

Agrarian Nationalism after Independence in India with special reference to Patiala Muzara Movement (1947-2000) A.D

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Abstract:

After independence various agrarian reforms were started by the Congress government at centre in order to reorganise the agriculture sector of India which was badly affected by the colonial policies of the British Government of India. But after these major agrarian reforms in the agricultural sector of India we see once again agrarian nationalism in India from in one form or other form. In this research paper I have mentioned the agrarian nationalism in the form of Patiala Muzaras Movement.

Keywords: Maoists, Naxalite, Muzara, Telangana, Nizam, Sanghatna, etc.

The years since independence have seen agrarian nationalism of enormous variety, The agrarian nationalism was reflected in the form of agrarian struggles and continued in one or other form like Kharwar Tribal's Movement in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar in 1957 and 1958, the Bhils Movement in Dhulia Maharashtra from 1967-75 and Patiala Muzaras Movement. Among these movements the Patiala Muzaras Movement was the first movement after independence which reflected the agrarian nationalism of peasants of Patiala. It was the movement which got the attention of both Congress and left.¹ The Congress gave the leadership to this movement through Praja Mandal. With the coming of independence Patiala joined the union of India, but due to non responsible government of Maharaja of Patiala the movement became violent which got the attention of Ministry of State in Delhi which led to the formation of PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union) in July 1948. And PEPSU Occupancy tenants Propriety Rights Act came promulgated through which tenants became the owners of land.²

Patiala Muzara Movement

The Muzara or tenants' movement that was going on in Patiala (the largest princely state in Punjab, that had become notorious for its repressive and rapacious maharaja) at independence

had its origins in the late nineteenth century. Biswedars (the local term for landlords), who earlier had only some mafia claims or revenue-collecting rights, due to their growing influence in the

Administration, succeeded in claiming proprietary status (imitating the pattern in British India where zamindars or revenue collectors with customary rights only to retain a share of the revenue had been made into landowners) and relegated the entire body of cultivating proprietors of roughly 800 villages, comprising one-sixth the area of the state, to the position of occupancy tenants and tenants-at-will.³ The new tenants regarded the new landlords as parvenus, who had no legitimate right to the land which had belonged to the tenants for generations, and not in the manner in which a traditional tenantry might regard their old, established, feudal landowners, whose right to the land had acquired a certain social legitimacy by virtue of its very antiquity. The grievance festered, but the opportunity for expression came only with the new wave of political awareness brought by the national movement and its associated movements such as the Akali and the Praja Mandal movements in the 1920s. But the repressive atmosphere in Patiala made any political activity extremely difficult, and it was only in the late 1930s with the change in the political atmosphere brought about by the formation of Congress ministries in many provinces that it became possible for a movement to emerge. By then, Communists were quite active in the peasant movement in the neighbouring British Punjab, and they soon emerged as the leading force in the Muzara movement as well. From 1939, a powerful movement emerged and from 1945 it escalated into an open confrontation between Muzaras and Biswedars, with the state intervening mainly to institute cases of non-payment of batai (rent in kind) and criminal assault. Numerous armed clashes took place at different places, some over forcible possession of land, and others over forcible realization of batai. The Praja Mandal, which spearheaded the anti-Maharaja democratic movement, under the influence of Bishu Bhan, who was sympathetic to the Communists and the tenants' cause, extended support. This gave strength to the tenants as the Praja Mandal had the weight of the Congress behind it. With the coming of independence, Patiala joined the Indian Union, but made no moves to grant Responsible Government. The Maharaja, in fact, isolated by the opposition of all political groups, launched severe repression on the muzaras, leading to appeals to the Ministry of States in Delhi by the Praja Mandal on behalf of the tenants.⁴ The repression decreased after the formation of the PEPSU in July 1948, a new province comprising the erstwhile princely states of Punjab. However, with the state unable to assert its authority, the situation was

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increasingly beginning to resemble that of a civil war in which the contending classes or political groups were left, by and large, to settle the issue between themselves as best as they could. Increasingly, as some landlords began to use armed gangs, the necessity arose for the movement to resist this armed onslaught by organizing its own armed wing. The decision to organize an armed volunteer corps was given a concrete form by the formation in 1948 of the Lal Communist Party, by Teja Singh Swatantar and a breakaway group of Punjab Communists, mostly belonging to the 'Kirti' group which originated in the Ghadr movement and had always had an uneasy relationship with the CPI. Thus, by the end of 1948, this small band of armed men was in place, whose duty was to rush to the aid of muzaras who were threatened with physical, especially armed, assault by the Biswedars and their organized gangs. The fear of the 'armed force' helped to keep Biswedars in check. However, quite contrary to popular notions, and Communist mythology, the size of this 'armed force' was never more than 30 or 40 people, the largest estimate being 100. This armed force was also not meant to take on the forces of the state, as was clearly shown by the Kishangarh incident in January 1949, in which four members of the armed force lost their lives. Anticipating an assault by the government forces, since a policeman had died in an earlier clash, the Communist leaders had wisely decided to send away the main body of the force, maintaining only a token presence so that the people did not feel abandoned. Dharam Singh Fakkar and others who were arrested in this incident were acquitted after a defence was organized by the left-wing Congressmen led by Brish Bhan. The situation changed radically with the formation of a new, purely Congress ministry in 1951, in which Brish Bhan was deputy chief minister and his group had a strong presence. An Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee was set up to make recommendations and, till such time as the legislation could be enacted, the PEPSU Tenancy (Temporary Provision) Act was promulgated in January 1952 which protected tenants against eviction. In the meantime, the general elections intervened, and the Congress failed to secure a majority on its own in PEPSU. Now was the chance for the three Communist legislators to pay back some of the debts they owed to Brish Bhan and his group, but they chose instead to support Rarewala, the Maharaja's uncle, on the specious plea that they secured some minor reduction in compensation to be paid to Biswedars. Other accounts suggest a deal by the CPI (with whom the Lal Communist Party had merged) with the Alkalis in Punjab for seat-sharing in the elections. Rarewala's ministry also collapsed without passing the agrarian legislation, and it was the introduction of President's

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Rule that brought about a qualitative change in the situation, as the President issued the PEPSU Occupancy Tenants (Vesting of Proprietary Rights) Act (1953). Under this act, occupancy tenants could become owners of their land by paying compensation amounting to twelve times the land revenue, an amount which (given the wartime and post-war inflation and the fact that land revenue continued to be assessed at the pre-war rates) was none too large. This legislation, though it did not meet fully the Communists' demand of transfer of proprietary rights without compensation, was obviously found acceptable by the tenants, and no further resistance was reported. The Communists continued, however, to condemn the new agrarian legislation as inadequate because the Biswedars' lands were not being confiscated without compensation. This resulted in their growing isolation from the peasants, a process that was also furthered by their desertion of their erstwhile comrades-in-arms in the muzaras movement and the Praja Mandal, the left-wing Congress group led by Brish Bhan. In the long run, the Communists were also the losers in this game, because they were too weak to struggle effectively on their own against the gradual ascendancy of the Alkalis and other communal and semi-communal and right-wing groups. This was most poignantly expressed by an 85-year-old grassroots Communist worker to the authors' in 1981: 'These people for whom we fought so hard do not even offer us a drink of water these days.'⁵

Conclusion:

To sum up we can say that the signs of agrarian nationalism after independence was in the Muzaras Movement of Patiala which was launched in Patiala in late 1930s under the leadership of Harman Singh of Dharmgrah, Jagir Singh of Phaguwalia, Wazir Singh Daftriwala, Pritam Singh Gujran. And after independence it was given leadership by Praja Mandal Group led by Jagir Singh and Patiala Kisan Committee led by Hanam Singh of Daramgrah. The Praja Mandal the left wing of the Congress changed situation radically when it achieved its goal with the formation of new Congress ministry in which Brish Bhan as the deputy minister and PEPSU Tenancy Act was promulgated in January 1952.

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