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Peasant movement in Haryana: In the light of the views and thoughts of Sir Chhotu Ram

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Abstract

India is an agriculture country for a long time. Before independence lot of measures were adopted by the English to extract more and more from the land of India. So many laws were formed to squeeze the Indian farmers. In that time Deenbandhu Sir Chhotu Ram came as source of relief for the peasants of India especially that of Haryana. He is known as the LEADER OF FARMERS in this region. He established the Unionist party and also became the minister of agriculture. During his reign he gave the gift of GOLDEN LAWS to the peasants so that their condition can be improved a bit. All over his life he fought for the rights of peasants and is still remembered as the KISSAN MASEEHA today.

Keywords: Peasant Movement, Haryana, Sir Chhotu Ram

1. Introduction

The Indian economy has been traditionally based on her agriculture. This holds true even today. Lord Curzon once said that Indian agriculture was a gamble in monsoon. If the monsoon fails, everything turns topsy turvy. This happens after every third or fourth year. Politics, administration, industry, entire life put on a dreary, bleak appearance. The British knew this, but they developed agriculture to the extent it supplemented industry at home.

Daddabhai, Ranade, Gokhale and other nationalists during the closing years of the 19th century pointed out that Indian poverty was the direct outcome of the British policies, which aimed at reducing the Indian people to hewers of wood and drawers of water. During the preceding rule of the Mughals, India was one of the richest and industrially advanced countries of the world. This is on the testimony of British historians and economists like Moreland, who writing about India at the close of Akbar's rule established by comparative statistics her superiority over countries like England and France.

Reviewing the Failure of Lord Curzon by C J. Odonell, who wrote after 28 years of close study of India, where he had been a civil servant, Sir William Wedderburn Bart, ex-MP' said:

“The superficial observer might from the title of the book, suppose that it was personal attack on Lord Curzon. But this would be a mistake. The book is an attack, not on an individual but on a system; it is a condemnation of the extravagance, the oppressiveness, the obscurantism, the corruption and the general folly of imperialism.”

Referring to be surpluses in the Budget, Gokhale Said:

“these surpluses constitute a double wrong to the community that government should take so much more from the people than is needed in times of serious depression and suffering and they are also wrong because they lend themselves to easy misinterpretation.”

Much before Gokhale, Sir William Hunter, the distinguished Indian historian, when a member of the Viceroy's Council in 1879, declared:

“the Government assessment dose not leave enough food to the cultivator to support himself and his family, throughout the year.”

Generally the grievances of the Kisans and indeed the rural problems as such never figured as basic issues in the various confrontations of the Congress with the British government.

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Agriculture remains the most disorganized sector in the Indian economy, even when it provides more than 50 per cent of GNP.

The peasant the back bone not only of Indian economy, but the main prop supporting the entire superstructure, himself remains voiceless. Even those drawn from the peasant stock, once they also to high positions, forget the ladder that raised them to eminence.

We have gone through this long discussion on the peasant and his problems to approach the subject from a wider perspective necessitated by the existing conditions.

Chhotu Ram lived and worked in different times, but what he has said and written about the peasant, agriculture and rural life as a whole is amazingly relevant to our own times.

Democracy, secularism and socialism become meaningless terms unless translated into action. In the Indian context, it means divesting the vested interests and planning with village, agriculture and the peasant as the base.

Fazi-i-Hussian's Unionist Party which remained dominated by Muslim Landlords was not inspired by Gandhian principles. Chhotu Ram firmly believed in the constructive programmes of the Congress as framed by Gandhiji but being a member of a party not so fully committed to it, his own efforts remained circumscribed.

Chhotu Ram's significance lies in the fact that he attempted to do so much under such and unfavorable environment. In one sense his role has been almost prophetic. In the controversies that arose in his times, of which he was the main centre, he was blamed by the Congress and other nationalist Leaders for having become an instrument in the hands of reactionary, feudal and bureaucratic elements.

Chhotu Ram used to retort that he was laying down the real foundation of Swaraj by working for the rural areas. His involvement with the peasant was so passionate and total that he become in his person the embodiment of rural India.

In the Punjab, under this Unionist regime, a strong peasant movement had developed and the Government, which represented the Punjab peasantry had helped in creating strong consciousness amongst the peasantry and the rural areas as a whole.

That the peasantry lead become class conscious is clear from the fact that in West Punjab (present Pakistan) the entire peasant population, including the big landlords, supported the stand taken by the Premier Sir Khizar Hyat Khan and Sir Chhotu Ram against the Muslim League regarding the creation of Pakistan.

Sir John Lawrence who later became Governor-General had spent most of his time in the Punjab and founded there what has been described as a 'School of Paternalistic Administration'! Amongst the disciples, he had such distinguished civilians Montgomery, Darling, Bayne, Jacob and Abbot. The Unionist government further developed this tradition and creates a rural consciousness which defied the Pakistan-wave, when other provinces had been overwhelmed. The migration of 8 million Muslim from India to the area marked for Pakistan, destroyed the cohesion which had existed there for centuries. West Pakistan became dominated by the urban Muslims who had immigrated from India and on this side the East Punjab, (now part of the Indian Union) was dominated by the Congress Party, again was urban dominated. We have already mentioned that both the Congress and the Muslim League, the two dominating parties at the time of partition, adopted probes and policies which adversely, agriculturists in both the countries. Before Independence, the united Punjab was so prosperous agriculturally that it met the

food needs of the rest of India. After partition because of the anti-rural programmes of the Muslim League and subsequently of all other parties that followed, West Pakistan became a deficit area it food which it skill continues to be. In India also there was food deficiency in spite of strenuous efforts through planning to increase production and it is only recently that the country has acquired a modicum of self-sufficiency. Both the countries continued the political system they had inherited from the British with the result that the economic and social development, expected has not materialised.

The peasantry in both countries has been ignored as compared to the upper end middle classes.

There can be no real prosperity either in Pakistan or in India or for that matter in Bangla Desh unless the policies followed by the governments of these countries are reversed. The peasantry in all the three countries is not organised effectively and unless the rural people are able to assert themselves, it is unlikely that economic and social conditions can markedly be improved.

We are really dealing with a dilemma. Unless the peasants through strong organisation snatch political power, their social and economic conditions cannot improve. But they cannot acquire political power unless they become economically and socially strong.

Economic and social conditions in the three countries of this sub-continent have been stagnant and the lower classes particularly in the rural areas have suffered the most in spite of large scale planting. The planned schemes have till now been biased in favour of the middle and upper classes and the peasantry and rural probes have not received due consideration. If conditions continuously deteriorate, there may be a breakdown of the present system without an alternative.

Sikander, Feroz, Shahbaddin all of them held cushioned jobs. Ahmad- Yar, a crony of Sikander but a loyal Unionist and much devoted to Chhotu Ram shared his enthusiasm for party work, but an element of self-interest entered there. He was one of the highly encumbered feudal lords of Multan and Chhotu Ram's debt legislation was a source of much relief, keeping hire financially alive.

The small peasants in the Western Punjab, most of them, tenants were placed similarly as the Haryana peasant-proprietors (traditionally called zamindars). They had small holdings, hardly enough to provide them subsistence.

The Punjab peasant's plight deteriorating every day moved Chhotu Ram to his depths. He decided to depict the peasant as he saw him in a small pamphlet 'Bachara Zomindar' (Helpless Peasant) to which we have already referred.

The pamphlet graphically described the peasant, but it was also a call for action. A few samples give a below will show how in his passion for protecting this helpless creature, Chhotu Ram produced a literary master piece, which moves all those acquainted with the suffering and ordeals of the man behind the Plough.

The pamphlet starts by describing the peasant as an anomaly, in the modern age, an anachronism, with hardly any Identity and no impact anywhere.

"The modern age is one of science, education art and culture, speech, writing, organisation count. The peasant knows nothing of those. He is a relic of something past and dead. But his faith that justice will be done unto him is pathetic. Oh how simple and naive."

"But strange that I should at all pose these questions. The most dominating trait of the peasant is while seeing everything to see nothing. His eyesight can make him see

something really very obvious like a well or a village pond. He stumbles hundred times, on the same stone. That is what distinguishes him moat."

"This world has changed miraculously. The Kisan remains what he has been, a relic of the old, uncharged and unchangeable. He has the same old plough, the same cart, the same Persian wheel, the same old tools and implements"

"The Kisan is dumb, deaf and speechless." Chhotu Ram quotes a line from Iqbal:

"Khamoshi guftgu hai, baizabani hai zaban meri."

("Silence is my speech, my tongue being incapable of any expression")

This is the most characteristic trait of the peasant. Driving his point farther home, Chhotu Ram quotes other verses from Iqbal, which though written in a different context depict the Kisan admirably:

"Baka ki phikar kar nadan, mussibat anai wali hai tri-barbadyon kai muswarai hain asmanon, main

Zara daik iss ko jo khuch ho raha hai honai wala hai Dhara kai hai bhalla Adha Khohan ki dastanon main."

"Yah khamoshi kahan tak, Lizzata faryad paida kar Zamin par tu hao and tari sada hao asmanon par."

("O Thoughtless one, think of the future, some calamity is about to come; the elements are conspiring to destroy you; think of what is happening and is likely to happen; what is the use of old bygone tales? How long will you remain dumb? Create in yourself the power of speech, so that while you are on the ground, your voice resounds in the skies.")

That was Chhotu Ram's clarion call for action. He wanted to dumb- speechless peasant to raise his voice, so that his enemies and exploiters may find their peace disturbed.

A popular song that the Bhajan parties, organized by the Zamindara Leagues sang at rural gatherings ran as follows:

"Jaida nahin zamindar bras Doa bat main lia, Ik boalna lai seekh ik dusman pahchan lai,"

(Just understand two things my dear peasant, Recognise your enemy and learn how to speak.)

Warning the peasant against all those who were robbing him day night on one pretext or the other, Chhotu Ram wroth:

"Wake up, O Kisan; be alert, gather your wits, the world around is full of cheats; and you are easy prey. Those very people for whom you labour, are after your blood.

You do not even know how you are exploited. They appear in various garbs; one a religious guide (Peer), another a prophet (a Hindu religious leader) someone as a creditor charging exorbitant interest and another makes you to give bribe, some appear as customers, others as salesmen, some rob you through arhat (fee charged in grain market); some through commission of all kinds; you lose in whatever transaction you make; your goods are taken cheap; and you given under-weight. If you are well-to-do, "doom", "bhat" and "mirasi", befool you to part with your wealth through flattery and if you poor, the Sahukar will squeeze last drop of your blood."

How to cope with such a dreadful fate? Chhotu Ram prescribes the remedy, if only the peasant will listen.

"You can save yourself, O Kisan only through well-planned action, by loudly mouthing your grievances, not by showing

weakness but strength, not by appearing helpless but by preparing yourself for struggle."

At another place in the book, Chhotu Ram thus sums up the lot of the peasant:

"Frankly speaking, what is the peasant? A moving picture of sadness and pity, an embodiment of all woes. His heart is totally pierced by countless troubles, but he does not possess the faculty to express them. If he has a mouth there is no tongue in it.

The moment the peasant gains the faculty of speech and learns to express himself, his exploiters will find the earth moving from under their feet, there would be an earth quake all around. The government which, because of its ignorance and arrogance, is indifferent, will get so disturbed as to lose all its complacency. All those misleading the government by flattery and falsehood, will involve the existing system into greatest catastrophe."

Chhotu Ram raised the important issue of the ownership rights in land.

"Under the existing laws the ownership of the land is vested in the government and the peasant is no more than a tenant. This means the government can remove the peasant from the land and is otherwise free to interfere in various ways, because of its right of ownership."

Chhotu Ram questioned this system. He tried to show why this position, taken up by the government under laws framed itself, was untenable.

The land was cultivated by the people much before there was any government, he argued. He pointed out that the claim of the British government to have inherited the right of ownership from previous governments--those of the Muslim and before that of the Hindus-- was not well founded because those governments never claimed the right of ownership, the way the British did.

The system of assessment according to which every inch of land was taxed was most iniquitous, Chhotu Ram pointed out. In every system of taxation, for instance, a certain portion of income was tax-free, such as in the case of income tax. But that principle was not applicable in the case of land revenue, where even the smallest cultivator had to pay in full.

Chhotu Ram pointed out that the government could increase land-revenue by Executive Order and the Legislative Council had no say in the matter. Even a subsequent amendment, which brought the report of Settlement Officers within the jurisdiction of the Council, simultaneously authorized the government to ignore the Council as the legislature had been given only nominal powers in this respect.

The cultivators being mostly illiterate, were never in a position to know why and how these increases were made. The government could also increase other charges such as fees on mutation of a holding, irrigation charges and cess on well irrigation etc.

The representative of the peasants in Legislative Council could be little to protect the peasants against these executive power of the government. The government was able to impose all these taxes arbitrarily because the peasant had no means of effective protest. About the time when Chhotu Ram was writing (early thirties) the peasant was really in a most helpless position. Apart from all the taxes there was another tax called 'Chaukidara.'

The conditions have not markedly changed after these many years in Free India. This only reinforces what Chhotu Ram said in those ore-Independence days. Chhotu Ram holds the peasant himself responsible for his plight.

“My dear Kisan; have you ever given thought to your helpless condition? Why are you lying crushed under poverty? Let me tell you the main cause of your helplessness. You have not recognized yourself. You have so far considered yourself weak and humble. Others also consider you to be so. But if rise to your consciousness and organize yourself, the power and hidden force within, will be released, taking everybody by surprise. You are suffering from an inferiority complex. Shake yourself out if this and you will see a storm will rise drowning all your exploiters. You will then come into your own real self.”

Thus Chhotu Ram was a real visionary in the contexts of the peasants and she did his best to improve their condition.

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