and south was closely linked and played greater role in politics at the national level. When in 1922, Gandhiji, asked the peasants not to be strict for stopping rent to landlords then on this the peasants reacted that he had done nothing to uplift the lower-caste, untouchables and tribal inhabitants those were called as Kalipraja (dark people) to differentiate with the high caste or Ujalipraja (fair people) while the Kalipraja is out numbered with Ujalipraja. Though, later some institutions were established for education of the tribals. Mr. Kunverji Mehta and Keshavji Ganeshji both worked a lot for upliftment of these tribal's. The teaching classes started to educate the Kalipraja. In the same way in 1927, a similar school was also set up in Bardoli town. For the Kalipraja the annual conferences held in 1922 and 1927, those were presided over by the Gandhiji. He initiated an enquiry to know the conditions of the Kalipraja. In this connection the campaign in the Newspapers, (Young India and Navjivan) edited and published in news by Gandhiji, were taken seriously by the people. But the actions taken by the Government were not satisfactory.

5. Establishment of All-India Kisan Sabha

The economic depression of 1929, which crashed the crops prices were dealt seriously because the peasants were already overburdened with taxes and rents. These high taxes and rents were hit the common people and peasants drastically. This enforced the Congress leaders to change its working style of mass struggle in 1930. During this period, the Government cleverly rejected to scale down the rate of taxation but asked the landlords to scale down their rents. But peasants in Surat and Kheda (Gujarat) said 'no' to pay their taxes and went for hijrat to nearby Baroda state to get rid of from the repression of the Government. In Bihar and Bengal, the people came on road against the hated Chowkidar tax which was paid by villagers to upkeep their own oppressors. In Punjab movement was launched against the revenue campaign. It was supported by the Kisan Sabhas those have demanded reduction in land revenue and water-rates. They have also demanded to cut short the debts. In Maharashtra, Bihar and the Central Provinces, peasants and tribals came forward against the forest laws those restrict them regarding use of the forests. In Nellore district (Andhra Pradesh) peasants were against the Venkatagiri zamindars. By visualising the problems of peasants the Congress established the All-India Kisan Congress in Lucknow in April 1936 to sort out their problems. Later, it was named as All-India Kisan Sabha. The Swami Sahajanand, the founder of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (1929) became the first President and N.G. Ranga, the leader of Kisan Movement in Andhra as a General Secretary. In its first session Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and other stalwarts like, Ram Manohar Lohia, Sohan Singh, Jayaprakash Narayan, Mohanlal Gautam, Ahmed Din, Sudhir Pramanik, Indulal Yagnik, and Kamal Sarkar were present. In this Conference, it was decided to bring 'Kisan Manifesto' and 'a periodic bulletin' which will be edited by Indulal Yagnik. The Kisan Manifesto was finalized in Bombay during the All-India Kisan Committee Session. Later, because of its significance it became part of the 1937 elections. The manifesto emphasised more on well being of the peasants and agricultural reforms adopted by C.W.C. at the Faizpur Session. Its main demands were: 50% reduction in revenue and rent, tenure securities of tenants, moratorium on debts, the abolition of feudal levies, and the recognition of peasant unions. The second session of the All India Kisan Congress held with Congress Session at Faizpur (Maharashtra)

was presided over by N.G. Ranga. By the time Kisan Congress became so famous that more than 500 Kisans proceeded from Manmad to Faizpur covering nearly 300 kilometres distance. On the way, these peasants briefed the people about the aims and objectives of the Kisan Congress. After reaching in faizpur, the group was welcomed by Jawaharlal Nehru, Shankar Rao Deo, M.N. Roy, S.A. Dange, Yusuf Meher Ali etc.

6. Other Peasant Movements of India

The relationship bond between the national movement and the peasant movement became strong due to an efficient leadership of intellectual leaders. It was not the first time that the peasant movement got attention of the British Government but it happened before 1857 also. Hence the role of peasants of various states cannot be ignored and neglected but it should be acknowledged in political history of the national movement. Here some important events of the peasant's movement especially in Kerala, Andhra, Bihar, Punjab and Bengal are explained below:

6.1 Peasant Movements in South India

In Malabar region (Kerala), the peasants showed their strong efforts felt, mainly by the Congress Socialist Party (C.S.P.) workers. The Congress Socialist Party was working with the peasants since 1934 and also shouldering their responsibilities. They toured village to village and set up Krashaka Sanghams (Peasant Associations). The main demands of these Krishaka Sanghams were same as All India Kisan Sabha. In south India the main problem was of the tenancy. Hence, the Krashaka Sanghams organized a strong protest against the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929 and asked to amend it. In this connection, in 1938, it was declared that: 6th November will be observed as the Malabar Tenancy Act Amendment Day. Thus, in whole Malabar region on this day meetings were organised and in all the meetings uniformly resolution was passed to demand of amending the Malabar Tenancy Act. Immediately, a committee headed by R. Ramachandra was appointed by the All Malabar Krashaka Sangham to check the tenancy problems. This committee gave its recommendations and submitted its report to the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee on 20th November, 1938. In December, 1938, All Malabar Krashaka Sangham organised a conference at Chevayur near Calicut in which two jathas one from Karivallur

(north Malabar) and another from Kozhikode (South Malabar) each with 500 workers was reached in the Conference. They were received and honoured by the local Congress Committees wherever they went. Similar meeting was also organised in 1938, by Provincial Kisan Conference at broad level in Andhra Pradesh. Here the peasants were led by the great leader N.G. Ranga who was also running the Indian Peasant's Institute in his own village Nidobrolu in district Guntur. In March 1938, C. Rajagopalachari also introduced the Agricultural Debt Relief Act, to ease the burden of debt on the province's peasant population when he took over the command of Madras Presidency.

6.2 Peasant Movements in Bihar

In 1937-38, Bihar also played an important role to mobilise the peasants. The Swami Sahajanand who formed the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (leader of the All India Kisan Sabha also) played the key role to spread the wings of the Kisan Sabha in rural area of Bihar. He was joined by many left-wing leaders like; Karyanand Sharma, Rahul Sankritayan, Panchanan Sharma and Yadunandan Sharma. The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha led by Swami Sahajanand, efficiently conducted the meetings, organised the conferences, rallies and demonstrations etc., In 1938, he led a demonstration at Patna in which more than 10,00,00 peasants were present. This demonstration was organised to popularise the Kisan Sabha programmes. In Bharahaya Tal (Distt.-Monghyre) the struggle of peasants were led by the Karyanand Sharma. In Reora (Distt.-Gaya) under leadership of Yadunandan Sharma, the peasants gained victory as the District Magistrate gave an award restoring 850 bighas of land out of the disputed 1,000 bighas to the tenants. It was a major victory of the peasants comparing to other areas. Similar movements were took place in Padri, Raghopore, Dekuli and Pandoul under Darbhanga district. Jamuna Karjee led the movement in district Saran and Rahul Sankritayayan in Annawari. All these movements of Bihar were in pattern of Stayagraha but peasants were forcibly sowing and harvesting their crops without fear.

6.3 Peasant Movements in Punjab

The Punjab is agricultural state, hence the peasant of this state were most affected by repressiveness of the British Government. In Punjab the Kisan Sabhas came into existence in 1930. But the

Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Indian National Congress, Akali Movement's revolutionaries and Kirti Kisan shown a new way by the Punjab Kisan Committee which was formed in 1937. Of course the main demands were same like other peasants organisations but two key issues were the resettlement of land revenue of Amritsar and Lahore districts and the increase in the canal tax or water-rate. To solve these issues through demands, the Jathas marched to their respective district headquarters and the demonstrations and agitations were held there. In 1939, the Lahore Kisan Morcha demonstrated in which hundreds of farmer court arrested in many districts. The remarkable event was that the Muslim tenants-at the will of Western Punjab as well as the Hindu peasants of South-Eastern Punjab (present-day Haryana) was largely remained absent from the Kisan Movement. The tenants of Multan districts mobilised by the Kisan leaders were mostly emigrants of Central Punjab. Bhagat Singh Bilga, Baba Sohan Singh, Teja Singh, Baba Rur Singh, and Master Han Singh, were prominent peasant leaders of that time. The tenants refused to pay the batai (share rent) to their biswedars (landlords). These tenants were supported by Left leaders such as Bhagwan Singh Longowalia and Jagir Singh Joga and Teja Singh. But, the great thing was that in his two last letters, Bhagat Singh also affirmed the revolutionary terrorist faith in socialism. He wrote : 'The peasants have to liberate themselves not only from foreign yoke but also from the yoke of landlords and capitalists'.

6.4 Peasant Movements in Bengal

In Bengal also the peasants were aggressive against the enhancement of the canal tax on the Damodar canal. In district Burdwan peasants demonstrated under the leadership of Bankim Mukherji against the enhancement of the canal tax and got success to get reduced the taxes. In another district i.e. 24-Parganas of Bengal, the peasants marched to Calcutta in April 1938 to put their demand. These peasants were undoubtedly encouraged by the Bengal Land Revenue Commission which is also known as the Floud Commission. The Floud Commission already given its recommendations and submitted its report to the Government. The Hajong tribal's were demanding commutation of their rents into cash rents. The Tebhaga Movement which is led by the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha clashed with their Jotedars. Thus, there were many problems of peasants in Bengal but gradually sorted out. This was

the time that all Hindu-Muslim Unity was seen in the form of peasant movement and political action. This was the time when whole country shouted the slogans of 'Hindu-Muslim ki Jai'.

7. Conclusion

Thus, undoubtedly, the foundation, the growth, the development and the roles of the peasants and various organizations played were very significant for national struggle and freedom of India. This was the time that Hindu-Muslim leaders came together and strengthened the movement all over the country from east to west and north to south. In fact, the parties and groups of the religious name were united in the name of peasants and fought together to overthrow the British Government.

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