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Gandhi and Agrarian Classes

Abha Pandya

Gandhi treated British colonial interests as a distinctly non-Indian category and so long as peasant interests were adversely and directly affected by government policies and actions, Gandhi defended peasant interests with vigour. But when peasant interests were circumscribed by indigenous landed interests, the Congress under Gandhi counselled mutual trust and understanding and compromised continuously in favour of Indian vested interests.

This paper traces the development of Gandhi's views on the relationship between zamindars and kisans in colonial India and discusses how his ideology on the peasant question influenced his actions as the leader of the national movement.

THERE is no doubt that Gandhi more than any other nationalist leader, represented the ethic of peasant India. Yet, objectively, his attitude to the peasants in colonial India was ambiguous and contradictory and consequently his idealist notions for their emancipation failed.

Gandhi recognised the existence of social conflicts in Indian society and felt alarmed at the threat to national unity as a result of these conflicts. He thus sought to harmonise these mutually conflicting interests in order to present a united front against British imperialism. This concern for class harmony during the course of the national movement resulted in a duality in Gandhi's ideology and actions. This duality finds its most explicit expression in the attitude of Gandhi and the Congress to the agrarian classes in colonial India. Gandhi treated British colonial interests as a distinctly non-Indian category and so long as peasant interests were adversely and directly affected by the government, Gandhi defended peasant interests with vigour. But when peasant interests were circumscribed by indigenous landed interests the Congress under Gandhi counselled mutual trust and understanding and compromised continuously in favour of Indian vested interests.

Gandhi's view of India was somewhat coloured by the outlook he had imbibed in his early days in Gujarat and he was considerably influenced by the Jain doctrine of non-violence. Other parts of India had been influenced much less and some not at all. Gandhi, however, took an eclectic view of the development of Indian thought and history and believed that non-violence had been the basic principle underlying it. This indicated a historical bias in Gandhi's mind which he attempted to relate to economic conflicts.¹

Gandhi did not analyse the existing class structure and was content to

speaking in general terms of an all-encompassing peasantry without further qualification. His strategy was to seek a solution to the conflict between zamindars and kisans in a non-violent way by means of converting the oppressor and being just and fair to the oppressed. It was in this context that the concept of trusteeship was developed, as an alternative to class war.

This paper traces the development of Gandhi's views on the relationship between zamindars and kisans in colonial India and discusses how his ideology on the peasant question influenced his actions as the leader of the national movement.

TRUSTEESHIP

Trusteeship was regarded by Gandhi as a compromise between private and state enterprise. Private enterprise, Gandhi believed, led to great and unjustified disparities of wealth. Therefore, a non-violent government and society was "clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the hungry millions and the rich persists".² Moreover, the rich accumulate their wealth by exploiting the masses.³

The basic idea underlying trusteeship is quite simple. The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth, of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a trustee for the remaining to be used for society.⁴ Trusteeship would eliminate all possibilities of class conflict and lead to the establishment of co-operation and harmonious relations between the conflicting classes.

Gandhi did not believe that landlords and capitalists were exploiters by any inherent necessity, or that there existed a basic and irreconcilable antagonism between the interests of the former and those of the masses. "What is needed is not the extinction of landlords and capitalists, but a transformation of the existing relationship between them and the masses into

something healthier and pure."⁵

Fundamental to the theory of trusteeship was the principle of non-appropriation of the owners' property. Gandhi seems to make a distinction between legal and moral ownership. Legally wealth belongs to the owners, morally to the whole society — so the peasants are also owners of wealth possessed by the zamindars. Addressing the landlords he once observed, "I have always told mill owners that they are not the exclusive owners of mills and workers are equal sharers in ownership. In the same way, I could tell you that ownership of your land belongs as much to the ryots as to you."⁶ Yet, Gandhi declared quite emphatically that in the new set-up ownership would rest with the trustee himself.⁷

DIFFERENT FROM PASSIVE RESISTANCE

This point is central to the entire idea of trusteeship, because the means proposed by Gandhi suggested that there must be voluntary conversion of the exploiting classes to the cause of socio-economic justice. Here, his concept of trusteeship must be distinguished from that of passive resistance, though he does not always isolate one from the other. His emphasis on moral conversion includes, in addition to the moral transformation of the exploiter, the awakening of workers and peasants into a realisation of their own moral strength. Recommending non-co-operation and civil disobedience as the "right and infallible means" of resolving social conflict, Gandhi believed that exploitation could take place only with the co-operation of the exploited classes and that nonco-operation on their part would at once deprive the exploiter of his power to exploit, leading to the establishment of equality between them.⁸ Gandhi's object was thus to eliminate not class divisions but class conflict. "Class divisions there will be but they will be horizontal not vertical."⁹

In case the zamindars refuse to be converted to the new way of life, the peasants would compel his adherence through non-violent nonco-operation. If this failed, the peasants would quit the land if asked to do so, but make it clear to the landlord that all land really belonged to the tiller. Since it would be impossible to till the land, the zamindar would submit. Should he attempt to replace the nonco-operating tenants by others, agitation short of violence would then continue till he replaced the tenants.¹⁰

What was the actual degree of equality which Gandhi considered feasible? "My ideal is equal distribution but as far as I can see it is not to be realised. I therefore work for equitable distribution."¹¹

In an answer to a question, whether class war can be avoided, Gandhi said in 1931, that "we may not dispossess the zamindars and talukadars of their thousands of bighas. And among whom shall we distribute them? We need not dispossess them. They only need a change of heart. When that is done and when they learn to melt at their peasants' woes, they will hold their lands in trust for them, will give them a major part of the produce, keeping only sufficient for themselves."¹²

Gandhi in his anxiety to build harmonious relations between conflicting elements in Indian society, applied the concept of trusteeship only to their conflicts and not to those related to the alien government. During the struggle of the Champaran peasants (1916) against British indigo planters as also the Bardoli struggle (1928) against the Bombay government, the concept of trusteeship was not applied. In Champaran the European planters asked why they alone among the landlords of Bihar became the target for a long-term, large scale and eventually successful popular agitation.¹³

In another instance when Assam Tea Garden workers went on strike against reduction of their wages by the English planters, Gandhi justified the strike and said that "the coolies have a substantial grievance ... and the government has failed to cope with it". Here again any reference to trusteeship is missing.¹⁴

ATTITUDE TO KISAN STRUGGLES

The 1920s and 1930s saw an increasing wave of kisan struggles against the oppression of indigenous zamindars all over India, and Gandhi reacted adversely to these manifestations of kisan discontent. For instance, in 1921

Gandhi strongly condemned the social boycott and non-rent campaigns launched by rack-rented peasants in UP and called the movement an "instrument of violence". In Guntur, a no-tax campaign was started without the permission of the Congress. Gandhi took strong exception to it and directed that all taxes must be paid forthwith.¹⁵

The resolutions adopted by the Congress Working Committee, presided over by Gandhi at Bardoli in February 1922 were bitterly critical not only of the occurrence of violence in the movement but also of any independent peasant movement inevitably developing into a kind of non-rent movement.

The resolutions stated:

Clause 6: CWC advises Congress workers to inform the ryots that withholding of rent payment to the zamindars is contrary to Congress resolutions.

Clause 7: CWC assures zamindars that the Congress movement is in no way intended to attach their legal rights and that even where the ryots have grievances, the Congress desired that the redress be sought by mutual consultation and arbitration.¹⁶

Gandhi himself stated that the kisan movement had received an impetus from nonco-operation but was anterior to and independent of it. He maintained that while there should be a department of the Congress to look after specific problems of the peasants they should not be organised into an all-India organisation with a political stance. Gandhi said, "While we will not hesitate to advise the kisans when the moment comes to suspend payment of taxes to the government, it is not contemplated at any stage of nonco-operation that we would seek to deprive zamindars of their rent. The kisan movement should be confined to the improvement of the state of kisans and the betterment of relations between them and the zamindars".¹⁷ He advised the kisans to scrupulously abide by the terms of their agreement with the zamindars. Where custom or even a written contract was unacceptable, they should not try to uproot it by violence and an attempt should be made to arrive at a settlement.¹⁸

In the second nonco-operation movement (1929-33), a call was given by the AICC in May 1930 for non-payment of specific taxes in certain provinces to the British government. And again in the Karachi session of March 1931, the Congress called for a substantial reduction in agricultural rent paid by the peasants to the colonial government.

However, the Congress assured the zamindars that no campaign would be approved against their interests. Al-

ready after the Karachi Congress session, Gandhi had told the zamindars, "I shall be no party to dispossessing the propertied classes... I am working for co-operation and co-ordination of labour, capital, landlord and tenant".¹⁹ A resolution of the Congress said, "in as much as some misapprehensions have been created in the minds of the zamindars of UP in particular, and others in general that in discussing proposals for non-payment of rent or taxes the Congress was contemplating a class war... [the Congress] assures the zamindars that the no-rent proposals were in no way directed at them."²⁰

Though the Congress wanted the peasants to participate in the national movement, the emphasis throughout was on how to strengthen itself through such participation. If the peasants through an independent movement of their own threatened to be a divisive force in it, the Congress would have preferred doing without them." In fact, in December 1937, the Congress took the decision forbidding Congressmen from participating in Kisan Sabha activities. The Congress also criticised the kisan movement for being prone to violence. Gandhi believed that such a movement "would be something like fascism".

PROGRESSIVE RADICALISATION

By the mid-30s, however, we notice a shift in Gandhi's stand and a progressive radicalisation of his thoughts on the peasant question. The peasant struggles, especially in UP, were becoming militant in reaction to the violent resistance of the zamindars. In a message to zamindars, Gandhi warned them of the danger facing them. "I would like the zamindars to recognise the correctness of the peasants' position and make a corresponding change in their own outlook. Let the zamindars cease to be mere rent-collectors... thus they should become trustees of their tenants... limit their privy purses... forgo questionable perquisites they take from the tenants in the shape of gifts... give them fixity of tenure... make them feel they are their true friends... In short, they must justify their position."²²

By 1936, he began to realise that the concept of trusteeship was ineffective in practice. Instead of the earlier indismissibility of the zamindars, he said, "I do not mean to destroy the zamindar but neither do I feel that zamindars are indispensable."²³ He went on later to say that if the zamindars do not change, "they will die a natural death".²⁴

Two years later he had moved further from his concept of voluntary change of heart. Replying to a socialist's question, Gandhi declared, "the difference between your view and mine is whether the zamindar system is to be mended or ended. I say it should be mended, if it cannot be mended it should end itself".²⁵ By 1947, Gandhi had made a radical departure from his earlier opposition to the nationalisation of the means of production. "In the non-violent order of the future land would belong to the state, for has it not been said 'Sabhi Bhoomi Gopalki'. Under such dispensation there would be no waste of talents and labour."²⁶

Gandhi had also moved from his earlier assertion that the conditions of the peasants can be improved without legislative intervention by the government. He said that the present owners of wealth would have to make their choice between class war and voluntarily converting themselves into trustees. They would be allowed to retain their possessions and use their talents to increase the wealth for the sake of society, without exploitation. The state would regulate their rate of commission and their children would inherit property only if they proved their fitness for it.²⁷ Voluntary conversion had thus receded further into the background.

Gandhi also did not rule out violence altogether. On being asked by Louis Fischer in 1942, what the position of peasants in a free India would be, Gandhi said that the peasant would "seize land", that no compensation would be paid to landlords, for compensation would be "financially impossible". "There might be violence in the process but the landlords might co-operate by fleeing."²⁸

Here, although we notice a progressive radicalisation in Gandhi's thought, he never made it clear as to who would control the state of the future. He developed the concept of panchayats controlled by the kisans but but did not visualise that the panchayat themselves would be dominated by the vested interests.

STATE INTERVENTION

Thus, his concept of trusteeship developed and changed with time. In its final form, it was substantially different from the original utopian concept. The optimistic hope that the vested interests would voluntarily transform themselves into trustees and that state intervention was similar to violence were no longer held tenable. Now he believed that if change did not

come, the state would intervene and end the system of exploitation.

Nehru wrote in 1949 that "the nationalist movement in India was essentially a bourgeois movement. It represented the natural historical stage of development. Gandhi represented that movement and the Indian masses in relation to that movement, and he became the voice of the Indian people to that extent... He functioned inevitably within the orbit of nationalist activity".²⁹ Viewed in this historical perspective, the contradictory duality of Gandhi's role in the national movement reveals its internal logic. Gandhi, objectively a bourgeois leader, was successful to the extent that the primary contradictions of the Indian people and specifically those of the Indian bourgeoisie against British colonialism were resolved.³⁰ Yet, within Indian society Gandhi's actions based on his ideology of class peace helped the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie against those of the Indian masses. As Jadunath Sharma, a kisan leader from Bihar said in 1938, "the Congress have tried to reconcile irreconcilable interests in its attempt to keep intact its national character, but the exploiters and exploited cannot be benefited at the same time... there cannot be a compromise between landlords and tenants".³¹ Thus, Gandhi's idealist notions for the emancipation of the peasants failed. Although he understood the nature of exploitation undergone by the peasants he never analysed its origin. In fact, he never saw that the contradictions lay in the system itself and not in the hearts of men. This was the failure of Gandhi.³²

Some further questions arise from an analysis of Gandhi's writings on the peasant question. Were Gandhi's attempts at harmonising the conflicts between kisans and zamindars tactical in nature, to be resolved after Independence? Was the progressive radicalisation of his thoughts in favour of peasant interests and his subsequent disenchantment with the Congress an indication of a drift in this direction? Recognising and fearing the inherent dangers of such radicalisation to their own interests did the dominant leadership of the Congress deliberately manoeuvre to remove Gandhi from the centre of power as soon as freedom was won? These questions can only be studied in the wider context of Congress history and Gandhi's functions within it.

Notes

1 Jawaharlal Nehru, "Mahatma Gandhi", Asia Publishing House,

Bombay, 1966, 2nd Edition, p 134.

- 2 M K Gandhi, "Constructive Programme", Navjivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1944, p 18.
- 3 *Young India*, November 26, 1931.
- 4 *Harijan*, August 25, 1940.
- 5 N K Bose "Selections from Gandhi", Navjivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1957, p 93 (Hereafter referred to as "Selections").
- 6 "Selections", p 91.
- 7 *Harijan*, February 16, 1947.
- 8 "Selections", pp 97-98.
- 9 *Ibid*, p 95.
- 10 *Harijan*, March 31, 1946.
- 11 *Young India*, March 17, 1927.
- 12 *Young India*, March 26, 1931.
- 13 Stephen Henningham, "The Social Setting of the Champaran Satyagraha", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol XIII, No 1 (March 1976), pp 71-72.
- 14 *Young India*, June 8, 1921.
- 15 B P Sitaramayya, "History of the Indian National Congress" Allahabad, 1935, Vol I, p 23.
- 16 R P Dutt, "India Today", New Age Printing Press, New Delhi, Revised Edition, 1947, p 270.
- 17 *Young India*, May 18, 1921.
- 18 *Ibid*, May 1, 1921.
- 19 "Selections", p 91.
- 20 "Congress Resolutions", Congress Working Committee, New Delhi, 1937.
- 21 B P Sitaramayya, *op cit*, Vol 1, p 23.
- 22 *Young India*, May 28, 1931.
- 23 *Harijan*, December 5, 1936.
- 24 *Ibid*, April 23, 1938.
- 25 *Ibid*.
- 26 *Ibid*, March 9, 1947.
- 27 *Ibid*.
- 28 Louis Fischer, "A Week with Gandhi", Dull, Sloan and Pearce, New York, 1942, pp 55 and 91.
- 29 Jawaharlal Nehru, *op cit*, p 76.
- 30 Non-recognition of this progressive anti-imperialist aspect of Gandhi's role in the national movement led the Comintern and consequently the Communist Party of India to adopt a false position *vis-a-vis* the national movement, leading to their isolation from the mainstream of nationalist activity. For the views of the Comintern on Gandhi, see O W Kunsinen, "The Indian Revolution and Gandhi's Manoeuvre", *International Press Correspondence*, Vol XIV, No 10, 1930, p 241.
- 31 B B Chaudhri, "Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar" in "Socialism in India", B R Nanda (ed), Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, p 222.
- 32 The Sarvodaya movement, based explicitly on Gandhi's ideology (of class peace and trusteeship) has also been unsuccessful in post-Independence India. See, Ghan-shyam Shah, "Revolution, Reform or Protest?: A Study of the Bihar Movement-III", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 23, 1977, pp 695-702.