

## The Congress Party in Colonial Bihar, 1908-47

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### INTRODUCTION

Till March 1912, Bihar was administered by Bengal along with Orissa. The new intellectual class in this decade wanted separate province of Bihar, so that Bengali dominance would end and provinces people would get opportunities provided, however in limited number, by the British Government. A section of young lawyers organized, under the leadership of Sachidanand Sinha, a leading barrister and liberal leader, was publishing “The Biharee” weekly newspaper in English from Patna to express their views and the another journal which echoed their voice was “ The Kayastha Messenger”.<sup>1</sup> British Government agreed its demand and created a separate province of Bihar and Orissa from Bengal in 1912 and further Orissa had been carved out from Bihar in 1936. This act of division of separate province necessitated due to rise of sub-nationalism<sup>2</sup> in the region and the formation of Utkal Sammelani<sup>3</sup> and other bodies to press for the demand of separate province of their own.

The first political organisation which took shape in the province was the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee, the provincial branch of the Indian National Congress.<sup>4</sup>

Early leadership of the Congress was mostly of upper caste especially the distinguished lawyers, like the ‘Hindu elite in occupation and class origins’<sup>5</sup> and early days of Congress were marked by close fraternity among Hindu and Muslim leaders. Gandhi’s visit to Champaran in 1917 and non-cooperation movement made Congress from an elite based debating group into mass-based organisation in India, especially in Bihar. Congress took shape of movement organisation in which all section of the society has enthusiastically participated in the freedom struggle against British Raj. Parallel to Congress, Provincial Muslim League was also established in 1908 and the leader of the League initially worked in harmony with the Congress leadership and in some cases same individual were simultaneously active in both the organisation.<sup>6</sup> Third important political organisation which emerged out of various peasants movements was the Kisan Sabha, in the leadership of indomitable Swami Sahjanand who gave a strong voices and a platform to express peasant and farmer’s suffering in day to day activity against Zamindar’s exploitation that were without any organisation in the formal sense. In Bengal and north Bihar Indigo Planters, mostly Europeans, were treating

1. Shashisekhar, Jha. *Political Elite in Bihar*. Vora & Co publishers private limited, Bombay, 1972, p-16.
2. Bailey, F.G’. ‘Politics in Orissa’, *EPW*, 1959. He has explained the rise of Oriya Nationalism in the region.
3. Utkal Sammelani was an organization under which people of Orissa organized a movement for separate province.
4. Shashisekhar, Jha. *Political Elite in Bihar*. P- 32.
5. K.K, Dutta. *Freedom movement in Bihar*. Government of Bihar Publication, Patna Vol 2, ch-4, 1957.
6. M. Mazharul Haque was the first president of the Bihar Provincial Muslim League in 1908 and he was also active in Congress.

peasants as dumb cattle subjecting them to inhuman torture. From time to time violent agitation occurred in one area to another area but brutally suppressed by the government. Planters had to support the Raj and also the Zamindars who had settled their portion of land with European planters. When Congress met in its annual conference in 1916 in Lucknow, a party activist from province, Raj Kumar Shukla, requested Gandhi to come and solve the problem of the Indigo plantation and Gandhi gave an assurance to solve the problem of the farmer. In 1917, Gandhi travelled to Champaran to investigate the grievances of the peasants and found “the village were insanitary, the lanes full of filth, the well surrounded by mud and stink and the courtyards unbearably untidy. The elder people badly needed education in cleanliness. They were all suffering from various skin diseases.”<sup>7</sup> He made it clear that his sole purpose of coming to Champaran was to investigate if any social injustice that might exist, with special reference to tinkathia system.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi succeeded in his ambition to abolish the exploitative tinkathiya system and this extolled movement was the first Satyagrah launched by Gandhi in India. This struggle was essentially a middle-class peasant movement and reaction against the exploitative nature of Planters’ Raj. It was directed mainly against European planters and not against the rich landed interests who were equally, or sometimes more ruthless in their exploitation of the peasantry.<sup>9</sup> From the later part of 1920s, the peasant issues were taken by Kisan Sabha which was the sole political organisation of the farmer and peasant movement. However, Kisan Sabha recognized Congress organization as a sole representative of Indian masses.<sup>10</sup>

When Congress came in power in 1937 in the province, land was the main issue of conflict to resolve in front of these three political organizations. When demand for redressing the grievances of peasants was placed before the government by the Kisan Sabha and the Socialist in the Congress, large number of Zamindars

inside the Congress made it difficult for the Ministry to introduce any changes in status quo regarding the issue of land which had affected the Zamindari system. K.K.Dutta observed that:

“The most important legislative measures to the credit of the Congress Ministry were the Bihar Tenancy (amendment) Act, which was intended to afford relief to the tenants of Bihar from hardships they had to bear under an iniquitous system of land tenure. The Zamindars were totally opposed to it from its very inception...But the passes of this Bill became easier as a result of an agreement between the Zamindars and the Congress, affected largely through the effort of Shri Rajendra Prasad and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, both of whom were eager to mitigate the rigours of a chronic social malady.”<sup>11</sup>

The farmer’s demand of land reform was ignored by Congress that culminated in clear cleavage between Kisan Sabha and the government and now the government was threaten with violent mass upsurge. Zamindars urged the government to take steps against the leaders of the Peasants Movement under Public Safety Act. The Provincial Congress Committee in Bihar passed a resolution on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1937 asking ‘all Congress workers and sympathisers to keep themselves aloof from the activities of the Kisha Sabha in Bihar.’<sup>12</sup>

Trade Union movement was another development in south Bihar where newly industrial city had been established such as Bokaro, Jamshedpur, Dhanbaad where wide spread of unrest was taking roots in the factories and coalmines. During 1937-38, large number of unrest and strike took place in these newly industrial cities.<sup>13</sup> Prominent Congress Socialist leaders, such as Abdul Bari, organized important trade union in the most part of the south province. Apart from Abdul Bari, Jayaprakash Narayan, Basawansingh, Yogendra Shukla, Ram Briksh Benipuri, Bishwanath Mathur, Kishori Prasad, Habibur Rahaman, Radha Mohan, Baleswar Singh and others were most prominent socialist leaders

7. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p421.

8. Tinkathiya system was introduced in Bengal and north Bihar by which every farmer was compelled to cultivate indigo in its third part of land and sell it to Britishers on marginalized price and there was complex process of exploitation of the farmers by the Planters and Zamindars.

9. Tirumal, Mundargi. Congress Party and Zamindars: Collaboration and Consultation in Bihar, 1915-1936, *EPW*, 1990.

10. R.K. Barik. *Land and Caste Politics in Bihar*. Shipra Publication, New Delhi, 1996. P-91.

11. K.K. Dutta. *Freedom Movement in Bihar*. Government of Bihar Publication, Patna. Vol.2 p-308-309.

12. *Ibid.* p-317-318.

active on the trade union Front. In the later period Left took the charge of trade union movement along with socialist leaders in the south Bihar and made an ample base among the industrial workers and labourers.

An important political event occurred during this period that was the introduction of the Government of India Act 1935 in which political system provided a federal structure of the government in which governor was responsible to act with the advice of ministers responsible to the provincial legislature which came into effect in 1937. Congress decided to contest election and form the government. Franchise was also extended and nearly 14% of the total population were eligible to cast their vote. Congress was the major party which contested this election and overwhelmingly supported by the voters, and other party which contested election were Depressed Classes League (an organization of the depressed caste), Triveni Sungh (a party of Guwala, Kurmi and Koeri caste) and these were political alliance of the Congress. The Muslims were divided into four different groups- the Ahrar Party, the Independent Party, the United Party and the Nationalist Muslims in the Congress.<sup>14</sup> However, Muslim League was the main opposition Party in the assembly. Congress voted for the power and formed the government and after a short reign it dissolved in 1939 as per notice of the AICC. The next election held in 1945 in which Congress again formed the government and main opposition came from the Muslim League.

### Conclusion:

The most important development in the pattern of Bihar politics was that, the Congress lost its characteristics of an organized movement and became a complete political party and its social and political base shrunk in the independent India, especially in Bihar. Two organisations withdrew its support from Congress due to ideological differences, which had greater contribution in the broadness of party as a movement. First, the Gandhian group led by Jayaprakash Narayan who still

believed in Gandhian philosophy of constructive program and subsequently joined 'Sarvodaya'<sup>15</sup> movement and left the Congress. Second, the Socialist group led by Ram Manohar Lohiya who seems Congress is a party not working for farmers and peasants and a party of landlords and Zamindars which work for the interest of few. The Congress leadership hastened the departure of the Socialists by first asking that the CSP drop the name of "Congress" from its name so as not to exploit the title, by refusing to include leading members of the CSP on the working Committee of the Congress, and finally by passing an amendment to the party constitution which banned any Congress member who was a member of another political party. In March 1948 the CSP withdrew its support from the Congress and formed the Socialist Party.<sup>16</sup> Among all faction within Congress CSP was most organised group which decided to go alone in upcoming election. In addition, the Congress had its unchallenged dominance, its catch-all character eroded with the passes of time.

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13. Ibid. p328.

14. Ibid. p-43.

15. 'Sarvodaya' literally means upliftment of all. Mahatma Gandhi advocated the philosophy of Sarvodaya inside the Congress. He wanted that Congress should dissolve itself after independence and retain its constructive program and movement character. After Gandhi's death, Vinoba Bhave in A.P and Jayaprakash Narayan in Bihar devoted to this movement.

16. Marcus.F. Franda. *The Organizational Development of India's Congress*. *Pacific Affairs*, 1962, P-254.