

**Social Origin and Composition of the C.S.P. in Bihar with Special Reference to the
Bakasht Struggle of the Peasantry**

Dr. Ashok Kumar Singh,
Associate Professor,
Dyal Singh College (Eve.),
University of Delhi.

The social origin and composition of the Congress Socialist Party (hereafter C.S.P.) in Bihar during the period 1934-1948, had its roots firmly entrenched in certain historical factors and forces. Girish Mishra and Braj Kumar Pandey have rightly pointed out that the state of Bihar was neglected by the British because of its active role in the 1857 uprising and the recruitment to the army from there remained minimal.¹ They have further observed that because of the above factors the remittances from the army to the villages were not sufficient to fulfil the cash demands of the peasant households in any substantial manner.² Not only that, the people of Bihar were also at the receiving end during the British Raj as far as getting government jobs were concerned.

India's agricultural production and organization underwent fundamental and far-reaching changes during the colonial rule. Because of their ignorance of the Indian land-holding system, the British Raj introduced new forms of land tenures as a result of which peasants in Bihar were deprived of their secure hold over the lands they had been tilling for generations.³ They were subjected to perpetual danger of dispossession, rent enhancement and several other kinds of legal and illegal recoveries. It was this atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty that peasants could not make any investment in agriculture.⁴ In Bihar, the rights and privileges of the common cultivator were completely ignored. At the same time, neither the government nor the zamindars had any incentive to improve the provision of facilities for irrigation, drainage and flood control. Bihar remained, as before, predominantly agricultural, with over 70 percent of the population deriving its livelihood from cultivation of land. The

¹ Mishra, Girish and Braj Kumar Pandey, *Rammanohar Lohia and His Thinking*, Delhi, 2002, pp. 176-180.

² Ibid.,

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Ibid.,

proportion of the earning population dependent on agriculture went up from 78.7 percent in 1931 to 87.3 percent in 1951.⁵ In fact, upto the middle of the 20th century, the economy of the state was overwhelmingly rural, dependence on land was increasing and agricultural productivity was stagnating. Land remained the primary economic resource and the struggle for various rights in the produce of the soil formed the backdrop to much of the history of the socialist movement in Bihar during the period 1934-48.

It is in this background of an under-developed state of Bihar that the social origins and composition of the C.S.P. in the state need to be analyzed. Between the years 1936-39, the peasants of Bihar were actively engaged in various agrarian struggles and raised several burning issues which included the demand of Zamindari abolition. It was during this period that the Bakasht movement was started in the province which soon spread to many districts, notably Monghyr, Gaya, Shahabad, Saran and Darbhanga. It would be pertinent to mention that Bakasht lands were Zamindar's *Khasland* which the occupancy tenants had lost to Zamindars by virtue of non-payment of rents.⁶ It was cultivated by tenants as share-croppers who were mostly low-caste Dhanuks, Koeris, Ahris and in some places by upper caste Maithil Brahmins, Bhumihars and Rajputs. They had to pay a fixed proportion of the produce as rent to the landowner. The landlords started evicting the cultivating tenants, as they were afraid that they could acquire occupancy rights. This led to the beginning of a series of Bakasht struggles in different parts of the province under the banner of Kisan Sabha and the able guidance provided by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, Jayaprakash Narayan, Ramnandan Mishra, Karyananda Sharma, Ganga Sharan Sinha and others. Socialists cadres were in the forefront of these movements. It started with the Bakasht movement in Barahiya Tal in Monghyr district in the month of June 1936 and continued upto the middle of 1939. Here the tenants were mostly low caste Mallah (Boatmen) and Dhanuks. Earlier, they were the owners of the land but lost it to the local Zamindars in rent suits. Karyananda Sharma, who later became a prominent communist leader, launched a movement against evictions and the tenants started harvesting the crop. He was arrested and there was great deal of repression. But the movement caught on. There were hundreds of volunteers, both men and women, who

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ Chandra, Bipan Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Panikkar and Sucheta Mahajan, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 349.

were monitoring the movement in the absence of Karyananda Sharma.⁷ An important feature of the Barahiya Tal Bakasht struggle was large participation of women from lower caste tenant (locally known as Raiyans) household.⁸ Kisan conferences were held at several places in the Tal area such as Monghyr in October 1936, Sheikhpura in February 1937, Lakhisarai in October 1937 and again in November 1938 and Pali in February 1939 to discuss and chart out the future course of action. Around one hundred innocent peasants were mercilessly assaulted by the musclemen of local Zamindars while coming to attend the Lakhisarai Kisan conference under the leadership of Panchanand Sharma. On the other hand, the peasants remained non-violent.⁹

The C.S.P. in Bihar further strengthened its bond with the masses through active participation in Kisan Sabha led peasant struggle. In the winter of 1938 Bakasht Satyagraha started in Reora in Gaya district which received countrywide attention.¹⁰ The Zamindars at Reora used to compel the peasants of all castes to undergo forced labour (Begar). Yadunandan Sharma, the Kisan Sabha leader from Gaya district opened a camp at Reora and started imparting training to Kisan volunteers. During the course of Satyagraha, Swami Sahajanand also visited Reora and addressed a large public meeting attended by more than twenty-five thousand peasants which included both men and women and student Kisan volunteers.¹¹ The women at Reora participated in large numbers in the struggle and bore the brunt of both Zamindar's *Julum* (excesses) and police brutalities. Their slogans rant the air-*Zamindari Ka Nash ho, Angrezi raj ka nash ho, Kisan raj Kayam ho, Inquilab Zindabad*. What was also remarkable at Reora was that the local rent-paying cultivating peasants and their labourers (*Halwahas or Raiyans*) together fought against the landlords and even went to jail. Finally, the District Magistrate struck a compromise with the peasants and it was agreed that 850 bighas of land would be restored to the tenants and the remaining 150 bighas would go to the zamindars. Certainly, this was a partial victory which gave an impetus to the movement.¹²

⁷ Saraswati, Swami Sahajanand *Mera Jeevan Sangharsha*, Delhi, 1985, p. 314.

⁸ Ibid., p. 315.

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Sahajanand Saraswati, Swami *Kisan Kaise Ladte Hain?* (Hindi), Delhi, Granth Shilpi, 2002, p. 91.

¹¹ Sahajanand, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-319.

¹² *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 24th August 1937; also Report of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), 1938-39.

The Bakasht struggle in Dekuli village under Bahera P.S. in Darbhanga district witnessed intense fight between the peasants and the Zamindars. Hundreds of rent-paying cultivators were jailed. Dekuli's brave Kisans continued their struggle and Satyagraha for three years under the leadership of veteran socialist, Ramnandan Mishra who had recently returned home on being released from Jail. He was actively supported by the prominent local Kisan Sabha activist, Satyadev Rai.¹³ The Zamindar who also acted as the village moneylender (*Mahajan*) was socially boycotted by the locals and agricultural labourers refused to work on his field.

The C.S.P. in Bihar played a decisive role in radicalizing the rural masses through the active participation of its cadre in the Kisan Sabha and the peasant movements and thereby helped in building a strong anti-imperialist front. The C.S.P.'s social composition cut across caste barriers, class distinction and gender differentiation at several places where both the rent-paying peasants, marginal farmers and the landless labourers (*Raiyans, Harwaha and Charwaha*) along with their women-folk fought unitedly against the onslaught of foreign rule and their Indian counterpart- the landowning Zamindars.

The Bakasht struggle at Majhiyawan (1939) in Gaya district under the Zamindari Raj of Amawan-Tekari illustrated gender perspective of the movement. The upper caste Bhumihar women of Majhiyawan were in the forefront of the satyagraha.¹⁴ They were later joined by the Gwala /Ahir and Koeri women of the surrounding villages. What is to be noted that the peasants of Majhiyawan were Bhumihars, an upper caste to which the local landlords also belonged. Therefore, such instances of agrarian unrest subsumed within themselves elements of conflicts between the classes of haves and have-nots. At the same time, intra-caste conflicts overlapped the boundaries of what Andre B'etille calls 'communities',¹⁵ at least at the local level of village. The gender perspective of the agrarian conflict was further exemplified by the fact that when men were thrown in jail, women resisted the landlord's *slathials* (musclemen) and finally, the latter had to retreat. At Sandha Mauja in the same zamindari of Raja Harihar Prasad Narayan Singh, Bhumihar women broke the police barricades, ploughed the field and thereby established occupancy rights. The Amwari

¹³ *Janata*, 18th March 1940.

¹⁴ Saraswati, *Mera Jeevan Sangharsha*, op. cit., 1985, pp. 320-21.

¹⁵ B'eteille, *Andre, Caste, Class and Power*, OUP, Bombay, 1966, p. 208.

agrarian Satyagraha (1939) in the Saran district was led by prominent socialist and Kisan Sabha leader Rahul Sankrityayan and Rambriksha Benipuri. The struggle involved fine women Satyagrahis who were arrested along with others. Many women processionists wearing red clothes paraded the streets of Siwan during the 14 kilometers long march of peasants from Amwari to the local town.¹⁶ Darampura village under Silao p.s. in Patna district witnessed the heroic struggle of Sitaram, a local woman who led the Satyagrah.¹⁷ Under her able leadership, all the women and children occupied the threshing floor (*Khalihan*) and thwarted the attempts of the Zamindar to take away the crop. The women and children of Darampura were taken to jail but they resumed their struggle after returning to their villages.

The events during late 1930s and early years of the next decade dramatically changed the scenario both inside the country and in the international arena which in turn influenced the course of history at the national as well as provincial level. In Bihar, it was Jayaprakash Narayan who strengthened the cause of the peasantry by building up strong and independent peasant organizations despite opposition from the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC). It had the desired result which further consolidated the Kisan movement in the province and the membership of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) in Bihar had risen to 2,50,000 by the time of Comilla Conference (1938). With Jayaprakash's able assistance and strong support, Swami Sahajanand defeated his rivals and foiled their game plan to capture the AIKS. Half of the members of the Executive Committee elected at Comilla came from the CSP.¹⁸ Again, it was Jayaprakash Narayan who had the entire Kisan strength of Bihar behind him which constituted more than half of the total membership of the All-India organization.

After the success of Reora peasant satyagraha, the fourth annual conference of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) was held at Gaya in April 1939. Acharya Narendra Deva presided over the conference. The political resolution adopted here stressed the need for building United

¹⁶ Saraswati, *Mera Jeevan Sangharsha*, op. cit., 1985, pp. 320-21.

¹⁷ Saraswati, *Kisan Kaise Ladte Hain?* op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁸ CID Report, File No. 12, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch, 18th May 1938, West Bengal State Archives (WSA).

Front between the Congress and the Kisan Sabha.¹⁹ More than a lakh kisans attended the Gaya Conference and the largest contingent of *Kisan Sevak Dal* came from Jahanabad area.

The outbreak of the Second World War and the subsequent German attack on Soviet Union on 21 June 1941 drastically altered the relationship between the left forces. A section of left oriented workers in Bihar adopted radical postures. The war was now People's War. This changed attitude of CPI affected the course of the peasant movement in the province. Instead of exhorting the peasantry against the British rule, the communists tried to mobilize them in its favour. The Congress Socialists, on their part, favoured maintaining and further strengthening the united front with the nationalist forces to drive out the imperialist power. They wanted to use the might of the peasantry against the colonial rulers. Both the Congress and the CSP refused to accept the plea that any weakening of the Britishers would facilitate the victory of the fascist forces. Consequently, the peasant movement from now onwards was channelized in two diametrically opposite directions- one led by swami Sahajanand and his lieutenants, Yadunandan Sharma and Yamuna Karjee and the other by prominent Congress and CSP leaders of the province.²⁰ The bulk of the kisan Sabha cadres had swung to the side of the Socialists and the nationalists in Bihar. As expected, repression was let loose on the Kisan Sabha and particularly, its Socialist cadres who were opposed to the policy of collaboration with the British authorities.

¹⁹ AIKS Papers, 1936-47, New Delhi, (This resolution was drafted by Jayaprakash Narayan and P.C. Joshi).

²⁰ Gopal, Surendra, *Peasant Movement in Bihar during the Second World War*, in Sources of Indian History, Volume 4: Peasant and Tribal unrest, Indian Historical Records Committee, National Archives of India (NAI), Delhi, 2013, pp. 191-92.

References:-

B'eteille, Andre, *Caste, Class and Power*, Bombay, OUP, 1966.

Chandra, Bipan, (*et. al*), *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin, 1989.

Mishra, Girish & Braj Kumar Pandey, *Rammanchar Lohia and His Thinking*, Delhi, Pragati Publications, 2002.

Saraswati, Swami Sahajanand, *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh* (Hindi) Delhi, PPH, 1985.

_____, *Kisan Kaise Ladte Hain?* (Hindi), Delhi, Granth Shilpi, 2002.