

Agrarian Struggle and Gambhira Sah in Champaran, Bihar, 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to comprehend agrarian struggle which occurred in Champaran district, after the independence of India. As the Champaran Satyagraha, launched by Gandhi during the colonial period, has been a most celebrated peasant movement which was basically for the causes of reasonably rich tenants, but the problems of those who worked as agricultural labourers and sharecroppers were hardly touched by the peasant leaders during the colonial period. After independence, a new kind of the struggle, whose social base was not the tenants, but the labourers and sharecroppers, emerged in the district in 1960s and 1970s. The paper gives a large space to the most celebrated leader Gambhira Sah for the poor peasants, labourers and sharecroppers of Champaran. He envisaged *Garib Raj* (rule of the poor). The paper, in the end, illustrates the course of the struggle after the killing of Gambhira Sah.

Keywords: Champara, agrarian struggle, Bihar, agricultural labourer, sharecropper, Champaran Satyagraha, peasants, Gambhira Sah, Naxalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Champaran district of Bihar, originally formed as an independent unit in 1866, had witnessed a prolonged legacy of agrarian struggles and movements, particularly in the 20th century. The specificity of the struggles and the movements had been in their varieties. Peasants and agrarian labouring classes adopted a diversified way of resistance. They followed from the Gandhian principle to the Communist based ideologies to Naxalism. In 1917 Champaran Satyagraha had been launched by Mahatma Gandhi, the most celebrated mass leader of the anti-colonial movement of India, against the European planters. The active leadership of the Satyagraha was provided by upper caste 'peasant elites' or rich peasants who had been facing problems to expand their profitability due to the *Tinkathia* system* and European dominance in the agrarian structure of the district [1]. The Satyagraha was only limited against the European planters and it did not touch, cautiously, the 'local exploitative elements' [2]. In 1950s Communist Party of India (CPI) waged an agrarian struggle famously known as Sathi Farms struggle in the district for the 350 acres of the Sathi farmland which was illegally transferred to Shahis brothers in 1946. The transfer was made by ignoring the claims of the local people. The tenants began to

organise themselves against this transfer in the late 1940s, however, in the 1950s and 1960s their struggle got intensified under the leadership of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. In the late 1960s, the Sathi Farm struggles inspired the tenants to lead their struggle against big estates like Shikarpur [3].

Jhokia: East Champaran Kisan Sabha

In the late 1960s in Jhokia village of Turkaulia block in East Champaran, Kisan Sabha was formed by the workers of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) to fight against landowners mainly those who became newly emerged as 'petty tyrants' after the zamindari abolition. The landowners had adopted several ways of oppression such as extracting *beth-begar*, beating up and abusing labourers, sexual assaults, and harassments of poor rural women, imposing exorbitant interest rates on the labourers [4]. Ram Ashray Singh, a Bhumihar landowner was the prominent leader who organised agrarian labouring classes and poor peasant against the social and economic exploitations and oppressions. He stepped cautiously due to his class origin and caste identity and tactically, he, initially, took up the issues related to social oppression and began 'passive resistant'. The poor peasants were persuaded to defy 'traditional respect' such as continuing to sit when landlords

approached, wearing shoes by youth peasants, not admitting the decision of the arbitration made by landlords to iron out intra-community disputes [5].

The landlord got instigated from the 'passive resistance' and began to intimidate and harass the peasants and the labourers day-to-day, abusing, slapping, mocking, and disparaging became a normal act of the landlords. However, the peasants and the labourers began to retaliate in the same way, which culminated in several clashes. The retaliation was viewed by the landlords as a challenge of their well-established power based on caste tradition and class dominance. The landlords frequently began to attack and to call the police who often used excessive and repressive power to crush the rebellious mood of the peasants and the labourers. Against the combined oppression of the police and the landlords, the peasants and labourers and their womenfolk and children got mobilised. Several peasants and the labourers and their leaders including Ram Ashray Singh were arrested, but he was released on bail on the intervention of the CPI (M). Afterward, he raised economic issues and the first economic issue was the wages of the agricultural labourers. However, middle peasants were exempted to pay higher wages. The strike was a usual mode of protest. Eventually, the labourers became successful to get increase wages about 25 percent [6]. According to Das (1983), the major setback of the agrarian struggles led by the Kisan Sabha of the CPI (M) in the district was "the ambivalence of the political leadership towards parliamentary institutions. Unlike Sahajanand, the Champaran Kisan Sabha leaders still had hopes in achieving a 'judicious mix of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities' [7].

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, agrarian struggles in Champaran district entered another phase and a serious armed insurgency occurred in certain areas district. Bagaha, Narkatiaganj, and Madanpure forest area of the district had witnessed armed agrarian struggles between 1969 and 1972 [8]. An outpost of Bagaha Police Station had been attacked by an armed squad of 'Naxalites', consequently the police led a search operation in the areas where activities of the struggles were going on, and killed three Naxalites. Additionally, 88 Naxalites were arrested between January and July 1970 in connection with four cases [9]. But the struggle in Chaurandano block of East Champaran was very noteworthy.

The Struggle in Chauradano

In Chaurandano block of the district, the agrarian struggles became very intensive under the leadership of Gambhira Sah in the late 1970s. In Chaurandano, the agrarian relation was exploitative and society was highly feudal. In this region, many zamindars held hundreds of acres of land and they got cultivated their land through sharecropping. The sharecroppers were not only economically exploited but

also socially exploited and humiliated by zamindars and their goons. Sharecroppers were prevented not only to get their share according to the law but also they were denied to occupancy right according to the tenancy act. The feudal attitude of zamindars and their goons was very humiliating towards the sharecroppers who had to stand up when the zamindars passed by and also whenever they talked with zamindars, they were supposed to keep their voice low, humble tones and respectful manner. Whenever the zamindars wanted to punish the sharecroppers or peasants, they could beat them and evict them from the land. The zamindars did never hesitate to let their goons rob the sharecroppers and take their wife, sister, or daughter [10]. The zamindars always carried guns and other weapons. They had a private army, equipped with various weapons, and were settled in the basti (hamlet) on the land provided by the zamindars. Whenever conflict came about, they were ready to protect the zamindars who often take the help of the police to crush the struggle of the sharecroppers. Agrarian struggle in Chaurandano was for occupancy rights for sharecroppers, fair wages for agricultural labourers, and against sexual violence, feudal exploitation, and other social oppression.

Gambhira Sah: Garib Raj

More than 10,000 poor peasants, including 3000 women, of several neighbouring villages of Mahuawan village of Chaurandano, gathered at the village for a funeral of a beloved leader of the peasants [11]. The leader was Gambhira Sah who envisaged bringing the '*Garib Raj*' (rule of the poor), presumably, the notion was unclear but the expectation of the peasants was not less heightened. Gambhira Sah, Teli by caste, 30, completed his education up to intermediate, was under the influence of a 'communist minded' teacher in his high school. He went to Motihari College. It is said that he was not only a brilliant student but also very vocal and politically active.

After his education, he got a job as a truck mechanic in Motihari and often travelled to Calcutta where he got connected with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI [ML]). In Motihari, he was known his radical views about society. However, later he left his job and returned to his village Mahuawan where he met some young peasants and agricultural labourers and began to organise and mobilise the sharecroppers, the labourers and poor peasants against the tyranny of the zamindars. Gambhira and his friends were being identified as communist, and began to greet each other with 'Lal Salaam'. Although, he got formal education only up to intermediate, he had greater faith in the power of knowledge in revolution and creation of new system. Once he had gone to Nepal, he returned with 1400 books. He often said that "We [had] not only to change the old system but also create a new one. So we must

grasp Marxism and learn from the experience of Communist Movement of other countries” [12].

Organisational Efforts

Gambhira and his supporters formed an organisation called Khetihar Kisan Mazdoor Sangh (KKMS) for the causes of landless labourers, sharecroppers, and poor peasants. He began to advocate a ‘Kranti’ for the Raj and gave a militant orientation of the KKMS. Gambhira formed the first unit of the KKMS at Pipra village, and within one month, around eight panchayats the KKMS organised the masses, and the leadership was provided by many young peasant and labourers’ leaders such as Gambhira, Ramchandra, Madan, and Mohammed Rasul. The KKMS was fighting against the zamindars over economic issues like occupancy rights and wages; however, its fight against social oppression was remarkably successful [13]. Earlier the KKMS was influenced by Samayuk Socialist party, later it departed from the party. Karpoori Thakur had a good understanding with the KKMS and several times he visited its dominated villages. During the emergency period, when Gambhira was in the Bhagalpur central jail, Karpoori Thakur hid with Gambhira’s men [14].

He also encouraged the masses to form village committees in which the problems of the village and contradictions among people were debated and ironed out. In the village committee, the agricultural labourers, poor peasants were made as members. The meeting of the committee was held once in a week and democratic principles were followed in the committee, the people of the village were called by beating drum for joining in the meeting. Around 25 village committees were formed in various villages under the leadership of Gambhira.

Struggle from His Own House

Interestingly, Gambhira began to end the exploitation of the poor peasants from his home and launched a fight against moneylenders who had been exploiting agrarian classes and poor peasants. His father was a moneylender who treated, very badly, to the peasants who borrowed money from him. Gambhira tore all the papers related to money-lending and burnt them [15]. As a result, the fight against moneylenders got momentum. The peasants, the labourers and the sharecroppers of his village and other surrounding villages stopped paying repaying debt and became free from the grip of moneylenders. Furthermore, Gambhira led a successful wage movement in around 50 villages where launching strikes by the labourers was a way to get increased wages, positively, wages increased from 2.5 kg. Paddy to 4 kg. Paddy [16]. The landlords retaliated by stopping lending money to the poor masses. Gambhira quickly responded to the retaliation and made an alternative for the poor. A pool or reservoir of 25 quintals of grains was developed. The

poor could borrow grains from the pool when the need and return it in stipulated time [17].

He held meetings of the poor masses and told them that “our main enemy [was] the zamindar. We [had] too tight him and seize his land” [18]. Under his leadership around 100 acres of land were seized and distributed among poor landless people. The focus on the seizing land of the zamindars motivated the poor peasants and labourers to launch land grab movement in many villages. Installing red flags in the field was the mark of captured land. Similarly, red flags were put in on 100 acres of Munshi Singh of Tinkoni, 50 acres Adapur landlord, 100 acres of Harendra Singh; these were surplus land according to the ceiling act, and Bhoodan land of Darpa Math [19].

Darpa Math and The Killing Of Gambhira Sah

The murder of Gambhira Sah was observed by the rural masses as Martyrdom and it manifested in the huge crowd at the time of his cremation at his village. The immediate cause of the murder was directly linked with the retaliatory action of the mahant of Darpa Math, Ram Khelawan Goswami who held 400 acres of land. The mahant employed 200 labourers for the cultivation of the land but they were fired; because they allegedly had been plotting to capture the whole land with the help of ‘Naxalites’. The mahant made an understanding with other zamindars like Dharman Singh owner of 300 acres land, of the region to crush the labourers’ revolutionary temper. The mahant and the zamindars declared not to employ the labourers. The labourers under the leadership Gambhira Sah immediately demanded employment from the mahant but the mahant and the zamindars were sick with their retaliatory action, not giving employment to the labourers of Darpa. Ultimately, Gambhira travelled several villages and appealed to all the peasants to contribute for the help of the labourers. The idea worked and many peasants came forward to help with grains, ample grains mounted for the labourers. This efforts of Gambhira made the mahant and the zamindars disappointed. They had planned to push the labourers in starvation. However, the labourers continued to get organised and forced the mahant for employment. Meanwhile one day the labourers gathered at the math and repeated their demand but callously, the zamindars the mahant and their goons randomly fired on the gathering, fortunately, no death was recorded but several labourers got injured. Additionally, the zamindars always waited for the opportunity to harass or beat the labourers.

On 20 June 1977, Ramchandra Singh, a zamindar of Tinkoni village was found killed. Several members of ‘the party’ were made accused of the killing. And a police camp was posted at the math for the protection of the mahant and zamindars. But they were not feeling safe as Gambhira was alive, so the zamindars and the mahant framed a plan with the help of the police to eliminate Gambhira and his comrades.

On the night of 2 July 1977, Gambhira and his six comrades were picked up by the police from Bathuahia village where they were sleeping in a hut. They were assured by the police that they were taken to the math for a compromise between the mahant and the labourers. As soon as, the police and the arrested person came out from the village, according to the plan of the zamindars and their goons attacked the arrested person and beaten them. Afterward they were brought to the math, where their hands and feet were tied and hung upside down. They were severely beaten with batons, canes, and rifle butts. Finally, the arrested persons were loaded in a tractor, brought at the Chaurandano thana on the morning of 3 July. Meanwhile, all the zamindars got information about the arrest of the persons; they rushed to the thana with armed with guns, lathis, and canes. In lock-up of the thana, again they were hung upside down, tortured by the police and the zamindars. Special attention was paid to Gambhira during torture. In the lock-up after the cruel beating, the police offered to Gambhira, "leave the party, your life will be spared", Gambhira reacted:

I am making a Party against your tyranny. As long as your oppression continues, people like me will keep on making the Party. I am not doing anything wrong which I should refrain from. It's battle for justice, no matter if I lose my life in this endeavour. Like me, thousands and lakhs more will be born and ultimately this tyrannical system will be overthrown. You can kill me but I will not leave the Party [20].

In the lock-up, Gambhira, while responding to the police, became able to convince the police about his fight against discrimination and atrocities and for social and economic rights. As a result, interestingly, Chowkidars, and policemen refused to beat Gambhira. Finally, the police officers permitted zamindars and their henchmen to beat him to death [21]. However, the process of torture continued around four hours. Eventually, in the lock-up, the beloved leader of the poor masses Gambhira departed from this world. Gambhira's wife reacted to her husband's death in this way: He died for garib raj. We will all work to establish the raj." While her mother Babunia said with pride: He sacrificed himself for garib raj. But he was not my son; he was the son of the whole world." [22]. The leader is still very popular. His statue was unveiled in his native village Mahuavan on 3 July 2007, on the occasion of the 30th death anniversary. Every year, the people assembled in the village on the occasion.

After the Killing of Gambhira Sah

The brutal killing of Gambhira Sah did not discontinue the agrarian struggles in the region. The leaders of peasants and labourers and the followers of Gambhira Sah continued to fight for the rural poor masses, and the activities of the peasant and labourers' organisation- *Khetihar Kisan Mazdoor Sangh*

constantly extended beyond Chaurandano, in fact, the entire Champaran could feel its presence and activities [23]. On 5 August, 1977 in Mahuawan village agrarian upheaval again took place spontaneously when agricultural labourers were in a queue to collect their wages after the completion of the implantation of paddy in the field of a zamindar named Zahur Diwan. The wages were being distributed usually but when the turn of Shekhua, a young labourer came. He was paid only half of his wage, because, according to the zamindar, he was *kamchor* (shirker), lazy. Shekhua became angry and remonstrated. Consequently, he was lashed with cane. The behaviour of the zamindars made the labourers waiting for their wages resentment. Ultimately, the labourers attacked the zamindar and assaulted him. Lathi, spade, sickle whatever they found, took in their hand and used against the zamindar and his relatives who tried to protect him. They were seriously injured and hospitalised. Indeed, after the death of Gambhira, the police and zamindars' repression continued in Mahuawan. The 60 families of poor peasants and labourers of the village left their home due to the repression. However, the violence and repression of the police-zamindars were not limited to the village. As Sinha noted that

Beginning with the murder of Gambhira Sah the whole of Chaurandano area of Champaran [had] witnessed indescribably inhuman oppression and terror marked by killings, torture, arrest and loot of peasants and labourers and humiliation of their women.....Since July there [had] been ten murders and wounding of countless number of peasants and labourers; a hundred people [had] been arrested and a number of houses [had] been looted and demolished leading to the near abandonment of at least four villages [24].

The culmination of the repression was the killing of 5 labourers including a 70-year-old widow of Sukhlahia basti, near Darpa. On 5 September 1977, the zamindars and their goons rampaged the basti and encircled it in the daytime. They entered several huts and dragged out of the labourers including the widow, and beat men, women, and children. The attackers also trapped Ramdeo Ram, Mosadi Mian, Madan Mahato, and Ralal Chamar in their huts. First, they were shot; one died on the spot while another tried to escape, but caught in Pipara village and got shot to death. Finally, at the basti lit a fire of woods and bamboo and threw the remaining three –Rampal Chamar and Madan Mahto – and the old widow Manmatia in the fire, they all were burnt to death. The "four Naxalites and the mothers of Naxalite sons" were killed brutally [25].

The immediate cause of the carnage was the killing of Ramji Mahto, an agent of mahant of Darpa. He had played a key role in the capturing of Gambhira

Sah and his supporters. He was hacked to death near the labourers' basti. The carnage happened in Sukhlahia basti did not stop the struggles of the poor peasants, sharecroppers, and the agrarian labouring classes. On 21st September, 1977, a group of persons ambushed some policemen, belonged to the Darpa math camp, at Pipara village in the night when they were returning from Chaurandano police station. They attacked with *dabila*, a sharp-edged farming tool. The policemen opened fire and ran towards the camp but suddenly a strong mass blocked the way of the policemen. The policemen fired on the mass; as a result, 3 persons got killed. Finally, the policemen reached the camp, shortly a strong police force rampaged and raided the village and arrested a wounded person [26]. Again, in the succeeding year, the labouring classes showed their way to a zamindar, in September 1978 punished the zamindar of Tinkoni village by death. In 1979, under the leadership of a local peasant and labourer's organisation 200 acres of land were seized and distributed among sharecroppers [27]. And in 1981 a successful wage movement was launched in four villages of Chaurandono where in some other villages, at the same time, sharecroppers wear fight for their rights. The local organisation later was merged with the BPKS which organised a huge demonstration against police repression in Baithuhia [28], the village where Gambhira had been caught by the police.

CONCLUSION

Briefly, the labouring agrarian classes of Champaran district had been getting organised and mobilised under the various ideological banners. During the colonial-period Ganghian principle was a major creed to which peasantry class experienced. The principle was succeeded by the communist ideology which played a significant role to mobilise sharecroppers and poor peasants against feudal exploitation. The local workers of the CPI (M) formed the Kisan Sabha to fight against the social and economic exploitation in the countryside of the district. His notion of his *Garib Raj* became very fascinated element to mobilise the rural masses. Indeed, Gambhira Sah made impatiently effort to intensify the agrarian struggle, and because of his effort, after his passing away, one of Gambhira's comrades, Rameshwar Singh reiterated "Gambhira used to say that one should not rest until garib raj was established. Let the zamindars and military kill one Gambhira, we have thousands of Gambhiras here" [29].

Note

*Champaran district was split into two districts: West Champaran and East Champaran in 1971

**Tinkathia* system was a system under which the peasants were forced by European plantation owners to grow indigo on 3/20 part of the total agricultural land of the peasants.

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