

The Civil Disobedience Movement and the Tribes of Bihar (1930-33)

Dr. Sanjay Kumar*

Associate Professor, PGDAV College (Eve), University of Delhi, India

Abstract – The Lahore Congress of 1929 had authorized the Congress Working Committee to launch a programme of civil disobedience including non-payment of taxes. In mid-February 1930, at a meeting at Sabarmati Ashram it invested Gandhiji with full powers to launch the Civil Disobedience movement at the time and place of his choice. Gandhiji was already 'disparately in search of an effective formulae'. Besides, his ultimatum of 31 January to Lord Irwin stating the minimum demands in the form of 11 points had been ignored. The only way out left for Gandhiji was civil disobedience. He believed that the Salt tax constituted 'the most inhuman poll tax the ingenuity of man can devise. Therefore, Gandhiji started his famous Dandi march to break the salt law.

-----X-----

Gandhi Ji, on 6th April 1930, by picking up a handful of salt, inaugurated the Civil Disobedience movement, a movement that was to remain unsurpassed in the history of the Indian National movement for the countrywide mass-participation it unleashed. So far as the participation of people of erstwhile Bihar and presently Jharkhand (created in 2000, out of Bihar) is concerned, it was overwhelming from the very beginning. Even before the 'Dandi March', the people extended their full-support to the CWC resolution investing Gandhiji with full powers to launch the Civil Disobedience movement.

From early 1930 the freedom movement in the Jharkhand took a new turn with celebration of Independence day on 26th January. Out of 400 people, 225 Tana Bhagats participated enthusiastically in the long procession at Ranchi, shouting 'Vande Matram' and 'Bharat Mata ki Jai'. [1] Dr. P.C. Mitra, the President of Ranchi District Congress Committee hoisted the national flag at the junction of three roads near the Sadar Hospital amidst great rejoicing. According to police report, subsequently 1763 Tana Bhagats had enlisted themselves as Congress members under their leader Bhuka Bhagat. They were fully prepared for the impending fight in connection with Civil Disobedience movement. [2]

At the same time, a reform movement called Sacred Thread movement was going on among the Santals of Gomia under the leadership of Bangam Manjhi, claiming to be a disciple of Gandhiji. He asked his followers to give up non-vegetarian food and drinks and to wear the sacred thread like a high caste Hindu. He declared that Gandhi Raj would replace British Raj. He sought to reform his society with some sort of mysterious inspiration and soon thousands of disciples gathered round him. He advised his followers to

abandon the use of mill-made clothes and use 'khadi' exclusively. As this covered some important items of Congress programme, the movement soon attracted the attention of the local Congress leaders of Hazaribagh. K.S. Singh is of opinion that as this brand of Bongaism spread, a large number of Santals were converted to this new religion. They refused to pay Chaukidari tax and danced under the national flag. [3]

At this juncture, Krishna Ballabh Sahay (1898-1974), ex-MLC, Ram Narayan Singh, etc. tried to enlist the support of tribals in the Civil Disobedience movement in Hazaribagh district but the enthusiasm of the local Congress leaders was soon checked by the institution of proceedings u/s 108 Cr PC against them and both of them offered no defence. They were sentenced to one year imprisonment. [4] Besides, the movement among the Santals of Gomia also appeared to be making less headway having now aroused definite opposition by the more orthodox section of the Santali community. [5] Nevertheless, the prosecution of these prominent local leaders gave impetus to the movement among the Santal. [6] Amidst this scenario, meetings of these Santals were held in the night of every full moon and some of these were attended by such prominent persons as Sardar Ballabh Patel, Rajendra Prasad and Mathura Prasad. On 31st May, about 210 Santals wore sacred thread. The Sub-Inspector of Gumla reported to his higher authorities that the Santals were inducing other to join the movement. [7] Bangam Manjhi was arrested on 4th July 1930 and was charged with inciting his ignorant people against the British government. He told the tribal people that the government caused them misery and deprived them of their means of subsistence. Like Birsa Munda, he also told his

followers that the bullets of the government soldiers would be harmless like water. He was convicted and sent to jail. This was a further set back to the above mentioned movement.

It is significant to note that during the Civil Disobedience movement, the tribals stopped paying all taxes to the government but refrained any attack on private property. At the same time, the Congress exploited every opportunity to discredit the government in the eyes of the tribals. When the popular resentment was subsiding in Dhanbad and Hazaribagh areas, the local Congress workers encouraged illicit distillation.[8] The Congress volunteers often took the help of some drama and sang patriotic songs in the local dialects in order to bring the movement to the grassroots level.[9]

According to police reports, the Civil Disobedience movement reached the Santal Parganas around March 1930 in the Bario Bangalow of the Damia-i-Koh. It was suppressed by the local Santals themselves. The Congress workers who were active here came from Maldah and Dinajpur districts of Bangal. In the non-Damin tract, where the Santals were not so protected as in the Damia-i-Koh, there were sporadic agitations inspired by the Congress volunteers.[10] Dr. P.C. Mitra, after meeting with Mahatma Gandhi at Ahmedabad on 30th March, 1930 fixed 6th April as the date for embarking on Salt satyagraha. He had long discussion in context to Salt satyagraha with Deokinandan Lal, Gulab Tiwary, Nagarmal, Jagadish, a student of BHU, Charwa Bhagat, Madhu Bhagat and Ramchandra Prasad. During the Salt satyagraha, illegal salt was made out of 'rehra mati' (salty earth) by the Tana Bhagats of Khunti. The tribals also withheld the payment of Chaukidari tax to the government during the Civil Disobedience movement.

According to PC Tallents of the Census of India, the followers of Late Birsa Munda attended the Thursday schools and chanted the name of Mahatma Gandhi alongwith their traditional Birsaité invocations. In Manbhum district the two tribes – the Bhumij and the Kherias of Sadr sub-division remained politically active. When a Sub-Inspector and some constables arrested three persons for picketing liquor-shops, they were attacked by a mob of 80 villagers.[11] The Sapha Hors or Kharwars among the Santals remained at the forefront under the leadership of Bonga Manjhi and his lieutenant Hopna Manjhi.[12] Their Congress connection brought the proceeding against them u/s 108 of Cr PC and they were sent to jail.

Several Tana Bhagats were arrested on charge of picketing the liquor shops at several places like Lohardaga. As like the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921, the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930 assumed a strange trend in tribal areas of Bihar. Whenever popular resentment began subsiding in Dhanbad and Hazaribagh areas, the local Congress workers encouraged illicit distillation among the tribals on a large scale. This was a peculiar way of instigating the simple minded tribal[13] to brake the laws. No less

than 91 cases of illicit distillation were detected between 22nd August and 6th September 1930.[14] By the end of September the excise revenue had fallen by 19.5 lakhs from 92.75 lakhs to 79.25 lakhs in Chotanagpur.

The Congress also organized a series of forest satyagrahas demanding the tribal customary right to use timber, roots, fruits, honey, etc. for their livelihood. This was a good way of mobilizing the tribals, making them aware of the corrosion of their rights by the commercial exploitation of the forest products. Some Hos under the leadership of Harihar Mahto violated the Forest Act near Chakradharpur on 6th August in place of Salt Law. Another forest satyagraha was organized among the Kharwars of the forest region in Palamau district under the leadership of Jadubans Sahay and some other Congress leaders.

Around October 1930, Silu Santal alias Tarachand claimed divine inspiration through dream at Rajbasa in Dhalbhum area. Soon he became a healer and preacher and condemned the use of liquor. His chief associate was Mangru Bhumij of Chilko in the neighbouring Kharswan state. The tribal village priests of Chotanagpur pushed the movement forward and under the impact of Civil Disobedience movement it assumed a political character and spread to Gangpur, Tamar and other areas.[15] The Janeodhari Santals at Asnagarh organized a meeting in February 1931 and decided to disobey the orders of the government. Thus a large number of tribals were brought within the fold of Civil Disobedience movement. However, Ranchi was the only district where 'Independence Day' was celebrated at Bero on 26th January, 1931.

During this period the Congress workers continued to work secretly in the jungle areas of Hazaribagh amongst the tribals. Gandhiji's release had given a fresh impulse to the waning interest in the Congress affairs. A strike of coolies in a mica mine was declared when they heard that Gandhiji was free from prison.

Bonga Manjhi, Hopna Manjhi and Somra Manjhi were prosecuted u/s 108 of Cr PC for distributing the sacred thread among the Santals. They were, subsequently, sentenced to imprisonment. In their absence, K.B. Sahay, Saraswati Devi and Bhagwati Prasad Singh remained active and worked to bring more tribals into the Congress fold in Hazaribagh district. In the meantime Hazaribagh District Congress Committee instructed the tribals to pay Chaukidari and other taxes to the government. The Santals obeyed the directive but the Santals of Dumri and Pirtand did not welcome the Congress instructions and even went to the extent of discarding the sacred thread. They proposed to consult Bonga, Hopna and Somra on these matters when they would return from jail. These radical Santals were not convinced by the moderate approach of the Congress. Meanwhile the 'Janeodhari' Santals

began to assert themselves in Pirtand where they threatened to destroy the place of worship of non-Janeodhari Santals if they did not join the movement. These activities terrified the local zamindars of Gomia, who reported the activities of the tribals to the police. However, the local authorities could not check their activities until the trio applied the break.

Hopna Manjhi and other Santals went to Purulia to attend the Manbhum District Conference. Rajendra Prasad also attended this meeting. He and other leaders generously received the Kherias, who "attended the conference in a manner most flattering to those members of a criminal tribe".[16] The general praise bestowed upon the Kherias 'criminals' of Patanda including the one who tried to kill a Sub-Inspector was remarkable. The Santals remained hostile to the government and held to meetings at Gomia and Borobera on full moon. These meetings were attended by many Congress leaders and volunteers. Even in the Santal Parganas, ashrams were opened in three or four places by them. The volunteers led by Kripanath Pandey were endeavouring to enlist the sympathies of the Santals and conveyed them that each would receive Rs. 15 per month under Gandhi Raj which had almost been attained.

The Kharwars extended their cooperation to the Congress leaders. The local authorities initiated a damage control exercise and instructed the local parganaits and other chiefs to check the spread of Congress influence. Despite these counter measures, Bonga and Hopna Manjhi continued their influence over the Santals of these areas. The local authorities were compelled to perceive the Santal movement as a threat to the law and order situation in the tribal areas.

Meanwhile, under the instruction of Rajendra Prasad, a noble scheme was initiated in order to uplift the aboriginal tribes of Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas.[17] A Board was formed for combined activities in imparting training to the primitive and aboriginal tribes with Nibaran Dasgupta of Parulia as President. The Board consisted of Kshistish Chandra Basu of Ranchi as secretary and Rajendra Prasad, Jeemut Bahan Sen, Saraswati Devi as members and six representatives in-charge of six districts viz. Shashi Bhushan Rai for the SPs, K.B. Sahay for Hazaribagh, Bejoy Krishna Dutta for Ranchi, Ashwini Kumar Paul for Manbhum, Chandrika Prasad for Palamau and Ananda Kishore Lal for Singhbhum. So far as the objectives of the Board were concerned it was decided that centre would be started for a month in each district, where tribals would send their men for receiving training in (a) preventing evil like drinking by magic lantern lectures and other mediums of propaganda (b) stopping litigation by organizing panchayat committee (c) protecting themselves from the oppression of zamindars and mahajans by arousing the consciousness of their own strength (d) primary education (e) cotton growing, spinning and weaving (f) lathi playing and (g) regular volunteer

crops by regular parade, etc.[18] There was a widespread and whole-hearted participation of the leaders of the Santals of Hazaribagh, the Tana Bhagats of Ranchi and Mahtos of Manbhum at the conference at Hutmura, where this Board was formed. The Chief Secretary, Government of Bihar and Orissa found objective (c), (f) and (g) objectionable and sent notices to district officers with a warning to keep an eye on all activities in connection with this noble scheme. The government feared that this might lead to class consciousness against the zamindars and mahajans. Meanwhile Rajendra Prasad begin his tour in the Santal Parganas in order to implement this noble scheme. He drew the large audience at Pakur but elsewhere the attendance was 'meagre'.

Rajendra Prasad also visited Santal areas in Hazaribagh like Nawadih, which was attended by 4000 including some 200 Santals. Bajrang Sahay addressed the Janeodhari Santals in another meeting: "In the days of Swaraj, there would be no army but every household would roll up for defence each with its own gun."

The officials of the SPs arranged meetings to counter the Congress propaganda and the feelings of the Santals that Swaraj would be attained within two years. Some had joined the Civil Disobedience movement believing that they would have to pay no tax and would be given Rs. 15/- a month alongwith clothing. Other sub-divisions had not been that much affected by Congress propaganda, but everywhere early attainment of Swaraj was hailed throughout the SPs and Chotanagpur.

The agrarian condition of Chotanagpur was gradually deteriorating day by day due to land alienation, indebtedness and gradual erosion of traditional land and forest rights. The agrarian exploitation of the tribals of Chotanagpur was a deeply entrenched phenomenon. To improve the condition of the tribal peasants, a meeting of Chotanagpur Kisan Sabha was held at village Hehal in Sadr Police Station on 12th June 1931 and was attended by about 100 people of Sadr and the neighbouring areas. Laurentius Barla and Theble Oraon spoke on the subject of trade depression and consequent difficulties experienced by the cultivators in paying their settlement costs. He said that in consideration of similar depression in other provinces, the Punjab and UP Governments had reduced their land revenues by 1.5 Cr. And 66 lakhs of rupees respectively. He expressed hope that the GOB&O would follow suit. He also opined that the government should assist the cultivators by suspending settlement operations from which they desired no benefit but which resulted in abnormal litigation.[19] He gave instances of cases in which cultivators had been obliged to sell their cattle at absurdly low price in order to pay their settlement costs. A resolution was passed to that effect that they should approach the government to suspend

the settlement operations until the prices of agricultural produce increased.

The Chotanagpur Kisan Sabha was organized to safeguard the interests of the tribal peasants of Chotanagpur just on the same line as Bihar Kisan Sabha which under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati fought for the rights of peasants of north and central Bihar at that time. However, it did not succeed as the tribal peasants had already enjoyed protection in Chotanagpur under the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908.

The mid 1931 witnessed another great movement called 'Haribaba Movement' in Singhbhum among the Hos, Santals and other aboriginal tribes of Dhalbhum sub-division as well as the two states of Saraikela and Kharsawan. This movement was certainly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's idea of vegetarianism and abstinence from alcohol. Its leader Duka Ho, popularly known as Hari Baba advised the Hos, Santals and Oraons to wear sacred thread. He expressed that Gandhi Raj would soon replace British Raj. All major tribes took this new religious upheaval seriously which had definite political undercurrents. Gradually, it assumed a shape of hurricane which blew over Chotanagpur. K.S. Singh is of opinion that "Behind it lay a century of agrarian strife and turmoils, the Tamar and Kol Insurrection (1789-1832), the Sardar and Birsa movements (1859-1900) which exemplified tribals' resistance against the breakdown of their socio-agrarian system.[20]

The year 1932 witnessed no big incidents like the 'Janeodhari' or Sacred Thread movement among the Santals or the Hari Baba movement among the different tribes of Chotanagpur. Small and scattered events occurred throughout the year under the guidance of Congress workers. Ram Narayan Singh of Hazaribagh, Deokinandan Prasad, Nagarmal Modi, Jugul Kishore, etc. provided momentum to the movements among the Tana Bhagats and other tribes of Chotanagpur. However, the movement of Chotanagpur touched the lowest ebb. The GOB&O claimed that the reports continued to be reassuring and there was no sign of the movement spreading to the aboriginal tribes[21] of Chotanagpur and the other aboriginal areas of the SPs.

In early 1933, when the Civil Disobedience movement was on a low key, the Mundas of Ranchi district kept up a semblance of confrontation with the government by launching an agitation against the Settlement department, urging a fair rent fixation.[22] Scattered events occurred throughout the year but no big movement was reported from the Santal areas. During this lean period Gandhiji did try to enlighten the Santals and instructed the Congress workers to start some Constructive work on the line of Harijan upliftment.

In conclusion, under the aegis of National movement especially the Civil Disobedience movement in the

tribal territory of Bihar, there emerged several distinct movements under the leadership of tribal leaders. In context to participation and programmes, one sees the dominance of tribes and tribal issues, yet there was commonality between the tribal movements and the Civil Disobedience movement. It is significant to note that although they were influenced by the nationalist ideology yet they had their own identity. They took up local issues which were not part of nationalist movement. They idealized Gandhiji but at the same time the tribal leaders were not less important. This can be clearly seen in the ways the local Congress leaders of Bihar gave them importance.

END NOTE

1. Freedom Movement File No. 51, The Confidential Report of the SP, Ranchi, dt. 26 January, 1930.
2. K.K. Datta, History of Freedom Movement in Bihar, Vol. 11, p. 65.
3. K.S. Singh, The Hari Baba Movement in Chotanagpur 1931-32, Journal of Bihar Research Society, XLIX, p. 385; Confidential File CS's Deptt. Spl. Sec., pp. 22-26.
4. Home Poll file No. 18[III] 1930, H.K. Briscoe to Haig First half of January 1930.
5. Ibid.
6. The Searchlight, 16 Feb. 1930.
7. Note on Santal Movement in Hazaribagh by R.P. Wilson, the SP of Hazaribagh cited in K.K. Datta, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 64.
8. J.C. Jha, The Indian National Congress and the Tribals, 1885-1985, pp. 41-42.
9. Ibid., p. 46.
10. Ibid., p. 49.
11. Home Poll. File No. 18/7/1930, MG Hallet to HW Emerson, Fortnightly Report of first half of June 1930.
12. Ibid.
13. Sumit Sarkar, 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism', Indian Historical Review, Vol. III, No. 1, July 1976.
14. Home Poll. File No. 18/IX/30, Sept. 1930, MG Hallet to HW Emerson, D.O. No. 232-CC Ranchi.
15. J.C. Jha, op. cit., p. 292.

16. Home Poll. Spl. File No. 57/31, dt. 28 April 1931.
17. Home Poll. Spl. File No. 263/31.
18. Home Poll. File No. 81/V/1931, Fortnightly Reports of second half of May; Home Poll. Spl. File No. 263/31 The CS to the Commissioner, Chotanagpur, D.O. No. 2985-C dt. 27/5/31.
19. Home Poll. Spl. File No. 57/31, The DIG, CID to the CS, GOB&O, Memo No. 1900/02 RSB, 21.6.31.
20. K.S. Singh, The Hari Baba Movement in Chotanagpur 1931-32, Journal of Bihar Research Society, Vol. XLIX, Part 1-4, p. 284.
21. Home Poll. File No. 18/4/32, PC Tallents to Emerson, Fortnightly Reports of the first and second half of February 1932.
22. Home Poll. File No. 18/6/1933, WB Brett to MG Hallet, Fortnightly Reports of Bihar and Orissa in second half of May 1933.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Sanjay Kumar*

Associate Professor, PGDAV College (Eve), University of Delhi, India