



## **Bihar in 1934: Earthquake, Gandhi's Harijan Tour and the Birth of Congress Socialist Party.**

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The year 1934 constituted an important landmark in the history of the province. It was a year of mixed reactions unfolding with the tremors caused by the earthquake leading to with the tremors leading to large scale destruction of lives and properties and the subsequent hopes emerging out of Gandhi's Harijan tour and the consolidation of the Left forces under the umbrella of all-encompassing anti-imperialist front. Moreover, the process of re-construction and relief took the center stage and the constitution of Bihar Central Relief Committee under the Chairmanship of Dr. Rajendra Prasad did their best to repair the ravages of this great calamity. Popular enthusiasm for helping the victims of the earthquake further accelerated the process of rehabilitating the devastated areas.

It was on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1934 that the province fell victim to a great tragedy and in a few seconds time the result of half a century of human toil and hope had been shattered. It produced highly devastating effects in an area of 30,000 square miles with more than twenty thousand casualties. All communications by rail and roads had been disrupted. Thousands of houses had been destroyed. There was the problem of the supply of drinking water. Tanks and Wells had gone dry or mysteriously disappeared. Many streams, tanks and lakes had become flat land or mounds of land.<sup>1</sup>The presence of sand in cultivable fields posed another big problem. It was feared that the land might become useless for cultivation if the sand was allowed to remain for a longer period. The most affected areas included the districts of Monghyr, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga and Champaran (Motihari). In Monghyr itself, almost ten thousand people lost their lives although the government records estimated it at twelve hundred. The greatest loss of life occurred in Tirhut division where the number of deaths as per official record was 5,295. In Muzaffarpur district alone 2484 lives were lost. In Muzaffarpur town there were 956 deaths reported. In Sitamarhi sub-division, where perhaps

<sup>1</sup> Prasad, Rajendra, *Autobiography*, First Publication in 1946, First Publication by Penguin Books India 2010, p. 357.



the shock was the most intense and havoc most complete, 942 lives were lost mostly in Sitamarhi itself and in Belsand and adjacent police stations in Hajipur sub-division in the south of the district the total loss of life was 227. In Darbhanga the loss of life was 2,128, over half of it was in Madhubani sub-division. In Champaran the total loss of life was 499 which occurred mostly in Sadar sub-division. The death toll in other districts were as follows: Patna 138, Gaya 34, Shahabad 22, Saran 184, Bhagalpur 174 and Purnea 02.<sup>2</sup> These figures were the result of counting through the agency of the police and village watchmen and staff employed in clearing ruined quarters of towns.<sup>3</sup>

As details of the devastation caused by the earthquake appeared in newspapers, there was spontaneous sympathy in India and even abroad for the victims. Jawaharlal Nehru came to Patna and reached Monghyr on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1934. Accompanied by Shri Krishna Sinha, Nehru helped in clearing the debris and digging out dead bodies himself at Monghyr where a prominent nationalist leader, Nemdhari Singh lost his life while rescuing a Marwari family during rehabilitation work.<sup>4</sup> Jawaharlal stayed in Patna and gave many useful suggestions about the organization of the relief operations. He visited Bihar twice during this period and also went to Tirhut division to oversee the relief work there.

Branches of the relief committee were setup in all the districts. Contributions were received in the shapes of money, rice, utensils, clothes, blankets, medicines from all parts of the country. From U.P. Acharya Narendra Deva and Sri Praksah visited Bihar to assist in the ongoing relief works. More than 2000 active workers spread over twelve districts were actually involved in the entire process of reconstruction and rehabilitation. In addition to that several social service organizations began relief work on their own but they cooperated with the Central Relief Committee. The more prominent of them included the Marwari Relief society, the Memon Relief society, Sri Ramkrishna Mission, the party of Baba Gurdit Singh the Red Cross, the Indian Medical Association and the Sankat Tran Samiti of Bengal under the guidance of Satish Chandra Das Gupta.<sup>5</sup> Senior congress leaders of Bihar, Anugraha Narayan Singh, Satyanarian Sinha and Mathura Prasad tirelessly worked in close coordination with

<sup>2</sup>Mitra, H.N. and N.N. Mitra (eds.) *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. 32, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 218-19.

<sup>4</sup> Prasad, Ram Chandra and Ashok Kumar Sinha, *Shri Krishna Singh* (Hindi), Publication Division, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 65-66.

<sup>5</sup> Prasad, Rajendra, *op. cit.*, pp. 355-56.



Rajendra Prasad. Jayaprakash Narayan who was recently released from jail, left his all other engagements and devoted himself completely to the relief measures. His wife Prabhawati took special care of injured children and orphans during the relief operations.<sup>6</sup>

The news of this dreadful catastrophe reached Mahatma Gandhi through the newspapers and a telegram from Dr. Rajendra Prasad, dated 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1934. At that time, Gandhi was in South India undertaking his Harijan tour and regarded the earthquake as “a divine chastisement sent by God for our sins”, particularly the “sin of untouchability.”<sup>7</sup> He postponed his tour and reached Patna on the 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1934 as he was deeply moved by the devastation that had taken place. It was not possible for Gandhi to visit all the places but he went to most of the worst affected areas and saw the unprecedented and widespread destruction caused by the earthquake. With the coming of Mahatma Gandhi and the more or less permanent stay in Bihar of Seth Jammalal Bajaj for relief work, the Bihar Central Relief Committee was much relieved.<sup>8</sup>

The Bank of Bihar was appointed as the treasurer of the Relief Committee and all the money received was directly sent to the bank. The noted Chartered Accountant, J.C. Kumarappa was sent by Gandhi to take charge of the accounts of the Committee and its relief operations. Already, the Central Relief Committee had set up many departments, each under a senior leader. Jayaprakash Narayan was in control of the entire central office. He was later joined by Anugraha Narayan Singh who took over charge after his release from jail. Representatives of all the groups and provinces which had sent relief were included in the Board of the Central Relief Committee.<sup>9</sup>

The difficulties in the distribution of relief were many and that too alarming in nature. Roads were repaired and diversions were made. The Relief committee purchased motor trucks for its use. Hundreds of cycles were provided to relief workers who were trained and organized by Acharya Kripalani, Dr. Hardikar and Miss Sophia Somji.<sup>10</sup> In the absence of houses to accommodate relief workers, straw huts were set up in many places. Almost two annas per day per worker was spent for their meals.

<sup>6</sup> Ranjan, Sudhanshu, *Jayaprakash Narayan* (Hindi), National Book Trust, 1994, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Datta, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Prasad, Rajendra, *op. cit.*, pp. 354-356.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*,



Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the affected areas provided the much needed relief and a word of solace to the sufferers of earthquake who now mustered the courage to face the grave situation. On 14<sup>th</sup> March, he started his journey for Motihari from Patna in the company of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Miss Slade, Miss Muriel Lester and Miss Hogg.<sup>11</sup> On the way Gandhi stopped at Hajipur and Lalganj where large number of people had assembled to whom he addressed. On his return to Patna, Gandhi addressed a large gathering at the Mangles Tank, Patna city on 20<sup>th</sup> March. This meeting was also addressed by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.<sup>12</sup> Besides collecting funds, Gandhi emphasized the need for removal of untouchability. Mahatma Gandhi and his party left Sitamarhi for Kamtaul on the 30<sup>th</sup> March. On the way he stopped at Sursand and Pupri, addressed the local people asking them again to remove untouchability and "not to sit idle but to work and dig their own wells and excavate new ones."<sup>13</sup> At one of these places in the Muzaffarpur district, the socialist leader Ram Briksha Benipuri presented an address to Mahatma Gandhi. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> April, Gandhi reached Monghyr where the earthquake had brought havoc by taking a heavy toll of human lives (about ten thousand) and ruining about two thousand houses. Accompanied by Dr. Shri Krishna Sinha and some other leaders, he toured round the town in the afternoon for about an hour and a half after which Gandhi addressed a meeting near the Monghyr railway station where he again stressed the need for removal of untouchability and relief work. Late in the evening some of the Harijan workers interviewed him.<sup>14</sup>

What we discern from the above analysis that Gandhi was very well aware of the importance of community wells in the villages and their symbolic as well as practical value in the process of removal of untouchability. Therefore, he emphasized the construction of wells first to tackle the problem of drinking water in the villages which would, in turn, help in the process of eradication of untouchability. Accepting Gandhi's advice, the workers engaged in relief operations built thousands of new wells and almost an equal number of old ones were repaired. During his tour in the earthquake affected areas from the 27<sup>th</sup> March to the 4<sup>th</sup> April,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.



1934, Mahatma Gandhi collected Rs. 6,833-9-1 out of which Rs. 2,833-9-1 was allotted for relief work and the rest for Harijan uplift.<sup>15</sup>

K.K. Datta has rightly observed that, “the year 1934 is significant in the history of Bihar not only for Mahatma Gandhi’s tours here for humanitarian work, but also for the fact that at Patna the Congress leaders then effected a reorientation of Congress policy and fixed their future line of action.”<sup>16</sup>

It was on the initiative of the Bihar Socialist party that a decision was taken to caring various socialist groups together in a conference.<sup>17</sup> This conference was held in Patna on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1934, under the presidentship of Acharya Narendra Deva. Many socialist groups sent their representatives to the conference which was also attended by a large number of socialist-minded individuals who were not formally associated with any group. Acharya Narendra Deva’s presidential address at the first socialist conference reflected his Marxist convictions. He said at the outset that it was their endeavour to influence the nationalist movement in the direction of socialism. To those critics of socialist’s attempts to reconcile nationalism and socialism and suggesting them to leave Congress and act as independent group from outside, Narendra Deva’s answer was that the socialists do not wish to isolate themselves from the great national movement against British imperialism which the Congress symbolized. He emphatically asserted that the latter with all its defects and short comings was the greatest revolutionary force in the country.<sup>18</sup> In his view, political independence was an inevitable stage on the way to socialism for a subject nation and further added that in the Indian conditions both the resolutions could be carried out simultaneously.<sup>19</sup>

The Patna conference (1934) considered not only the immediate political issues but also the question of organization and programme. Although Acharya Narendra Deva thought that it was premature to launch the party immediately, the conference opined that the time has come for the establishment of an All-India organization of socialists within the Congress as

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Memo No. 4196-97 S.B. Bihar and Orissa, CID. Special. Branch in Political Special. File No. 100/1934, p. 25, Bihar State Archives (BSA).

<sup>18</sup> Original Draft copy of the President speech delivered on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1934 at Patna, Political Special, File No. 100/1934, pp. 50-60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,



reflected in the resolution No. 5 of the conference.<sup>20</sup> It was with this end in view that a drafting committee was constituted to prepare a draft programme and a constitution for an All-India Congress Socialist party. To carry forward the task, Jayaprakash Narayan was appointed as organizing secretary. He was assigned the brief to organize provincial socialist groups where they did not exist earlier and to arrange for a national conference to form an All-India socialist party immediately prior to the next session of the Indian National Congress.

No doubt, Bihar in early 1930s provided fertile grounds for the growth of socialist trends both in terms of leadership and action. The Great Depression, the collapse of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Bihar Earthquake (January 1934) and the resultant calamity affecting lakhs of poor Kisans coupled with their heavy indebtedness- all combined and led to the building of mass organizations of different sections of the people in which the Socialists and the Communists played a vital role.<sup>21</sup> By 1934 some dedicated members of the Congress Socialist Party in Bihar developed close links with the peasant movements organized by the Kisan Sabha. They somehow succeeded in getting Purshottam Das Tandon elected as the president of second provincial conference of Bihar Kisan Sabha held at Gaya (1934). It was also during this period that some of the radical Congressmen chose to join the CSP in Bihar which could be related to the failure of the Congress to implement a radical programme.<sup>22</sup> However, the Indian Left failed to devote sufficient attention to the complex inter-relations of caste and class.<sup>23</sup> Mahatma Gandhi surely had a point when he rebuked Acharya Narendra Deva on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1934 for forgetting to mention untouchability in the draft programme of the Congress Socialist Party.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Supplement to the Bihar and Orissa Police, Abstract of Intelligence Patna, June 1, 1934 in Political Special File No. 100/1934, p. 27, BSA.

<sup>21</sup> Saraswati, Swami Sahajanand, *Kisan Kaise Ladte Hain?* (Hindi), Delhi, 2002, p.9. Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was formed at Sonapur in November 1929. Swami Sahajanand was elected as President and prominent Bihar Congress leader, Dr. Shri Krishna Sinha as General Secretary. Two years later, the Bihar Socialist Party was formed.

<sup>22</sup> Sen, Sunil, *Peasant Movements and Decolonisation, 1885-1947*, Delhi, Communist Party Publication, 1997, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Sarkar, Sumit, *Modern India 1885-1947*, Macmillan, First-published in 1983, Delhi, p. 330.

<sup>24</sup> Tendulkar, D.G., *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, New Delhi, Vol . III, Publication Division, New Delhi, 1962, p. 344.



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