

CHAPTER - I

RISE OF THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT IN MAHARASHTRA (1934-1948)

THE BACKGROUND

- * Rise of modern industries; and the growth of workers and peasants movement =

The British conquest of India, which introduced modern means of transport and communication, and modern industries brought about a revolution in Indian economy and society.

Before this change took place, 'self-sufficient village communities, based on agriculture, carried on with the primitive plough and bullock-power, and handicrafts, carried on by means of simple instruments, formed the basic features of the Indian economy.'¹ In pre-British era almost all agricultural production and other handicrafts was not for the open market but for the village community itself. In the main it was a economy of self-sufficiency rather than commercial. 'The village society was autarchic. The villages were not open to any market within the country or outside by modern means of communication and transport. And even within a village there was hardly, any trade or commerce in exchange for money. The artisan was remunerated by the village community for the services he rendered to the peasant of the village. The artisan would get some portion of the grain from the village community at harvest time

as his remuneration. The artisan was, therefore, not a private producer but virtually a public servant engaged by the village community.'

Further there was no water-tight distinction between the peasant and artisan or between agriculture and industry. The peasant might also do some domestic spinning, whereas the artisan may also cultivate small plot of land that the village community gave him.' Division of labour was in a rudimentary stage.²

'The village communities were based on possession of the land in common, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on production for use rather than for exchange.'³

This was the overall picture of the Indian society, before the advent of British rule. India had always been a land of villages. No doubt, there were few towns, some were the seat of government, others trading centres or the places of pilgrimage, but it is in the villages that India lived.

Prior to the advent of the British, India had been overrun by other conquerors, coming from the different parts of the world. But they did not affect the economic and social structure of the Indian society. But the British, the new conquerors, represented altogether different civilization and different economic order. They had their own approach towards Indian economy as a modern industrial

nation - state, that conquered India. The impact of the British rule drastically affected the Indian social structure, and hastened the transformation of Indian economy from feudalism to modern industrialism.

The year 1853, marked the opening of railway route in India. Together with the construction of roads and development in the communication system, the establishment of railway, commercialized agriculture and had a big impact on the development of industries. By the middle of the 19th century the British introduced plantation industries, such as, those in indigo, tea and coffee. Gradually cotton and jute industries developed, but upto the beginning of World War I, engineering industries, except mostly as repair shops for railways, had not developed and only the barest beginning in iron and steel industries had been made.⁴

Britain's policy of laissez-faire, pursued, both on doctrinaire ground, and also to protect Britain's own economic interest, was the main obstacle in the way of the development of modern industries in India. As Vera Anstey points out; - "It was thought inevitable, that India should remain predominantly agricultural, whilst the government wished to avoid both the active encouragement of industries that (like the cotton mill industry) competed with powerful British interests, and increased state expenditure."⁵

The experience during the 1st World War disclosed the industrial weaknesses of India, which made it clear

that the policy of 'laissez-faire' would have to be given up. Accordingly the Industrial Commission was set-up, which recommended that the government should take more active interest in the development of industries in India. "This was welcomed by Indian publicists, who had for a long time been demanding not only state aid but also state protection for indigenous industries."⁶

The Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1918, recommended that "a forward policy of industrial development is urgently called for to satisfy the aspirations of her people." As a result of this, industry was made a provincial and "transferred" subject thereby placing it in the hands of provincial governments which were partly controlled by elected representatives.

In 1923 the government of India adopted the recommendations of the Indian Fiscal Commission that a policy of "discriminating protection" should be introduced into India" and it set-up a Tariff Board. Thus, number of industries including iron and steel, cotton, sugar, paper and pulp were granted protection."⁷ Which helped them in their development to certain extent.

But although, the policy of 'discriminatory protection did help in the development of industries, the development was limited to the consumer goods like sugar, cotton, iron and steel only. Prior to the out break of IInd World War, India was almost wholly dependent on capital

goods, like machinery, without which the development of modern industries was impossible. 'Before the IInd World War, the large-scale industries that were set-up in India were primarily in cotton and jute. These cotton and jute industries employed more than 40 per cent of workers employed in large industrial establishments in India.

'World War IInd, like the Ist World War gave the fillup to industrialization, but even then the development was more in consumer goods than in capital goods industries.'⁸

It was only after 1947, when India achieved its freedom, the political difficulties that existed due to the conflict of interest with the ruling foreign power, disappeared. India then could adopt a full-fledged scheme of protection of Indian industries.

With the establishment of British rule in Maharashtra, in 1818, the development that took place in Maharashtra in the field of agriculture and industry was the same, as it was elsewhere in India. The Maharashtrian society has undergone a tremendous change with the growth of industrialization. The growth of industrialization in Maharashtra was comparatively more than in any other part of India. Upto the IInd World War many factories got established in the different parts of the Maharashtra. Cotton industry was the major industry in Maharashtra. Bombay and Solapur became the main centres of cotton industry. Sugar industry was the second largest industry

in Maharashtra. Sugar mills were established at Belapur, Tilaknagar, Phaltan, Walchandnagar, Ravalgaon, etc. Apart from these two major industries, engineering and other small scale industries developed in different parts of the Maharashtra.

The Growth of Labour Movement

From 1880's modern industries began to develop in India. This development brought into existence the Indian industrial class, as well as, an Indian working class. The growth of an Indian working class gave rise to labour movement in India. In the beginning, these workers were led by middle class intellectuals. Gradually they began to use the weapon of strike and collective bargaining, and in the course of time, working class movement in India developed the much required socialistic orientation.

Though the first spontaneous and unorganised labour movement started in the plantations, the first organised labour movement in India - though not as yet, through the instrumentality of properly constituted trade union - developed among the workers in the railways and the printing presses, and then spread in the textile industry. Some trade unions were formed among the workers in the railways and the printing presses the real and effective beginning of the trade union movement in India took place in the textile industries in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Calcutta and Madras. This was quite natural because of the large

concentration of workers; in the textile industry, and the higher political consciousness prevailing in the cities where the factories had been set up.⁹

The workers that came to these factories were drawn from the landless proletariat class or they belonged to the ruined artisans class, who were pushed to the cities in search of an employment. In those days farmers, to a great extent were responsible for the exodus of the rural population to the cities.

Margaret Mead, in her book, "The Indian Peasant Uprooted", writes - "Silent and patient, reluctant and bewildered they came, by boat, by road and by train. They came from the village, whose long history is written in custom and in mutual co-operation, to the city whose brief history is written in change and in cut-throat competition."¹⁰

The workers, in the early days, were too weak to launch any struggle against the evils they were facing, nor did the government, wedded to the policy of 'laissez-faire'; initially took any steps to protect the interest of the workers. Accordingly, "the worst features of the early industrial system of Britain were reproduced in India. Working hours for the workers in the factories were not fixed. And women and children were employed indiscriminately."

Attention to these evils were first of all, were drawn by Major Moore, the Chief Inspector of the Bombay Cotton Department, through the publication of report. His report gave rise to some agitation in England. And

accordingly the first factory commission was appointed in 1875. The employers in India naturally opposed to the introduction of any factory act; but a well known Indian social worker in Britain Sorabjee Shaprujee Bengalee, sent a draft bill on factory legislation to the Governor of Bombay in April 1878.¹² "It is interesting in this connection to note that the course of factory legislation in India was helped by Lancashire Millowners who looked with jealousy at the development of cotton textile industry in India."¹³

In 1881, the first Indian Factory Act was passed and although the scope of the Act was very limited, it certainly a landmark in the history of workers movement, because for the first time it recognised the rights of the working class in a statute passed by the government. In 1891, another Indian Factory Act was passed on the basis of the recommendations of the Indian Factory Commission of 1890.¹⁴

Both these acts came into existence, not as a result of any movement of the Indian workers or Indian political leaders. But these legislations were the results of the agitations of the British philanthropists and Indian social reformers. But, nevertheless, this period of 1880's marked the beginning of labour movement in Maharashtra, particularly in Bombay.

The credit of India's first labour leader, or one of the first labour leader, has been given to Narayan Meghaji Lokhande; who was working as a clerk in a cotton mill. In 1880 he became an editor of the newspaper



"Din Bandhu", which began to call itself 'Journal in the interest of the working class.' He later on founded the Mill Hands Association. In 1884, he organised a meeting of textile workers, which submitted a petition of demands to the Factories Commission.¹⁵ But it is doubtful whether the Mill Hand's Association was really an organisation in the true sense of the term.

It was in 1909, with the foundation of Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha, that the real and organised workers welfare association came into existence. This association was founded by S.K. Bole and others. Its aims were - to aid workers in their difficulties, to open schools for workers children, and to settle struggles with factory owners. It represented workers' grievances during the 1918-19 textile worker's strike and in 1919 it organized the first conference of Bombay workmen.'

Another organization was also founded in 1909, viz.- The Social Service League. N.M. Joshi, a well-known labour leader was the most prominent leader of this organization, who was appointed as a labour representative to many conferences.¹⁶ These organizations, founded before 1920, were reformist in nature, seeking to represent worker's grievances to the owners and the government but opposing to the more radical measures like strikes.¹⁷

Development of The New Labour Movement :

It was only after 1920, that the labour movement in Maharashtra, took a new and to some extent a radical direction. Richard Newman, in his book, "Labour Organization in the Bombay Cotton Mills - 1918-1929" brings forth three phases of discontent among the labour -

- i) Period of rising prices in 1918-20;
- ii) Period of wage cuts from 1922-25 and
- iii) Period of standardization from 1927-29

Which produced each two general strikes and an increasingly effective trade union.¹⁸

The Girni Kamgar Mahamandal, the mill worker's organization came to the fore during the 1923's strike. Initially, two non-manual workers - viz. Mayekar, a clerk and Bhatavadekar, a jobber, were the leaders. The striking feature of this organization was that most of its members were actual labourers. It was through the organization of G.K.M., that the workers movement in Bombay became more aggressive and militant. As the organization grew, new and more militant leaders came to the fore front. 'Most important of these militant workers leaders were A.A. Alve and G.R. Kasle, both had been originally tenant farmers in the Kokan.'¹⁹ It was through those militant workers leaders, the communist leaders in Bombay got associated with the G.K.M. organisation; which afterwards became the main channel of support to the working class movement.

Thus it was during the 1920's that the communists began to be more active in the labour movement especially in Bombay. Among the prominent communist labour leaders of Bombay during this period were S.A. Dange, later the Chairman of the C.P.I., R.S. Nimbkar, K.N. Jogalekar and S.V.Ghate.

In 1920, another development took place at the national level. It was in this year the 'All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)', the first All-India organisation of labour movement was formed; with Lajpat Rai - one of the eminent congress leader - as President. And from the very inception, the AITUC had close links with Indian National Congress.

The communists tried to obtain a measure of control over the AITUC. And in 1927, S.V. Ghate, one of the communist leaders from Bombay was elected as one of its secreteries. In 1927, the first day of May, it was for the first time in India, labour day was celebrated in Bombay. Since then, First of May, of every year has been celebrated as May Day or Labour Day in various parts of India.²¹

The year 1928, saw a considerable amount of unrest among the workers in Bombay. Out of 203 strikes, that took place in India, 111 took place in Bombay.²² In this year the workers of the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal joined with the communist to form a new union - as 'Girni Kamgar Union'; which is also known as Red Flag or Lal Bavta Union. This newly formed union gave a call for a general strike of the

textile workers of Bombay. Due to the success of the strike, there was a tremendous expansion of the union membership; estimated at between 50 - 100,000.

But the important thing here is not the number but the form in which this expansion took place. This expansion took place because various 'mill committees' (Girni Samitya) were formed. These Committees were composed of members elected as representatives from each department in a mill - By 1929 there were 42 such committees on record; which involved a huge membership of working class in the union activity.

These committees were informally recognized, doing their activities independently, to a great extent, from the central organisation of the union. They had their own subscriptions and enrollment, they use to formulate grievances and bargain with the mill owners independently and on occasion they even initiated strikes!²³

But this radical development was very short lived as it failed to get hegemony; and Mill Committees did not last long; due to various divisions amongst themselves.

Though Bombay was the main centre of workers organization and agitation, in other parts of the Maharashtra also, particularly at the textile centres, trade unions came into existence during 1920's. And we find the instances of workers agitations at these different industrial centres during 1920's. Thus, "There were strikes at Pulgaon (Wardha)

in 1927 and at Nagpur in 1928 in the B.N. Railway. R.S. Ruiker and R.S. Phule took lead in organising the labour of Nagpur, and Girni Mazdoor Sangh was established in 1927. At Solapur there was a strike of textile workers in 1928. In Amravati district, forest workers were organized, while trade unions of miners were started at Tumsar in Bhandara district.

Though not factory workers, the bidi workers of Vidarbha got organized and formed 'Madhya Pradesh Bidi Mazdoor Sangha' in 1931. The employers used to effect reductions in wages from time to time. To counter these attacks the workers had to resort to strikes. A little later, sugar workers were organized in Nagpur and Satara districts.²⁴

Landed Aristocrats and Peasant Movements :

British, after their conquest in Maharashtra in 1818, introduced individual ownership of land, which brought about an agrarian revolution. This phenomenon, known as "land settlement", awarded ownership of land to the individual and it also fixed the rate of revenue demand. This was done with two different forms (1) Zamindari settlement and (2) Ryotwari settlement.

"The Zamindari settlement which occurred in parts of Konkan and Vidarbha awarded proprietorship of land to the former feudal intermediaries, men who had held political and revenue claims to large areas of land under the higher scale political overlords.

The Ryotwari settlement, gave proprietorship to the primary cultivating landholders of the village, which was instituted through most of Maharashtra.

This new system introduced by the British rulers, instead of creating a system of small but prosperous peasantry gave rise to land concentration connected with an increasing peasant indebtedness.²⁵ While giving proprietorship to the cultivators, British also fixed the rate of revenue demands. They changed the land revenue system basically. "For the first time, the principle of state ownership of all the lands got translated into administrative practice. The assessment used to be revised after thirty years and at every revision it was increased by 20% to 77%. Payment was to be in cash."²⁶

With the continuing need for cash to pay land revenues and with the increasing participation in a cash economy, peasants fell into debt to a growing class of money lenders who became de-facto landlords controlling the produce of mortgaged land and frequently actual owners.²⁷ This policy of the British led to various types of exploitation in the society, which had administrative recognition.

Secondly, the establishment of railways, construction of roads and the transport facilities, commercialized agriculture. It came to be integrated into the complex of international market. This naturally caused friction.²⁸

The susceptibility of peasants to world prices has been noted. This appeared particularly true in the middle

of the 19th century when a cotton boom resulted from the fact that cotton from the U.S. was cut off during the Civil War, and Indian Cotton filled the gap. This resulted in temporary rise in prices. But the cessation of the Civil War and rapidly falling prices, together with bad season after 1867, intensified pressure on the peasantry, was a primary factory in the widespread uprising against money lenders known as the 'Deccan Riots' of 1875. These 'Deccan Riots' have had a great influence on the Indian society as such.

The third factor which was responsible for the miserable conditions of peasantry was the frequent failure of monsoon leading to the intense famines. Thus during the 2nd half of the 19th century there were acute famines in the years - 1875-76; 1867-68; 1875-96 and another one coupled with plague in 1899-1900. There was a period of progress between 1900 and World War-I, in which war itself had given a temporary stimulus to the economy. But again famines occurred in 1918-19 and 1920-21.²⁹ Hence the peasantry lived under the triple burden,-- the inflexible revenue demand of the government, the claim of the landlord for rent, and the claim of the money lenders for interest.

This triple burden together with occasional famines and the vagaries of cash prices, resulted into peasant indebtedness and even loss of their lands.

Such miserable conditions, on occasion, generated a spirit of recklessness and gave rise to peasant movements or struggles against the Zamindars and the government.

In the beginning these movements were spontaneous and unorganized and took place only when the conditions became unbearable.

During the second half of the 19th century, two outstanding episodes of peasant uprisings took place - one was the 'Santhal Rebellion of 1855' and the second took place in 'Western Maharashtra in 1875', known as Deccan Riots of 1875. The Deccan Riots, as they were known, were confined to the Poona and Ahamadnagar districts. And they were against the Marwari and Gujar Sowkars, who were the money lenders.

"As in many other parts of India, the Marwaries carried on a very lucrative business of lending money to the peasants at a high rate of interest, and very often, the lands were mortgaged as security. It has been estimated by the Commission appointed by the Government, that about one-third of the occupants of government land were burdened with debts which averaged about eighteen times their annual assessment. Nearly two thirds of the debt was secured by mortgage of land, with the consequence that about one eighth of the occupancies had on an average been transferred to the Sowkar, who were mostly marwaries.³⁰

In such an unbearable condition, the bitter feelings against the Marwari Sowkar burst into flames. In an spontaneous act the villagers in many villages declared social and economic bycott on the Marwaries. As a consequences the houses and shops of Sowkars were looted and burnt. Serious disturbances took place in about

33 villages.

In almost every case the object of the rioters was to obtain and destroy the bonds decrees etc. in the possession of their creditors.³¹

The government of India appointed a Commission to inquire into, the nature and cause of these riots. The Commission unanimously held that, the poverty and consequent indebtedness of the cultivators were the real cause of the riots.³²

It was after 1920, that the peasant movement became more organized. The decade of 1920s saw a decisive revolutionary turn in the nationalist, workers and peasant's movements in India.

Anti-colonial nationalism surged up at the beginning of the decade, with the Rowlatt Act agitation and the non-cooperation movement. There were waves of strikes in the field of industry. And the decade marked the beginning of true converization. Peasant uprising occured with new urgency.

R. Palm Dutt observes - "It is in the last two decades since the World War of 1914-18, and especially in the last decade since the world economic crisis, that peasant unrest in India has advanced at a speed without previous parallel and rakes on a more and more clearly revolutionary character. The world economic crisis knocked the bottom out of the already exhausted agrarian economy of India. The resulting process of rack-renting, debt

enslavement and expropriation found its reflection in rising movements of the peasants in all parts of India."³³

The remarkable feature of this period of peasant movement is the formation of "Kisan Sabhas". Through these Kisan Sabhas, the peasant movement came into contact with the national movement. "Peasant Leagues or 'Kisan Sabhas' - that is ongoing class defined organizations of the peasantry as opposed to simply sporadic uprising-emerged in U.P. in 1920-21 to play a significant role in connecting class-based peasant unrest with the non-cooperation led by Gandhi. The Sabhas while using Gandhi's name, rose independently and involved different types of leaders."³⁴

The peasants were drawn into the political struggle of the Indian National Congress on the basis of their own grievances, and on the other hand the leaders of the Indian National Congress took part in the formation of these Sabhas, in need to develop congress mass base.

Thus, though they were formed independently, their link with the Indian National Congress and the nationalist movement, became the main feature of these Kisan Sabhas.

These Kisan Sabhas were formed in almost all parts of India. 'Out of twenty linguistic provinces nineteen had provincial Kisan Committees.'³⁵ The Kisan Sabhas emerged in great strength in Bihar, Andhra and Kerala.³⁶ In 1936, the first All India Peasant Organisation was formed

known as 'All India Kisan Sabha'. These 'Kisan Sabhas' had in almost every case Marxist leadership, specially that of Congress Socialist Party.³⁷

In 1937, elections were held under the Government of India Act. And the formation of the Congress ministries proved a powerful stimulus to peasant organisation. In 1938, huge peasants' struggles took place in all provinces of India; and in many cases won partial success against their grievances.³⁸

In 1942, when the famous 'Quit India' movement started and most of the Congress leaders were imprisoned, mass uprising took place. "All India Kisan Sabha and its provincial branches consistently agitated for the release of the national leaders and the setting up of the national government."³⁹

As far as Maharashtra is concerned, the spread of 'Kisan Sabha' movement was very limited, compared to the other parts of India, like Bihar, Andhra and Kerala. Nevertheless, the peasant movement in Maharashtra did become more and more radical and took a revolutionary character, as in the other parts of India. Two instances of peasant's movement must be mentioned here. One is the Satara Rebellion of 1919-21, the other is anti-small Holding Bill agitation.

'The Satara Rebellion of 1919-21 was a revolt of tenants against Brahman and Marwari (and occasionally non-Brahmin) landlords in association with the Satyashodhak

movement, which took place mainly in the five southern talukas of Tasgaon, Khanapur, Walva, Koregaon and Karad. Apart from the boycotts of lands by tenants, rebels used other methods also. They harvested the landlords crops forcibly for themselves, looted and burned houses, and engaged in beatings.⁴⁰

Another instance was the agitation against the Small Holdings Bill (Tukade Bill) during 1927-28.

In 1927 the government framed 'Small Holdings Bill' which had two parts -

(1) a proposal to prevent further fragmentation by limiting the ability to divide land among heirs and forcing the sale of 'uneconomic' fragments (2) a programme for consolidation of fragmented strips owned by the same person in selected villages.

There was a wide-spread agitation against the bill as it was clearly against the majority of the peasant having very small portion of land to cultivate.

There were village meetings and taluka conferences and finally provincial peasant conference which was held at Poona, which was presided by Vittal Ramji Shinde.⁴¹

In 1942, when there was a call for the British to 'Quit India' because of which mass uprisings took place in Maharashtra, in which peasants participation was noteworthy. During this period the peasant based rebellions also got involved in guerrilla warfare, attacks on British outposts,

and even the establishment of parallel government. The workers and agricultural masses of Maharashtra/ this shows, got more involved in the national movement in latter stages; which initially got organised as peasant movements.

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