
Origin of the Jharkhand Movement in Bihar

Dr. Sanjay Kumar
Associate Professor
PGDAV College (Eve.)
University of Delhi

Abstract: The Jharkhand movement in Bihar was a separatist movement with an aim to establish a separate state of the Adivasis of Chotanagpur and the Santal Parganas within the framework of our Indian Constitution. In this context, it was different from the tribal movements of North-Eastern parts of India, which were secessionist in nature and wanted to become independent entity from India. The Jharkhand movement in its inception was not an illogical idea and it culminated in creation of the state Jharkhand, carved out of Bihar in 2000. The background to this movement was provided by the Adivasi Mahasabha, which in spite of fighting a long battle failed to achieve it.

Keywords: Chotanagpur Unatti Samaj, Adivasi Mahasabha, Chotonagpur Kisan Sabha, Separatist movement, and policy of 'Isolation' and Status-Quo'.

The participation of the tribes in the Indian National movement is a fascinating and inquisitive aspect of our freedom struggle. The tribal population of different regions had their own traditions to oppose and challenge the British rule. The age old economic and political exploitation of the tribes by the British administration and non-tribals, compelled them to raise the banner of revolt pretty often against their enemies. In erstwhile region of Bihar and presently Jharkhand, there were thirty tribes altogether and they differed widely from one another in context to their level of socio-economic condition at the turn of 20th century. Hence, their response to British exploitation also differed widely starting from socio-religious reform movements, revitalization movements with messianic zeal, missionary movements for proselytisation, armed struggle against the British to separatist movement like the Jharkhand movement in the colonial period.ⁱ

The tribes which participated in these movements were the sanskritised or sensitized Oraons, Mundas and Santals. These were not only major but settled agriculturist tribes. The Bhumij, Ho, Paharias, Kherias, Mohalis and Lohars were minor tribes. The Cheros remained aloof and associated themselves with the regional autonomy movement along with the educated Christian Mundas under the aegis of the Adivasi Mahasabha with active assistance of the Muslim League, the British officials, the Christian missionaries and the Bengalis.ⁱⁱ

In 1937, after the electoral setback suffered by the different factions of the Adivasis like Chotanagpur Improvement Society (Unnati Samaj), the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha and the Chotanagpur Kisan Sabha, they all decided to merge together to form Adivasi Sabha in May 1938. Jaipal Singh was elected the President of the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1939. The Sabha aimed at the creation of a separate province consisting of Chotanagpur and the Santal Parganas (hereafter the SPs). Thus it ushered a new era of a separatist movement adopting flexible strategies to suit their political ambition. The movement received encouragement from the Christian missionaries, the British officials, the Muslim League and a section of domiciled Bengalis. All these elements were anti-Congress in nature.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Congress ministry in Bihar (1937-39) had taken a lot of ameliorative measures for Chotanagpur and the SPs but failed to implement it in a meaningful manner. Besides, it was plagued from the very beginning as there was no aboriginal minister or parliamentary secretary in it. Knowing fully well that the deteriorating socio-economic condition of the Adivasis was the creation of more than a century old British rule and not the result of two-year rule of the Congress ministry, N.N. Rakshit of Jamshedpur, S.C. Roy, the father of Indian Anthropology and Jaipal Singh, the celebrated Captain of gold medal winning Indian hockey team at Amsterdam in 1928, paved the way for a separate Jharkhand movement in Chotanagpur.

The Jharkhand movement was the result of the backlash of a sense of neglect and fear of losing identity.^{iv} This consciousness was generated by the Christian missions who came to Chotanagpur around 1845. K.S. Singh is of opinion that as Christianity spread it performed many roles, it gave them a history and a myth; it accentuated the notion of private rights in land, it

promoted education and medical care; it also emphasized a sense of separateness from the rest.^v The tribes of Chotanagpur discovered and invented scripts, revived various forms of art and literature to define and assert tribal identity.

Amidst this situation the fuel was added to fire by the domiciled Bengalis and the supporters of Muslim League. The domiciled Bengalis were a sizeable professional and land-owning community who wanted to create their sphere of influence in the area of Chotanagpur and the SPs. Similarly, the Muslims, who had significant trading interest, harped on the principle of making Chotanagpur a corridor between East Pakistan and West Pakistan after the passing of the resolution of separate Pakistan in the Lahore session of Muslim League. Likewise, the Christian missionaries also had ulterior motive of conversion in their mind and gave whole hearted support to the Jharkhand movement. However, the Hinduised Sanatan Adivasis criticized the separatist movement and requested the Bihar government to amend the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 in order to solve some of their burning problems.^{vi}

The leaders like Rajendra Prasad, A.V. Thakkar alias Thakkar Bapa, Binodanand Jha, Motilal Kejriwal, K.B. Sahay, Saraswati Devi, Narayanji, etc. started a programme of upliftment among the Adivasis on lines of the missionaries. However, these ameliorative measures were limited to the major settled agriculturist tribes, while the hunters, food-gatherers and minor tribes remained largely untouched. Aware of the volatile situation in the Adivasis areas, Gandhiji included tribal welfare as the 14th item in his 13-joint reconstruction programme in January 1942 at the instance of Thakkar Bapa.^{vii}

On several points, the Census Reports had remained a bone of contention between the Government of Bihar and the Adivasis. The Census Reports of 1921 and 1931 held hinduisation of the tribals responsible for erosion of tribal identity. Besides, displacement of the tribals by non-tribal languages and growth of bilingualism among the tribal communities also contributed to the decline of their numerical strength. When the census operation was about to begin in 1940, the Sanatan Adivasis, led by Theble Oraon accused the missionaries of having managed to get Christians appointed as enumerators and supervisors in large numbers.

During the Quit India movement of 1942, more and more Adivasi leaders began to emerge on the political scene of the SPs. The Santals and Paharias wholeheartedly supported the movement. Forward Blocists and the revolutionaries like Sheelbhadra Yajee, Lambodar Mukherjee, Sarbanand Mishra, Prafulla Chandra Patnaik, K. Gopalan, etc. provided the leadership in Chhotanagpur and the SPs in 1942-43. The larger participation of the Santals, Paharias, Oraons, Kharwars, Tana Bhagats, etc. took the movement to the grass-root level by burning down the liquor shops, dak bungalows and quarter of forest guards.^{viii} On the other hand, Jaipal Singh provided every possible help to British war effort and acted as an agent of the British government by supplying vital and secret information about the activities of the Tana Bhagats in and around Chainpur to the Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi. He promised to organize his own men as defense party against the Tana Bhagats. These loyalist activities of Jaipal Singh created a wide gulf between him and the Indian National Congress and other nationalist elements.^{ix} He was of the view that British imperialism was far superior than the Congress imperialism.

The Congress approach to the problems of Adivasis was shaped by Thakkar Bapa. He was very critical of the officials and the missionaries' efforts to "isolate" the aboriginals from the mainstream of national life. "Nothing hurt the nationalist in Gandhi" says K.S. Singh "more than the segregation of various communities, particularly the tribals under the dangerous spell of the policy of 'isolation' and 'status quo'. Gandhiji and Thakkar Bapa did not advocate a complete absorption of the tribals at the cost of their individuality. Besides, Thakkar Bapa also protested against the plan of B.R. Ambedkar in 1945 under which all communities except aboriginals were to get proportionate representation. It amounted to political disenfranchisement of the tribals on the ground that they did not possess the political capacity to exercise political power for their own good. According to the Census Report of 1941, 4,737,150 Muslim population was to elect 5 members but 6,194,620 aboriginals of Bihar were denied the right to send 7 representatives to the Constituent Assembly. By classifying the aboriginals within the general community, they were left at the mercy of Hindu, who dominated the Congress Party. However, Jaipal Singh was elected a member of the Constituent Assembly on 23rd July 1946 on the initiative of Gandhiji.

In the Constituent Assembly, Jaipal Singh put forward his 'isolationist' proposal to solve the tribal problems and wanted the Scheduled Tribes to be added along with Schedule Areas invested with legislative and executive powers. Thakkar Bapa sharply differed with him. He pleaded for greater protection and for making available safeguard under the Indian Constitution for the non-Christian aborigines because there was none to look after them in the Constituent Assembly.^x A Sub-Committee headed by Thakkar Bapa and Jaipal Singh as its member was created to look into the problems of Adivasis and recommend remedial steps. Jaipal Singh knew fully well that the Sub-Committee had nothing to do with the creation of a new state of Jharkhand but he gave an impression to his followers that Jharkhand would soon be created by the Government of British India.^{xi}

At the same time, Jaipal Singh also tried to woo the Bengalis in the name of Greater Bengal so that the Jharkhand Provincial Party could win the majority of the seats in Chotanagpur and the SPs. Referring to the ill-treatment of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose by a certain section of Congressmen in Bihar, he tried to woo the Bengalis in his favour. His party workers started assaulting the Congress workers when they went to visit the Adivasi villages for election propaganda. This led to beginning of clash between the Congress and the Adivasis in Ranchi district. Another disturbing feature was that the small boys of tender age were engaged in propaganda work and shouted slogans 'Jharkhand Alag Prant' and even 'Pakistan Zindabad'.^{xii} The 'Tapkara incident'^{xiii} marked the zenith of the clash between the Congress and the Adivasis in which five Adivasis were killed on 10 March, 1946 but the Adivasi Mahasabha, Suharawardy, the PM of Bengal and Muslim League stated that the number of those killed as more than hundred and held the Congress responsible for it. This allegation was promptly refuted by the Congress.

The Adivasi Mahasabha managed to get only 3 seats out of 152 in the first elections in 1946. Out of frustration, the Mahasabha organized a rally on 14 April, 1946 to demand a separation of Chotanagpur and the SPs as a new state. In this situation, the Mahasabha decided to send a delegation to the Viceroy, the Cabinet Mission and the Governor to achieve their objective within three months. Meanwhile, Jaipal Singh extended full support to the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan.

In 1946, the non-inclusion of Adivasi in the Congress ministry of Bihar again created a good deal of discontent among them.^{xiv} A new portfolio 'Aboriginal uplift' was given to K.B. Sahay, the then revenue minister in the cabinet of Sri Krishna Sinha but it failed to satisfy the Adivasis. Meanwhile, the partition of India announcement made by the Viceroy, dejected the Adivasis as no notice was taken of their demands. However, the Congress-minded Adivasis formed an organization called Rashtriya Adivasi Mahasabha with the objective of countering anti-Congress and anti-national propaganda and worked for the amelioration of the economic condition of the Adivasis. The Adivasi Mahasabha failed in its objective as they were only 44.5% of population (Census of 1941) in Chotanagpur and the SPs. Besides, the absence of contiguous areas in Chotanagpur and opposition of non-Adivasis of Hazaribagh and neighbouring areas to a separate province of Jharkhand were major hindrance in the formation of a separate state. However, with Indian Independence on 15th August, 1947 came the concepts of democracy, secularism and adult franchise which gave the tribals a new sense of awareness of their rights and equality with others. The Constituent Assembly (1946-49) extensively discussed the necessity of providing proper safeguards for the tribals and incorporated far more radical provisions for security of the tribal interests in the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In fact, in pre independence era, the British Indian administration did not ever think of extending political rights to the tribals. In this context, the Congress was more progressive in comparison to few other political parties. Presumably the efforts of Gandhiji, Thakkar Bapa, Rajendra Prasad and Jawaharlal Nehru were instrumental in bringing about these changes. Several local leaders had been active in the tribal areas of Maharashtra, Central Provinces, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and the Constitutional provisions to safeguard the tribals were the result of their efforts and unconditional devotion.

The realignments of political forces after Independence made the ethnic character of the Adivasi Mahasabha redundant. On 5th March, 1949, a meeting of Adivasi Mahasabha held at Ranchi passed a resolution altering the Adivasi Mahasabha as new political outfit, the Jharkhand Party, with an aim to fight for the creation of a Jharkhand state. This new Party opened its membership to all Chotanagpuris, both tribals and non-tribals alike at least in principle. The

formation of Jharkhand Party was formally announced on 1st January 1950 at Jamshedpur, by Jaipal Singh with the sole objective of creating a separate province of Jharkhand within the framework of Indian Constitution.

End Notes

- i Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis of Dr. Sanjay Kumar submitted to the University of Delhi in 1999.
- ii *Ibid.*
- iii L.N. Rana, The Adivasi Mahasabha (1938-47); 'The Launching Pad of the Jharkhand Movement', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, 1912-13, pp. 397-403.
- iv K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society in India*, pp. 189-199; K.S. Singh, *Tribes, Partition and Independence*, p. 269.
- v *Ibid.*, p.197; quoted in Sanjay Kumar 'Adivasi Mahasabha (1935-1950) and the Dream of a Jharkhand State', *Social Science Probings*, Vol. 15, No. 1-2, Summer 2003, pp. 103-120.
- vi *Ibid.*
- vii K.K. Datta, *History of Freedom Movement in Bihar*, Vol. III, pp. 394-403.
- viii Home Poll File No. 69/43 Gandhiji's fast and official anxiety in Chotanagpur
- ix *Ibid.*
- x K.S.Singh, op.cit., p. 189.
- xi Igenes Kujur, *Jharkhand Dumuhane Par*, (Ranchi, 1955), p. 40; Cited in L.N.Rana, op. cit., p. 402.
- xii Home Poll. Spl. File No. 270/1947.
- xiii *Ibid.*
- xiv Home Poll. File No. 18/7/47, The CS, GOB to the SGOI, Ranchi 26 July, 1947.