



Patrons and Mobilisers: Caste Mobility Movements in Bihar, 1900-1930

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The caste movements amongst the Bhumihar Brahmans, Ahirs and Kurmis of Bihar during the early twentieth century posit enormous problems of characterization. On the one hand was the movement by the Bhumihars for re-asserting their traditional superior status in the social hierarchy, while on the other, were the movements by the Ahirs and Kurmis for claiming higher ritual status as well as pursuing socio-economic advancement. The prime motive behind the movements of the two latter communities was the desire to get rid of their socio-economic oppression by the zamindars of upper castes. The caste movements helped in the spread of education amongst the communities concerned. Boarding houses were established, scholarships instituted, schools founded, and generally, endeavors were made to make education more accessible and cheaper to the caste brethren. Desirable success was however, not achieved in popularizing female education which was perhaps the most important means of bringing about reform, since one of the greatest problems of Indian reform was the emancipation, physical, mental and economic, of women. The caste movements also sought to discourage child marriage and reforming other marriage customs including dowry. Here also only partial success was achieved and there were numerous instances where the patrons themselves violated rules more frequently instead of observing them. Nevertheless, marriages came to be celebrated on a more economical scale and child-marriages were few. At the same time, the caste movements re-established the old values like wearing the sacred thread.

The caste movement among the Bhumihars gained momentum when a lower social status was accorded to them in the early censuses which were inconsistent with their traditional zamindari status. They were economically the strongest of all castes in Bihar. Their leaders and patrons



particularly Sir Ganesh Dutt and Sahajanand Saraswati took active interest in the caste questions and mobilized their caste men for the re-assertion of their Brahman status. Surprisingly, it did not take many years for the Bhumihars to make others recognize their higher social status. Swami Sahajanand deeply studied ancient scriptures and carried out an extensive socio-cultural survey of the Bhumihars in different parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh which enabled him to trace the Brahmin origin of the Bhumihars.¹ Having satisfied himself by his researches about the veracity of the Bhumihars' claim, Sahajanand decided to pursue the matter further by encouraging them to perform *purohiti*. In his second book, *Brahman Samaj Ki Sthiti* (Condition of the Brahmin Society), he called upon the Bhumihars to practice *purohiti* as a matter of self-respect. In order to train them in the knowledge of rituals, Sahajanand wrote *Karmakalap*. Later on, the questions of *purohiti* and active participation in the national movement drove a wedge between the moderates (led by Sir Ganesh Dutt) and the extremists (led by Swami Sahajanand) in the ranks of the Bhumihar Brahman movement and its main organ, the Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha. The split of 1925-26 was also roughly on these lines of the rich and politically loyalists on the one hand and the not-so-rich and nationalists on the other. Sahajanand decided to throw in his lot with the non-landlord section, and in order to teach their children Sanskrit, he set up an ashram named Shri Sitaram Ashram at Bihta near Patna in 1927.

But the impact of the caste movement among the Bhumihars did not end with others recognizing their higher social status. In fact, it went far beyond such modest aims. In the process of setting up Shri Sitaram Ashram, Sahajanand met a large number of Bhumihar peasants of the neighbouring areas who, as tenants, were exploited by the Zamindars of their own caste. In other words, there were instances of agrarian conflicts in the province which also subsumed within themselves elements of class conflict. At the same time, intra-caste conflicts overlapped the boundaries of what Andre B'eteille calls 'communities.'² Several instances of atrocities

¹ Saraswati, Swami Sahajanand, *Brahmarshi Vansha-vistar (Expansion of the Brahmarshi Clan)* in Hindi, Ch. II, Shri Sitaram Ashram, Bihar, Patna, 3rd edn., July 1971.

² Andre B'eteille, *Caste, Class and Power*, Bombay, 1966, p. 208.



committed by Bhumihar Zamindars on their caste brethren (tenants) compelled Sahajanand to establish Paschim Patn Kisan Sabha during the last months of 1927. Initially, this was done on a quite moderate basis as a mediating agency between the peasants and the Zamindars. But Sahajanand and the movement he started were destined to advance far beyond such modest beginnings.

The Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha saw its premature death in 1929 as a result of increasing differences between Sir Ganesh Dutt and Swami Sahajanand. The Monghyr Session (1929) of the Mahasabha was the last one in its career spanning over more than three and a half decades. Thereafter, Sahajanand devoted himself whole heartedly to the cause of organizing the peasantry in Bihar. Thus, of the two most important leaders of the caste movement amongst the Bhumihars, Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh's chief concern was, Nirmal Sengupta argues, with the elite amongst his castemen and he ended up as one of the chief spokesmen of the landlord's interests in the Bihar Provincial Council.³ Of the other, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati's concern about the depressed social status of the Bhumihars, Sengupta points out, developed into a concern for the depressed in general and led him to become the undisputed champion for the cause of the peasantry struggling to be freed from the oppressive Zamindari system.⁴ It would be pertinent to take note of the fact that what added to Sahajanand Saraswati's strength was the band of young Bhumihar activists who had been enlightened by the idea of fighting oppression and exploitation during the course of the Bhumihar Brahman movement and continued to pursue that motto afterwards. Sahajanand gradually moved towards agitation on issues such as *begar*, *chapa* (Zamindars prohibiting ryots from threshing their crop) and *danabandi* (the system of fixing land-rent on the basis of the actual produce of the land) which severely affected relatively less affluent cultivators who were mainly tenants. Shri Sitaram Ashram became the center of struggle and many Bhumihar, Gwala and other ryots of neighbouring areas started coming there, narrating their

³ Sengupta, Nirmal, 'Caste as an Agrarian Phenomenon in Twentieth century Bihar', in Arvind N. Das and V. Nilakant (eds.), *Agrarian Relations in India*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1979, p. 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.



hardships before Sahajanand who led them in their struggle against the Zamindari oppression and exploitation. The Bhumihaar Zamindars on their part, stopped all financial help to the Ashram and became its bitter critic. Their opposition to the Ashram made Sahajanand realize that the affluent sections of the community wanted to keep Caste Sabhas and institutions as a tool in their hands to strengthen their own positions. Thus, the basically caste questions raised among the Bhuminars took on a peasant complexion and, what had started initially as a caste-welfare and socio-religio-cultural movement, developed later on in the form of a class struggle between the ryots and the Zamindars. This changed scenario paved the way leading to the formation of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha in November 1929, an organization initially dominated by the upper stratum of the peasantry with very limited lower caste peasant's participation in it.

The caste movement amongst the Ahirs and the Kurmis, beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century, gave expression to their long-standing socio- economic grievances and sought solutions to their problems within the existing social fabric. What was significant was that in both the movements the castes involved were not at the lowest rungs of the social ladder and at least a section among them was economically well off by local standards. Their numerical strength was also substantial. All these were decisive factors in their protests against the traditional elites and their domination. The colonial government had its share of responsibility in preparing the ground leading to the emergence of such movements.

During the early decades of the twentieth century the main emphasis of the caste movements amongst the Ahirs and the Kurmis of Bihar was on the efforts for caste mobility, and for this purpose they adopted the Kshatriya model of Sanskritization. The Kshatriya Varna became their reference group of identification. Consequently, they began to wear the sacred thread on a social scale to affirm the Kshatriya status which they found in their caste mythologies. The mobility efforts were spearheaded, in the initial stages of the movement, by the elites of both the aspiring communities who first came into contact with the outside world and thus experienced modernization. It is also significant to note that the prosperous groups amongst the Ahirs and the



Kurmis were most involved in the process of raising the status of the respective castes since it were they who suffered immensely from the general lower status of their own communities and felt status dissonance. The identification with the Kshatriya Varna made available to them the means for covering the gap between their achieved and ascribed status. Some of them were attracted towards the new message of social reform propagated by the Arya Samaj.

While outwardly the Gwala and the Kurmi movements took social and religious forms, they soon developed into economic conflicts between the upper-caste landlords and the lower-caste ryots followed by violent encounters. Abolition of the custom of *Begar* and privileged price for the produce of the Ahir and Kurmi ryots became their battle-cry. In the mid-nineteen twenties, attempts were also made to form well-knit political organizations. The formation of the Triveni Sabha was an example of federating local caste Koeri with the Ahir and the Kurmi. But it could not survive beyond mid- nineteen thirties and withered away after a decade of its existence. It is noteworthy that these caste movements encompassed within themselves important issues of class-conflict.

A deeper analysis of the three caste movements in Bihar reveals that they had also close connections with the wider forces in society. The main result of the colonial land policy in Bihar was gradual alienation of land from peasants with smaller holdings leading to their impoverishment and the subsequent increase in the numbers of landless agricultural labour. On the other hand, there was further strengthening of the already dominant position of Zamindars as big land owners. The separation of Bihar from Bengal in 1911 and the consequent expansion in the modern avenues of status mobility benefited the already privileged section of the society in the newly carved out province who took disproportionate advantage of the fresh opportunities. In this entire process, the have-nots were left far behind. Amongst the former, the Bhumihars led the Brahmans and the Rajputs against the domination of the Kayasthas in the public services and public affairs. On the other hand, the under privileged caste groups of Ahirs, Kurmis and others



were harnessed by their respective caste associations which made them realize the deprivation they had suffered and urged upon them to opt for organized action to mitigate these deprivations.

These caste movements did not run parallel or counter to the National Movement. True, a politically loyalist section existed within the Bhumihaar Brahman movement but, with the rising crescendo of the freedom struggle and its mass base amongst the Bhumihaars, the loyalist forces soon realized their utter helplessness in stemming the tide. In fact, nationalist and progressive forces led by Sahajanand took active part both in the social movement of the Bhumihaars and the India's struggle for independence side by side. The Gwala movement was also nationalistic in orientation and supported the policies of the Congress including the abolition of untouchability. It highlighted the contributions made by the Ahris to the national movement. Thus, they saw their movement as a part of the national movement. Similarly, the Kurmis also joined the freedom struggle and the Indian National Congress in the twenties and thirties of the last century. The president of the twenty-second session of the All-India Kurmi Kshatriya Mahasabha, Das Singh, an advocate from Patna, called upon the people to make efforts for achieving *Poorna Swaraj* (complete freedom) by the Indian National Congress.

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