

I N T R O D U C T I O N

## INTRODUCTION

The history of peasants' movement in India dates back to the 19th Century as the Maratha Peasantry rose in revolt against the British Government in 1873-74. Mahatma Phuley made attempts to depict the sorry state of affairs of the Indian peasants and made it clear that the traders working as middlemen were responsible for destroying the financial conditions of the farmers in the transactions. Due to the introduction of British goods in the market two new classes of traders and money lenders emerged. They would lend money to the peasants for different reasons such as ritual rites, marriages and to purchase seeds at usurious rates of interest.<sup>1</sup> Lokhitwadi and Dadabhai Nauroji had ventilated the grievances of farmers. Lokmanya Tilak had mobilized Indian peasants against the British rule for levying excessive taxes on them when there was famine. Mahatma Gandhi mobilized Indian peasants in Kheda and Champaran against their oppression by the landlords.

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1. Auti, V.B. and Chousalkar Ashok, "Nature of Mahatma Phuley's Political Thought", A paper read at the Third Maharashtra Political Science Conference held at Shivaji University, Kolhapur, January 30-31, 1982.

Swami Sahajanand, Baba Ramchandra, Sardar Patel, N.G. Ranga, Senapati Bapat were also notable leaders of peasant movements in pre-independent India. It is true that the principal aim of the movements was not to gain political power as they were launched to redress specific grievances of the peasants; but we cannot deny the fact that these movements strengthened the hands of the national congress and freedom movement.

During the post-independence period, many political parties have made efforts to undertake farmers' cause by launching movements for different purposes. The communist party made valient efforts to organise Indian peasants in the form of Kisan Sabha to free them from the exploitation of big landlords and money-lenders. The work of Gadavari Parulekar, A.K. Gopalan and H.K. Konar is historic and noteworthy. The peasants' and workers' party in Maharashtra has been trying to mobilise farmers since 1950-51 on agricultural issues such as remunerative prices for the agricultural products and land distribution. The socialist leader like Ram Manohar Lohia also launched struggles to solve the problems of farmers.

At present, the movements of farmers are led by the late Narayan Swami Naidu in Tamil Nadu, H.S. Rudrappa in Karnataka and Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra. They have attracted the attention of the people. Sharad Joshi came to the forefront. as a peasant leader in 1978 when he

undertook the agitation of onion producers at Chakan.<sup>2</sup> He succeeded in mobilizing and exerting pressure on the Government of Maharashtra to pay higher prices to them. The agitation of the sugarcane producers at Nasik was second important agitation led by Sharad Joshi. He mobilized the farmers under the banner of Shetakari Sanghatana. He has provided ideological base 'India versus Bharat' to his Sanghatana. He points out that the rural India which is predominantly agrarian is exploited by Anglicised 'Indians' living in great metropolis.<sup>3</sup> The urban India exploits rural 'Bharat' by buying raw material at cheap rate and by selling finished goods at higher rate. Thus, there is a case for internal colonization. As Sharad Joshi was successful in keeping his agitations apotical by nature, the farmers of all political parties supported him for the solution of their economic problems. Sharad Joshi was interested in developing peasant lobby in India as he was not interested in party politics; hence he wanted the peasants to play pressure group politics and get their demands granted by exercising maximum pressure through militant street action.<sup>4</sup> The Nipani agitation was a grand exercise by Joshi to exert pressure on the Government.

2. Kulkarni, A.R. : "The Story of Onions (Kandyachi Katha - Marathi) Chakan to Nafed, the Weekly Manus, September 16, 1981.
3. Parulkar, Vijay : "Indian Versus Bharat", Yodha Shetakari, Rajhansa Prakashan, Pune, p. 41.
4. Kulkarni A.R. : "Maharashtrache Vichar dhan - Shri Sharad Joshi", Sobat Diwali Special Number, Asmita Prakashan, Pune, 1984.

One of the most important agitations launched by Sharad Joshi was that of the tobacco growers' agitation at Nipani, in 1981. Joshi's appeal to the tobacco growers to join the agitation in the form of 'rasta roko' to draw Government's attention to the long neglected demands of the tobacco growers and to get remunerative prices for tobacco was responded to with all vehemence and enthusiasm. A twenty three days 'rasta roko' agitation was launched by around 30,000 tobacco growers of about a hundred villages in Karnataka and Maharashtra by actually participating in the action. To end the agitation, the police resorted to fire in which 12 persons were killed, about hundred injured and hundreds of them were imprisoned. The main demand of the agitators was payment of remunerative prices for tobacco. The 56,000 acre tobacco producing area was the base of the agitation. Tobacco growing peasants of this area had been nursing a grievance since a long time that they were the victims of worst type of exploitation at the hands of the tobacco merchants of Nipani who made under-payments and practised usury system. Out of this feeling the tobacco growing peasants responded to the militant agitation of 1981 at Nipani. Though the farmers displayed militancy and fought unitedly, they did not get anything substantial. A cooperative society or federation was set-up by the Government but it proved to be a great failure and at present there is no perceptible change in the prevailing dominance of the tobacco traders.

The tobacco growers' agitation provided an incentive to study the different aspects of the agitation. The study of different dimensions of the agitation is important to comprehend the real issues involved as far as peasant leaders and tobacco traders are concerned. The agitation was directed against the local tobacco traders and the Government and it caused some important political implications. Therefore, an attempt is made to understand and analyse the different dimensions of the agitation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

An attempt is made in the dissertation :

- i) To study political implications of the agitation in the light of its success or otherwise.
- ii) To study background of the agitation in the light of exploitation of tobacco growers.
- iii) To describe in detail 23 days agitation with the help of all the available sources.
- iv) To analyse the organization, leadership and nature of the agitation in the light of role played by the traders, the Government and police.

METHOD OF STUDY :

Data for the thesis were collected from sources viz. books, journals, news-papers, pamphlets etc. Most of the

sources are primary sources. For collection of figures of production of tobacco, the help of the research centre in tobacco at Nipani was sought. To fill in the gaps in the information and to comprehend the different trends and under-currents of the agitation, some prominent leaders and activists of the agitation were interviewed. The agitation of the tobacco growers was organised at Nipani due to importance of the Nipani Tract and the excessive exploitation of the cultivators. With the help of these sources, an attempt is made to present a description of the agitation in a coherent manner and through a critical perspective.

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