

NON-PARTY POLITICAL PROCESS- A PATHWAY OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: JEHANABAD EXPERIENCE

Debarati Tarafder*

The growth of non-party political process who have been trying to educate, conscientise, and mobilized different marginalized section particularly the oppressed poor, is the most important development and striking feature of contemporary social reality in India since the 1960s. They are working mostly at the micro-level, associating and identifying themselves with the weaker sections, adopted action oriented approach and evolve one institutional mechanism through which attempts have been made to articulate the needs of the marginalized and to empower them. So the mainstream society is forced to respond. The ultimate aim of non-party political process is contributing in its own way to the broader process of social transformation.

In Indian context Non-Party Political Process was basically a Post-Emergency phenomenon. In the past the organizations and movements that are alternatively called 'grass roots movements', 'micro movements', 'new social movements', or simply 'social movements', 'social action groups' or 'movements groups' etc are synonymous with this concept.¹ In the most of the writings these terms used interchangeably, but in general it gave "the reference to particular genre of social movement which became visible and acquired political salience in the mid 1970s and since been active in variety of issues which, in their own perception

*** Assistant Professor, Dhola Mahavidyalaya & Research Scholar, Rabindra Bharati University**

¹D. L. Sheth, 'Globalisation and the New Politics of Micro-Movements', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol-39, No-1, 3rd-9th January, 2004, p. 45

are__directly or indirectly related to what they see as their long term goal of democratizing development and transforming societies.”²

In assessing the role of non-party political process in society and in the process of social transformation, some relevant and basic questions came into mind. What are the main and basic issues that the non-party political process generally addressed as a instrument of social change? To deal with these issues What kind of relationship develop in between the mainstream power politics of state and civil society and the non-party politics of masses at the grass-root level? Are these antithetical to one another or are they complementary? If they are neither hostile to each other by definition nor instrumental reinforcements, do they run parallel? These are very complicated questions, because the relation between main stream politics of state and civil society and the non-party politics of masses at grass-root is very complex and controversial issue and it has multi-dimension. It is dynamic and ever changing in nature. The reason is that the main stream politics and their controlling agencies always tried to co-opt, control and curb the action of the non-party groups according to their changing needs. This article seeks to focus on the role of non-party political process on social transformation as well as its dynamic relationship with the mainstream power-politics of society in the light of the experience of the Mazdoor Kisan Sangrame Samity (MKSS) in Jehanabad district of central Bihar.

WHY NON-PARTY POLITICAL PROCESS EMERGED IN INDIA:

“Participation is the crowning concept of liberal paradigm of progress, equality and democracy”.³ India has a long history of democratic and representative form of Government. In this form of government primary importance lies on the participation of people in the politics as well as the governmental process to ensure the socio-economic and political transformation of the people in the society.

² This kind of definition of non-party political process explain in three major articles of Rajni Kothari (‘Non-Party Political Process), Harsh Sethi (Groups in a New Politics of Transformation), D.L. Sheth (Grass Roots Initiatives in India). All these article published in the same volume of *Economic and Political Weekly* (Vol-19) in the year 1984 which is complied in the article of D. L. Sheth, ‘Globalisation and the New Politics of Micro-Movements’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol-39, No-1, 3rd- 9th January, 2004, p. 45

³ Rajni Kothari, ‘Non-Party Political Process’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol-19, No-5, 4th February, 1984, p.216.

Since 1947, after the end of the colonial rule, independent India started getting recognition as a democratic country which created a hope among the masses. They thought that this government would take care of their aspirations and ensure their privileges. But in the course of time these hopes of development were not fulfilled and it created some dissatisfaction among the masses. They started searching for an alternative development model that is more humanitarian, equitable and people-centered. Simultaneously, gradual deterioration and decline of the existing structures and institutions of modern nation-states was also responsible behind the growth of non-party political process.

In this circumstance non-party politics emerged as an alternative model with their participatory approach, people's mobilizing capacity, closeness to grass-roots and better insights into the needs of the people.

LEGACY OF NON-PARTY POLITICAL PROCESS IN BIHAR:

The non-party political formations or non-party political domain is a new development paradigm of today's world. It identified as alternative development model that is humanizing, equitable and environmentally sustainable, a people-centered development with greater people's participation.

The nature non-party political process has undergone considerable transformation in recent times with the changing nature of society and its problem and developed with a more radical approach towards the contemporary socio-economic and political environment. It helps the common people to develop a distinctive sector within state and civil society. They have emerged as a viable institutional framework and a well defined 'third sector'- next to government sectors and private enterprises, to serve as a catalyst for development and change.

In the pre-independence period Bihar had witnessed several non-party political initiatives within the frame work of nationalist movement or other movements as well as communist movement and socialist movement under the banner of some radical groups who were largely instrumental in building a number of trade-unions and kisan sabhas at grass-root level. The most note-worthy feature of these initiatives was relatively categorized them in political terms into pro-government

and pro-nationalist camps. Equally significant was the crystallization of their ideological choices into ‘Gandhian liberal reformism’ versus ‘radical left revolutionism’ that indicated clearly distinct alternative paths for social transformation.⁴

In the post- independence period Bihar was over flooded by the “Sarvodayaist Ideology” of Vinoba Bhave and experienced ‘Bhoodan’, ‘Gramdan’ Movements. In early 1970s the CPI and Socialist gave a call for ‘Land Grab Movement’ and in 1974 ‘Total revolution’ of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) were also introduced to bring some changes in the grass-root level in Bihar. But the whole exercise was simply slow and fizzled out with a whimper. The retreat of Vinoba Bhave and JP was followed by the advent of the political crisis during mid-seventies. During this period the activities of the voluntary groups took up a new cutting edge and assumed some sort of militant character under the guidance of different naxalite groups. The voluntary activities of these naxalite groups not only challenged the hitherto undisputed domination of the dominant caste/class of the Bihar’s society, but also sought change of system through revolution based on violent methods. But the activities of the naxalite groups were not gladly accepted by the masses because of their violent technique and underground nature. Apart from that, the voluntary movement also got a serious setback during the declaration of ‘State Emergency’ in 1975 which continued until 1977.

BIRTH OF MAZDOOR KISAN SANGRAME SAMITY:

Following the State Emergency, the country’s political scenario changed and the Janata Party came into power in 1977. The Janata Government (1977-80) came to power as a reaction against the Emergency and its black laws, but it soon began enacting its own black laws. So from the late 1970s India as well as Bihar experienced the emergence of a new type of voluntary movement where a segment of young political activist who had participated in the JP movement found that unless there was a powerful agrarian movement with the agricultural working class as its nucleus, nothing would happen.⁵ In the early 80s, a small band of committed

⁴D. N. Dhanagare, ‘Action Groups and Social Transformation in India’, *Lokayan Bulletin*, 6:5, 1988, pp. 40-41.

⁵An Interview with Dr, Vinayan published in *Lokayan Bulletin*, 4: ¾, 1986, p.84.

activists began organizing rural poor and most of them came from ‘Chattra Yuba Sangharsh Vahini’ and other stream of JP Movement.⁶

In this background Mazdoor Kisan Sangrame Samity (MKSS) took birth in post independent Bihar under the competent leadership of Dr. Vinayan which was remembered for its role in the process of social transformation of rural Bihar through non-party political process. Dr. Vinayan in a product of JP Movement and was born on 19th September, 1948. He is a revolutionary in his own right. He studied medicine. But the plight of Bihar’s oppressed people disturbed him and so he decided to dedicate his life to their service. The main objective of MKSS was to establish a society based on socialism, humanism and secularism and free from exploitation.

ROLE OF MKSS IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION:

Jehanabad district of Bihar had become quite well-known all over the country due to the mass killings which took place there, mostly of Harijan agricultural labours. However what was not so well-known was that at the same time Jehanabad also witnessed most unprecedented mobilization of agricultural labours and poor peasants, the articulation of their demands and the struggle to realize their aspirations.

In the post-independence period number of Government Act was enacted but the laws concerning agricultural labours had remained largely on paper. This was because of the changing nature and pattern of mobilization by the political parties. In the contemporary dominant political culture politics is all about capture of State power through electoral process. So the sector of the population which do not form a viable political constituency and the issue directly concerning them, get left by the wayside.⁷

In these circumstance the non-party political process have made their biggest contribution. They trying to work with the people and concentrated on the issues that the parties have not much care about. They find out those issues which were connected to the day to day life of the people

⁶ By a special Correspondence, ‘Agrarian Movement in Jehanabad’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol-21, No-19, 10th May, 1986, p.814.

⁷ Dialogues: On Threats To The Non-Party Political Process, *Lokayan*, Vol-3, No-1, 1985, p. 44

which ultimately help to establish the dignity of man as human beings. MKSS did the same thing in the Jehanabad district of Central Bihar. Before MKSS number of political parties like Congress Socialist, the CPI and its Khet Mazdoor Union, the Khet Mazdoor Sabha led by Jagjivan Ram and Sarvodayites had a presence in Jehanabad, but none of these were able to mobilize the agricultural labourers into a militant organization⁸ due to their narrow social base. So when MKSS was formed as a front organization of the CPI (ML) (Party Unity) and began organizing the rural poor, the dalits and landless agricultural labourers through meetings, camps and pamphlets, the response was overwhelming. Dr. Vinayan, the founder of MKSS began mobilizing the peasants in this area against the landlords. They united the rural poor on three issues:

- Agricultural labourers must be paid the statutory minimum wage and illegally occupied Khas lands must be redistributed among the landless.
- Popular resistance to be built up against dacoits.
- Protection of the honor and dignity of their women folk.⁹

The first issue on which agitation was launched was to demand for minimum wages and end to social exploitation of women.¹⁰ But there was another fact which needs to highlight that the poor and dalits began organizing themselves under the militant organization, not only on the question of land distribution or payment of minimum wages, but on the question of ‘izzat’ (dignity). Once they organized themselves in some form, issues of lands and wages were automatically taken up.¹¹ The landlords and rich peasant immediately retaliated with brutal attacks on individuals linked to the MKSS.

But with the support from a section of upper caste of the society MKSS was establish a strong hold in Jehanabad and enabled it to expand its activity. Gradually it's acquired a multi-caste character and articulates the demands and aspiration of both the ‘mazdoor’ and ‘kisans’.¹²

⁸ Indu Bharati, ‘Mobilization of Agricultural Labour: Jehanabad Experience’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol- 25, No-22, 2nd June, 1990, p. 1183.

⁹ ‘A Fact Finding Report on Arwal Massacre’, Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), Calcutta, 11th May, 1986, p. 6.

¹⁰ By a special Correspondence, ‘Agrarian Movement in Jehanabad’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol- 21, No- 19, 10th May, 1986, p. 814.

¹¹ Arun Kumar, ‘Violence and Political Culture: Politics of Ultra Left in Bihar’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol- 38, No-47, 22nd November, 2003, p. 4979.

¹² By a special Correspondence, ‘Agrarian Movement in Jehanabad’, *op. cit.*, p. 814.

Soon MKSS was powerful enough to launch a much bigger movement for minimum wages. Village level strikes were organized at the time when the demand for labour was at its peak. To handle the situation of scarcity of agricultural laborers the landlords tried to obtain labour supply from outside the village, but MKSS laid siege over the village which prevented the landlords from doing so. The MKSS managed to disperse the workers on strike to other parts of the district. A siege was laid to the area to prevent the Bhoomi Sena and Rajput landlords from importing labourers from outside. In some villages, Kurmi landlords who had given up the practice of working on land were forced to use their own labour and that of their womenfolk. But production also suffered. Often the MKSS supporters would disrupt work or reap the crop when ripe¹³.

The Kurmi rich peasants were alarmed because it challenged their hegemony. They tried to control the situation by forming the dreaded Bhoomi Sena which was composed by the unemployed lumpen Kurmi youth of the nearby towns. This Bhoomi Sena went on a rampage, looting, raping and killing.¹⁴

The activities of MKSS had to break the rank of Kurmi peasants because of prolonged confrontation with the mazdoors and the economic burden of maintaining the Bhoomi Sena whose writ anyway ran only within the confines of the village and attacked on their womenfolk. As a result soon the more powerful landlords were seeking a settlement. In early 1985 the Bhoomi Sena formally surrendered to MKSS.¹⁵ The MKSS asked for return of all property and land looted and compensation for the assets destroyed. Both side agreed to withdrew number of cases pending against each other.¹⁶ All of them agreed to pay minimum wages of 3kg/day and end all social exploitation. A joint demand was made for the withdrawal of all police camp.¹⁷

This capitulation of the Bhoomi Sena was a major victory for the MKSS and after that number of changes took place in Jehanabad. Firstly, their supporters began to return to their villages and started rebuilding their homes. Secondly, the compensation was to be settled and revised. Thirdly, production had once again been resumed. Fourthly, the middle and small peasants began

¹³By a special Correspondence, 'Agrarian Movement in Jehanabad', *op. cit.*, p. 814..

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 815

¹⁷*Ibid.*

to flock to the organization while the landless would invite the activists to form units in new areas.¹⁸

The other issues on which the MKSS based their struggle were ending illegal capture of gairmajarua land by land lords and its distributions to the landless, fishing rights for Dalit labourers in the village pond, distribution of surplus land among the landless and preventing dacoities¹⁹.

The illegal capture of gairmajarua land by the landlords was a very crucial issue in Jehanabad. To solve the problem of land disputes MKSS proceeded step by step. At first it made an appeal before the local village committee and then 'jan-panchayat' which was nothing but a meeting of villagers and not any established institution. The MKSS also organized demonstrations before authorities²⁰.

The other question was the fishing rights of labourers. Fishing rights had been one of the most sensitive issues in Jehanabad for a long time. During that time fishing was the exclusive prerogative of the big and the rich. The labourers and poor peasants had no right to the yield of fish obtained from village pond. So there were struggle for acquisition of fishing rights, which meant a lot to them.²¹

MKSS began the struggle by organizing the local labourers on the issue. At first MKSS issued a declaration to the effect that no contractor or businessman would be allowed to bid for fishing the village pond. Thereafter, the villagers, mostly agricultural labourers took half of the fish yield from the pond as wage and deposited the other half with the jan-panchayat. The first day's yield was distributed among all the villagers. Traditionally skilled fishermen were employed whenever required and in such cases the yield was divided equally among the fishermen and the villagers.²²

The other issues concerning the unity of the workers and landed small and middle peasantry came to the forefront. The wage rates had gone up sharply almost everywhere. This made the economic condition of the small and middle peasant more vulnerable. There was danger that the

¹⁸ By a special Correspondence, 'Agrarian Movement in Jehanabad', *op. cit.*, p. 815.

¹⁹ Indu Bharati, 'Mobilization of Agricultural Labour: Jehanabad Experience', *op. cit.*, p.1183.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

sale of their tiny plots by small peasants would accelerate. The main buyers were those sections of the peasantry more closely integrated with the urban markets, especially the Yadavas who supplied milk and vegetables on commercial terms. The other section consisted of households whose members had regular jobs in the organized sector as petty bureaucrats, school teachers or small contractors.²³

At the beginning MKSS asked the workers to change slightly lower wages to check this instigation of the small peasantry which proved abortive. It merely meant that such employers would not get any workers when the demand for labors was high or would get it only when the demand of the richer peasants had been met. Hence uniform wage rates had come to prevail.²⁴

All these socio-economic issues which MKSS was tried to addressed and solve in its own way. These activities of MKSS initiated the process of social change of rural Bihar which creates a hope for bigger transformation in future. But it was not so easy, because the way MKSS chose was full of hindrances and fraught with difficulties. Working at the grass-root level sometimes the non-party political groups started asserting themselves against the local elites and sometimes against State machinery as well as periodically against the local unit of different political parties in the area of their operation and when this process gained some strength____the political parties and local elites started feeling insecure.²⁵ In this process sometime they adopted the militant style of politics which obviously could not be tolerated by the political parties. As a consequence they faced repression from the main stream political institutions. The experience MKSS reflected the same one. Besides working on the above lines the MKSS also launched counter action to defend Dalit labourers from the violent oppression of private armies of upper and backward caste landlords and rich farmers. In their struggle for agricultural labourers, MKSS not only faced such armies but also the armed might of the State. In fact when the MKSS by its determined effort were able to defeat one of the most notorious caste armies, Bhoomi Sena of the Kurmies, the government started patronizing the Brahmarshi Sena of the Bhumihars who found an opportunity to assert their hegemony.²⁶

²³ By a special Correspondence, 'Agrarian Movement in Jehanabad', *op. cit.*, p. 815

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Dialogues: On Threats To The Non-Party Political Process, *op.cit.*, p. 45

²⁶ Indu Bharati, 'Mobilization of Agricultural Labour: Jehanabad Experience', *op. cit.*, p. 1184

The Jehanabad experience point out that in the environment of social inequality the role of non-party politics is much needed because of their people oriented politics and the positive role in social transformation. It also showed lacunas and deficiencies and exploitation by a specific group of people of the larger down trodden poor masses in the prevailing socio-economic system which gives rise to the growth of dissatisfaction and in turn paves way for growth of non-party political process. Its close association and accessibility at the grass-root level make them popular to the poor and downtrodden mass of the society to whom the main stream politics of different political parties has little or no access. So when the non-party groups perceive their activities in political sphere, it gives rise to suspicion in the state machinery and political parties against even legitimate and bona fide acts carried out by the non-party groups. The reason is the popularity of non-party politics amongst the down trodden and poor classes gives rise to the fear of depletion of vote bank which ultimately means loss of power. So in this party based political environment the 'non-party' transformed into 'anti-party'.²⁷ Such distrust and suspicion paves way for struggle where the mainstream politics of State and political parties by dint of superior power takes recourse to repressive measures to subjugate the non-party political process. Whereas non-party political groups acts as a messiah for the poor, the State Machinery become an object of ire owing to their irresponsible and repressive measures, which does not in any way, address the actual issues at the grass-root level. The relationship between the non-party politics and the political party dominated mainstream politics of society has thus been marked by mutual suspicion and hostility, because in the democratic country like India parliamentary politics is based on electoral system and it always tried to protect the interest of the parties and not the interest of the common masses. All the political activities are done with the broader perspective to win the election and not guided by the demand and aspirations of the common masses. Sometimes non-party groups also misinterpret the political parties which also responsible the vitiating the political atmosphere. In this tug of war between the non-party politics and main-stream party politics, ultimately the mass movement suffers and as a result, the common, repressed, down trodden masses for whose aspirations the non-party political groups are formed, in most cases is getting limited success only. Sometimes non-party political group paves way for development, but it is till issue of discussion that both the non-party political groups and political parties need to learn more how to work together and tackle the urgent problems, rather than fight each other.

²⁷ Dialogues: On Threats To The Non-Party Political Process, *op.cit.*, p. 45