

Mahatma, Swami, Baba & Peasants: 1917 – 1922

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The present paper is an attempt to analyse and compare the basic nature and characteristics of three peasant-movements led separately by Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vidyanand and Baba Ram Chandra Das. In the process it focuses upon their impacts upon the policies of the Congress and tries to analyse the motive of the masses.

Gandhi's Champaran Satyagrah was successful. Whether Gandhi made Champaran Satyagrah successful or the synthetic dye made it, it is a matter of another debate and I am not concerned with it.¹ Gandhi's advent in Champaran and his style of working gave him the name of 'Mahatma'.² First of all the villagers of Champaran called him 'Mahatma' or a divine person.³ Waves of rumours arose in the North- Western Bihar and South- Eastern U.P. Stories of charismatic works and miraculous powers of Gandhi floated in air around this area. He was portrayed as a super-man, semi-divine personality.⁴ Out of their misery and hope, varied sections of the Indian people seem to have fashioned their own images of Gandhi, particularly in the earlier days. Thus peasants imagined that "Gandhi was the only solution for their problems'. He could end zamindars' exploitations, agricultural labourers believed that he would 'provide holdings for them. 'Gandhi appeared as a myth among the rural people. Exactly neither these illiterate people knew about Gandhi that 'who he was', nor 'what he was', but they knew that he was the only 'man' who could erase their sufferings and could create new fortune for their forthcoming generations.⁵ Divinity was imposed upon him and people were ready to follow his orders. This sensation for Gandhi, which was created by the rumours, paved the way for the non- political leaders who came in front and grabbed the situation in the name of Gandhi and religion.

We can see a different pattern of peasant mobilizations by these 'Sadhus' or 'Swamis' or 'Babas'. They preached for some sort of militant resistance among the peasants. Swami Vidyanand and Baba Ram Chandra Das, both declared their links with Gandhi and in the name of Gandhi and God, they easily organized the peasants. On the other hand, at the same time, Gandhi was involved in constructive programmes among the rural folks of Champaran and elsewhere. Gandhi was realizing that the mass was not prepared for any 'Satyagrah'. So he was trying to develop proper mindset among the people for further "Satyagrah". 'Gandhi-type leadership with strong religious overtones was something like a historical necessity in this period, is indicated'.⁶

Another factor for the emergence of these 'Babas' or 'Swamis' was the hesitation of the Congress leadership. As the Congress was dominated and sponsored by the landed giants of the country, it never tried to tackle properly the cause of peasants. Each demand of the peasants was against the interests of the zamindars. So the Congress was hesitating to lead them. When the non-political 'sadhus' started the movements, the Congress ought to have supported them. But it remained indifferent towards these movements. So these 'sadhus' got a fair chance to preach militancy among the peasants.

Thirdly, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 and the Survey and Settlement Operations of 1896-1907 were also crucial factors. During the settlement operations the peasants became familiar to their rights given in BTA and they started to proclaim these rights. At least the demand of the rent-receipt was their most genuine demand. On the other hand the zamindars with the help of local administration tried to settle this demand by force. So the atmosphere for militancy automatically developed.

II

The peasant protest, against the Raj Darbhanga emerging around 1920, was the outcome of the prevailing poor management and oppression of the officials of the Raj. The increasing demographic pressure and economic causes.⁷ The peasants' protests emerging before 1920s were sporadic, small-scale and localized. But under the leadership of Swami Vidyanand a series of strong protests emerged. Swami Vidyanand or Bishu Bharan Prasad was a Pachhimaha Kayastha resident of Sughar village of Saran district. He was a member of a reasonable well-off family occupying more than 30 bighas of occupancy land. This movement got heavy impetus due to the leadership and organizational skills of Vidyanand. He modeled himself as Gandhi and combined traditional religious appeal with political fervor to organize a political campaign.

In June 1919 Vidyanand took part in a meeting at Narar village in Madhubani. After his visit to Narar, the villagers gave a petition to the Lieutenant-governor of Bihar and Orissa, mentioning that the Darbhanga Raj was denying them their customary rights to the fruits and timber of their holdings. The situation in Madhubani (Sub-division) was more crucial and this occurred in the last decade when the Raj Darbhanga cancelled the tax collection agreements with the 'patterdars' of Kaluahi and Kapsia villages and new agreements were made with some Jayanath Singh. Records of the Darbhanga Raj show that this new arrangement was done for better tax collection management, but the 'oral tradition' reflects another story.

A song was composed in Maithili at that time.⁸

Bhai rao Julum Bitai Chhao, Julum Bitai chhao

Rukh-Sukh Me Kaluahi Karail Kao, Jhapri Me Kapsia

Bhai rao Julum Bitai Chhao. Julum Bitai Chhao

Pattah Tori Jamedari Lelkao, Jaynath Singh Jamedar Rao

Bhai rao Julum Bitai Chhao, Julum Bitai chhao.

The above song makes it clear that the Darbhanga Raj was frequently renewing the old 'pattas' and a new group of 'pattedars' was emerging. For their maximum profits these new pattedars denying the traditional rights of the ryots on the fruits and timber on the land. The situation was becoming critical and in this situation it was easier for Swami Vidyanand to organize a movement.

In 1917, the peasants of Madhubani had seen the success of Mahatma in Champaran satyagarh and thus they were easily organized under the banner of Vidyanand.

The peasantry in India, as a whole, comprised landless labourers, poor or small peasants, middle peasants and rich peasants and zamindars. Poor and middle peasants suffered due to the exploitation and oppression of the Darbhanga Raj and petty landlords (sometimes pattedars). In addition to land rent, zamindars were profited from the collection of 'abwabs'.⁹ The ryots were forced to supply without any sort of compensation, labourers, ploughs, carts for the cultivation of zamindar's lands. These were called 'begar' and the ryots had to do these 'begars' to the zamindars. Alongwith these begars the ryots were forced to pay free of cost ghee, oil and vegetables to the "Kamat (local office of the landlords) and amlas."¹⁰ On the other hand the zamindars used to settle the former (traditional) grazing lands for cultivation.

Another factor was the prevailing scarcity of grain, which occurred in the last two decades. The villagers of Narar were mentally ready to revolt against the amlas of the Darbhanga Raj. In 1919 Vidyanand drafted a petition on behalf of Narar and seventeen other villages.¹¹ The manager of the Rahika circle of the Darbhanga Raj, reported that the grievances took shape when Vidyanand came on the scene.¹² In the last month of 1919 and in 1920 Vidyanand continued his campaign in Darbhanga and other districts. In December he went to Sonbarsa (now Saharsa district) and started his movement against Grant, a European planter and in favour of tenants.¹³ Here Vidyanand also tried to get support of the Bihar

Congress. Initially the Congressmen showed interest in his campaign, but as his campaign gathered mass support and became too much critical of the landed interest, the Bihar Congress started becoming indifferent.¹⁴

As part of his campaign vidyanand led an agitation against E.C. Danby, the owner of the Dholi Indigo factory. The local organizer of the agitation was Saudagar Sahu, a money lender, and held more than 100 bighas of land. He was a rival of Danby in the money lending market, where, Danby usually used to offer money at lower rate of interest than Sahu. This campaign was broadened due to the co-relation among the indigenous money lenders.¹⁵

Vidyanand and his followers were not confined to drafting petitions and applications. Like other followers of Gandhi, he encouraged peasant militancy in his speeches. Vidyanand's speeches encouraged peasants to violence and peasants started cutting down trees and using the wood. Actually cutting trees was an act of defiance of the landlord's claims to exclusive rights to trees and timber. Vidyanand's movement generated uneasiness among the zamindars of the Tirhut Division.¹⁶

His call for movement was double edged : one concerned the characteristic dishonesty and oppressiveness of the amlas of the zamindars and the other arose from tenancy rights emerging from the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. Along with these causes, the Survey and Settlement Operations of the period from 1896 to 1907 had sharpened the tenants' awareness of their rights. The government fees regarding 'mutation' and 'transfer of land' also increased and it became irritating both for the poor and wealthy peasants.¹⁷

Vidyanand successfully utilized these grievances for attracting large number of peasants to his meetings. He inspired ryots to refer against the landlords and he promised them to fulfill all their desires.¹⁸ Swami asked the share-croppers to pay the rent in cash, rather to share half of the produce. Again he also told them to collect proper rent receipts. The demand for rent receipts became a bone of contention between ryots and the landlords.

The nature and base of Vidyanand's movement varied from locality to locality. He won support from a wide range of the social structure. In response to the movement, the Darbhanga Raj decided to pay the village staff more, to reduce the mutation fee from 25% to 10%, to waive out some of the estate's claims to the use of timber, to permit tenants to build houses on their holdings without having their rent increased, to increase the rates paid for the hire of labour and ploughs etc.¹⁹

Thus, the Darbhanga Raj by these concessions, also launched a counter propaganda and took coercive measures and managed assistance of the British administration, and succeeded in countering Vidyanand. As the economic condition in 1920 became a little better, the peasants also became inert toward Swami's call. On the other hand Swami won election of 1920 and entered in the Bihar and Orissa legislative assembly, where he never raised the problems of peasantry.

Though, Vidyanand left the peasant-politics in 1919. He had succeeded in drawing peasants into an extensive agitation and successfully encouraged them to defend their interests' militantly.²⁰ Through his movements he paved the way for the Kishan Sabha movements of 1930s.

III

The condition of peasants in U.P. was more or less similar to the condition of the peasants of Bihar. Politically the Congress in U.P. was an ineffective body at that time. It was dominated by the urban middle class and the landed elite almost in the manner as in Bihar. Most of the delegates who usually participated in the Congress activities were the professional classes as well as landlords and businessmen. From 1901-1920 the conditions of the poor tenants worsened but the Congress remained indifferent to rural mass. After 1915, the Congress realized the power of the mass and the question of tenants got importance only after the formation of the Kishan Sabha by Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya . The aspirations of the peasants were grown by the Kishan Sabha, but it had its own limitations and was confined only to Allahabad district. Nehru and Congress were confronted there by with the need to decide whether to expose the cause of the tenantry or not. Eventually a new group of peasants came on front under the banner of U.P. Kishan Sabha organised by Purushottam Das Tandon. However, the Congress leadership tried to put together both the Kishan Sabhas, as the attention of the Congress shifted from rural areas to national causes.

The agrarian disturbances in Awadh, which began as demonstrations in Pratapgarh district in late 1920 and soon became more widespread.²¹ A good number of peasants used to assemble at a place and they looted the crops and the rich talukadars and nearby bazars, particularly the shops owned by notorious merchants and money-landers.²² As Prof Dhanagre emphasized that there were two distinct strata of peasantry in 1920-22 agitation of Awadh. At one level a section of the tenant was protesting against the landlords exactions and was trying to secure occupancy rights by pressurizing the government in to suitable reforms. Liberal members of the legislative-council supported this demand. Second was the group of rich peasants, who were benefited by the price rise during 1901-1920. But those tenants, who

had neither sufficient nor direct control over the holdings, nor sufficient hoarding of grains, were more conscious regarding this movement.

Their conditions of scarcity and sufferings compelled them to participate actively in this movement or we can say they were the backbone of this movement. At the same time, in the U.P. peasant-agitations, the leadership had two different backgrounds. One group of leaders emerged from the urban middle class and had their vested interests in keeping their holdings intact. Most of them were professionals, well off and settled in the towns. They were profited from the scarcity of 1901-1920, and were well secured in the towns. Another group of leaders were non- political and non- professional, most of them were 'babas' not tenants. They were neither the part of tenantry nor the professionals.

They were wandering sadhus who played a vital role in the peasant movements of the Gangetic plain. No doubt Baba Ram Chandra Das was the most influential among them and while preaching Ramayan he easily used to motivate and mobilize rural folks. He was familiar to people and acquainted with local conditions. He became a local version of Gandhi with some differences. Gandhi was non-violent and constructive, but they were violent to some extent and preached a form of class –war. They legitimized their political messages by infusing them with a religious content and presenting the messengers in the saffron grab of holy men. They motivated and organized the large gatherings of peasants who flocked to their standard with the slogans of 'Ram Chandra Ki jai' and 'Sita-Ram ki jai'.

By the time he reached in Awadh, Ram Chandra also had a political agenda. Moving around the region with a copy of the Ramayana, blending readings from this epic which combined allegorical denunciations of both the Raj and the landlords; appeals to the peasantry to act in concord against their exploiters. A legend in his time, Baba Ram Chandra became the model par excellence of the indigenous peasant politics. Baba Ram Chandra made effective the political impact of the Kishan Sabha that had been formed in 1917.²³

On the other hand, the Gandhi's non cooperation movement initially catalyzed the peasant movement. But the peasants had faith in Gandhi rather than in the Congress led by Gandhi. Gandhi, however, was his sole representative and nothing equalled him, neither his message nor his party. He was considered as the ultimate political Mahatma, a true holy man whose 'darshan', purported super-natural powers and his promise of swaraj was the ultimate truth. In the rural areas of Bihar and U.P. Gandhi was larger than life, driving soul of the political sadhus who were organizing the peasant movement. His presence was felt in

every corner. He was the driving force for the struggle against the landlords with everlasting energy and enthusiasm.²⁴

The revitalistic atmosphere which was generated by Gandhi, enabled the numerous 'babas' and 'Swamis' to spring up throughout the rural areas to wrap themselves in the 'Symbolic mantle' of both 'Baba' and 'Gandhi's' cooperators'. The power of name was evident in rural areas during the years of 1920s. Ram Chandra appeared to develop a 'multiple personality'.²⁵

The next aspect of these movements was that it drew Congress field workers toward the Kisan movement, at least in Awadh region, Baba Ram Chandra led a delegation from Gorakhpur to Allahabad in June 1920 in an effort to broaden the movement through it in touch with Gandhi and other educated urban leaders. However, Baba's journey was a religious trip for 'Sangam Snan', but its another aspect was to meet Gandhi, Nehru and other Congress leaders.

However, he met these leaders but the urban leaders were hesitant to work with him. Baba failed to touch the stalwart leaders of the Congress due to 'lack of a programme, but his stay in Allahabad motivated some big leaders like, Tondon, Gauri Shankar Mishra, K.K. Malviya and others including Nehru who promised to visit these villages.²⁶ In this way Baba succeeded to convince the Congress. This was a breakthrough that helped in paving the way for the mutual cooptation, that led to the amalgamation of the agrarian questions with the Congress' 'designated ideological tasks'. On the other hand swami Vidyanand in North Bihar was unable to drag the Congress in his movement. Overall, still the peasant question required a dedicated and charismatic leadership, which was provided by Swami Sahjanand Sarswati. The motto of his life was:

Prāyen Dev Munayah Swavimukti Kamā

Maunam Charanti VijaneNa Parathanistah .

Naitan Vihay Kripanan Vimumuskh eko

Nanyatvadasya Saranam Bhramtonupashye .²⁷

Reference:

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3. *Ibid.*
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5. *Ibid.*
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8. *This song was narrated by late Muktnarayan Singh, a 90 years old ex-mukhiya of Narar Panchayat in 1990. The relevant part of the song clearly indicates what an extreme sense of hatred had developed among the poor peasants for Jayanath Singh who had proved to be a demon for the ryots of that area . The oft-quoted lines of the song express the inherent agony of those cultivators who were brutally deprived of their previous privilege.*
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12. *Manger, Rohika circle, 11 August, 1920, File No. 14,H.C.-XXVI, General 1919-20.*
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