

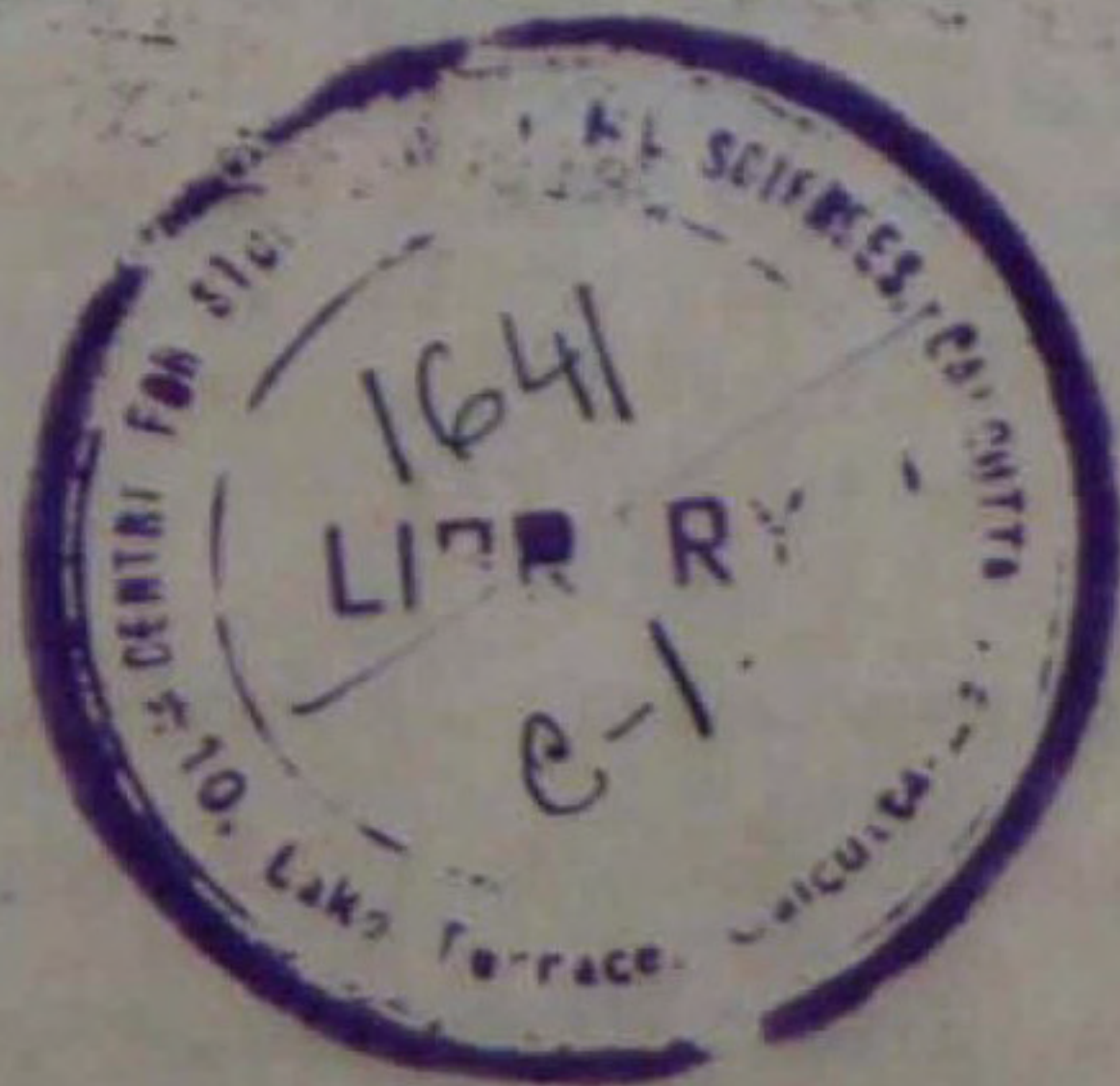
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The Congress and the Nation, c.1917-1947

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## I

Every ruling class or aspirant ruling class in modern times has sought to speak on behalf of the 'nation' or the 'whole people'. The British colonial rulers of India, of course, represented the British nation: nevertheless they sought to legitimise their position in the sub-continent on the ground that they were the 'makers' of modern India. When their successors, the leaders of the Indian National Congress, laid claim to the same role, it was scarcely surprising.

In making their claim, however, the Indian nationalists faced some peculiar difficulties. The British had no belief in the existence of an Indian nation. In their view, whatever integration had occurred in India, whatever the elements of nationhood or modernity, these were the contribution of the colonial regime. The people of India were, naturally, grateful for these and other attendant benefits, and if they rebelled - as, even the 'high' imperialism of the turn of the century acknowledged, they did occasionally - it was because they were misled by small groups of conspirators. Later colonialist officials and writers who recognized that Gandhi (and his 'religious' appeal) had somehow mobilized the peasant masses, counted this too among the many achievements of British rule in India.

The nationalist movement did not affect the masses of the people till after the Great War. It was not till 1919 that the movement spread to the rural areas as the result of intensive propaganda and, still more, the extraordinary influence of Mr Gandhi himself owed much to western education and thought. (O'Malley 1941, 97).

The Congress claim to be the makers of modern India could never be so clear-cut, or so blind. Long before the Congress came to be actively involved with the masses, in an organised way only from the

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years of the first World War, the idea of the nation had become well established. For Congress leaders in the twentieth century, then, it was as much a question of 'discovering' this nation as of 'making' it. The pursuit of these twin processes produced a certain tension in the world-view of this leadership, a tension that was resolved by the triumph of the belief in being 'makers' over the vision of being 'discoverers'. The first part of this paper indicates the passage from the one to the other. The later sections are concerned with an analysis of the structure of thought that lay behind the Congress leaders' exclusive claim that they were the builders of modern India.

## II

Well, I, who claim to know the conditions of India through and through, know that India is dying by inches. The land revenue exactions mean morsels forcibly taken out of the mouths of the peasants' children. It is an indescribable agony through which the peasant is passing... (Gandhi, November 1931; CWMG, 43, 262-)

By 1921 this was the standard position of the Congress leadership. The peasant was India, and India was dying. It was not very long, however, since the Congress leaders had first discovered this truth, and there had been for some time a considerable ambivalence in their understanding of the political potential of the peasantry. This is clearly revealed in some nationalist leaders' accounts of their first contacts with the peasantry in the years 1917 to 1920.

Jawaharlal Nehru, as always provides a dramatic version of this experience. He writes in his Autobiography of how he and other nationalists from Allahabad went to southern Awadh in the summer of 1920 to discover a

whole country-side afire with enthusiasm and full of a strange excitement. Enormous gatherings would take place at the briefest notice by word of mouth. One village would communicate with another, and the second with a third, and so on, and presently whole villages would empty out, and all over the fields there would be men and women and children on the march to the meeting-place. Or, more swiftly still, the cry of *Sita Ram - Sita Na-a-a-m* - would fill the air, and travel far in all directions and be echoed back from other villages, and then people would come streaming out or even running as fast as they could. (Nehru 1936a, 51-2).

The visit had occurred when two hundred peasants of Pratapgarh, participants in the Kisan Sabha movement in Awadh, had marched to Allahabad and demanded that nationalist leaders come out to see their conditions and support their struggle. Thus was a somewhat reluctant Nehru led to his 'discovery' of India; he was 'thrown (in his own words) almost without any will of my own, into contact with the peasantry'. (Ibid., 49). That visit to the villages 'far from the railway and even the pucca road...was a revelation to me'. What 'amazed' him was 'our total ignorance' of the rural areas; no newspaper ever carried reports of agrarian questions or events in the villages. 'I realized more than ever how cut off we were from our people and how we lived and worked and agitated in a little world apart from them'. (Ibid., 51, 54-5).

What 'surprised' Nehru, or so he recalled in 1934-35 when the Autobiography was written, was that such a great agrarian movement 'should have developed quite spontaneously without any city help or intervention of politicians and the like. The agrarian movement was entirely separate from the Congress and it had nothing to do with the non-co-operation that was taking shape'. (Ibid., 54). 'In its origin', he writes further, 'it was entirely unconnected with politics or politicians, and right through its course the influence of outsiders and politicians was of the slightest'. (Ibid., 63).

This was an accurate assessment, if we accept Nehru's narrow definition of 'politics'. For long before the involvement of nationalist leaders from Allahabad, the Kisan Sabha movement in Awadh had gathered remarkable momentum. Rure, the village in Pratapgarh district where the first local Sabha had been established, was the centre of the movement in the initial one or two months of its life. During this time, 100,000 peasants were reported to have registered themselves with the association; and there were said to be as many as 585 panchayats (village arbitration boards established by peasant activists) functioning in Pratapgarh district alone.

With the development of urban nationalist support, the movement advanced swiftly to engulf large parts of Pratapgarh, Rae Bareilly, Sultanpur and Faizabad districts and smaller areas elsewhere. Its strength may be judged from the numbers of peasants reckoned to have turned out for different kinds of demonstrations: 40-50,000 to press for the release of Baba Ramachandra from Pratapgarh jail in September 1920, 80-100,000 for the first Awadh Kisan Congress held in Ayodhya (Faizabad district) in December 1920.

By December 1920 - January 1921 the peasant movement in Awadh had entered its second phase. What began as a limited agitation among Kurmi peasants, mainly tenants-at-will and sub-tenants with small holdings, for an improvement of status and a relaxation of unduly oppressive demands by landlords' agents, had developed by this time into a powerful movement, involving peasants of many different Hindu and Muslim castes, which called into question the entire structure of zamindari, and by implication colonial, authority in the region. The phenomenal expression of this was a campaign for the non-payment of taxes, open attacks on landlords, moneylenders and the police, and the demand that was once or twice voiced for distribution of land to the tiller.

Congressmen and other urban nationalist leaders were not greatly in favour of these new demands and tactics of the Awadh peasantry. But not long after these violent politics of the Kisan Sabhas had been suppressed in southern Awadh, the movement burst forth again, in a slightly different form, in northern Awadh. From the later months of 1921 the peasants of several districts in northern Awadh began to come together in Eka ('unity') associations. Led by Madari Pasi and other leaders belonging to some of the most oppressed castes and classes, the movement re-established its organisational independence of the Congress, but continued nevertheless to put forward 'political' demands, including demands for a radical restructuring of north Indian agrarian society in the swaraj that was to come. (For the details of the above, see Siddiqi, 1978; Pandey, 1982).

And yet, after all of that, what was the vision of India that Nehru was left with. The peasants of Awadh had

looked on us with loving and hopeful eyes, as if we were the bearers of good tidings, the guides who were to lead them to the promised land. Looking at them and their misery and overflowing gratitude, I was filled with shame and sorrow, shame at my own easy-going and comfortable life and our petty politics of the city which ignored this vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India, sorrow at the degradation and overwhelming poverty of India. A new picture of India seemed to rise before me, naked, starving, crushed, and utterly miserable. And their faith in us, casual visitors from the distant city, embarrassed me and filled me with a new responsibility that frightened me. (Nehru 1936a, 52).

It was a vision that other important nationalist leaders shared, as Rajendra Prasad's writings on Champaran show. Of indigo cultivation under the pānchkathia and tīnkathia systems in that district, he wrote in his autobiography, 'No raiyat ever dared to refuse to cultivate indigo'. 'Sometimes in their bewilderment, the raiyats would start a riot, murder an indigo planter or get together in this way to create some other kind of disturbance. But even so, how could they match the strength of the planters !'. And, a few pages later on, 'The raiyats (of Champaran) were so downtrodden that they did not have the courage even to go and file a suit in the courts'. (Prasad 1947, 131, 132, 135).

Yet, in the detailed account of the Champaran satyagraha that he had written in the years immediately after 1917, Rajendra Prasad too had referred to the long history of peasant struggles in the area. He stated there that the first recorded outbreak against the cultivation of indigo in the district occurred in 1867. 'The disturbance caused a great consternation amongst the planters. Indigo cultivation was stopped in a way and it seemed as if it would disappear altogether from Champaran'. (Prasad 1928, 28). Indeed the peasants' demonstrations against the conditions under which they had to cultivate indigo lasted for nearly four months in 1867-68, and there were renewed outbursts of agitation in the 1870s and again in 1907-8 (See Misra 1963, 9ff.).

Of this last period of struggle, Rajendra Prasad had this remark to make: 'Even an ant, if you tread upon it, opens its small mouth to bite you in revenge... With the beginning of 1907 signs of discontent began to manifest themselves in the Bettiah subdivision'. (Prasad 1928, 37). He went on to observe that in 1907-8 the tenants of the Sathi factory in Bettiah subdivision stopped growing indigo, and from there the resistance spread to neighbouring areas.

One Shaik Gulab had taken a prominent part in stopping indigo cultivation in the Sathi villages. His example put new life into other villagers. Shaik Gulab had to suffer imprisonment and much pecuniary loss for his activities but he rose very much in the estimation of the villagers. They began to look up to him as their true friend and leader... A big fair is held at Bettiah at the time of Bijaya Dasani. People from distant villages visit this fair. The tenants converted this fair into an instrument to propagate their ideas. Shaik Gulab and one Sital Rai, who was an inhabitant of a village near Parsa began to persuade the tenants not to grow indigo. Some people went so far as to devise means for driving out the planters. On returning home from the fair the tenants began to talk among themselves about these matters and their ideas began to grow'. (Ibid., 42-3).

'It is said', Rajendra Prasad noted further, 'that the tenants [of the Mallahia, Parsa, Baeriya and Kundia factories] had so organised themselves that on hearing a particular singular sound, the tenants of several villages would assemble in no time...' (Ibid., 43).

We have other evidence to show that during this period the peasants established a number of resistance groups, collected funds for litigation and sent petitions to the Government. In Bettiah the resistance appears to have become a mass movement, with a boycott of the European factories being enforced over a considerable area. A Bengal Government report stated in November 1908,

As the boycott had been made fairly complete over an area of 400 square miles of country, as the meetings of raiyats convened by the agitators [sic] were becoming more frequent, largely attended and violent in tone, and as a great amount of intimidation and numerous acts of violence to factory



employees have occurred, vigorous action appears to be called for'. (Misra 1963, 15-16).

And Rajendra Prasad quotes a report from The Statesman of 27 November that

in order to protect the European population large forces of Bengal armed police and Gurkhas have been drafted into the town [of Bettiah] and its neighbourhood...in parts the division has assumed a perfectly warlike appearance. Seven cases have been reported to the police in which Europeans were attacked. Other stories are current in the neighbourhood of equestrians being ambushed, of frantic rides along jungle paths through crowds of ruffians armed with lathis and of in-offensive folk being molested on the highway'. (Prasad 1928, 44).

The 'agitators' of the Government report were all local men. It was at the end of 1908 that Ali Imam, a Patna barrister, showed some interest in the Champaran peasants' struggle. In December 1911, some 15000 tenants assembled at Narkatiaganj railway station to place their demands before the King and Queen of England, then touring their Indian memorial colony. Between 1911 and 1913, tenants submitted memorial after/to the Collector and other Government officials. However it was only in the latter half of 1913 that the nationalist press carried some detailed reports on the situation in Champaran (Prasad 1947, 56-7; Henningham 1982, 45). And it was another four years before urban nationalist involvement became significant, when Gandhi was dragged into the struggle - and this, Rajendra Prasad acknowledged even in his later writings - by that 'complete rustic', Raj Kumar Shukul, who 'knew a little Hindi but no other language'. (Prasad 1947, 124-5ff.). Even then, as Pouchepadass and others have made clear, the scope of peasant actions extended far beyond the initiatives of the nationalist leadership: Gandhi's name was invoked by peasant rebels to justify 'illegal' and even 'violent' forms of resistance which Gandhi clearly disapproved of, even if 'he could not too overtly repudiate them'. (Pouchepadass 1974, 84; Henningham 1982, 49ff.).

And yet, after all this, Rajendra Prasad returns to Nehru's vision of rural India. 'Naked, starving, crushed and utterly miserable', Nehru had said. 'Downtrodden', 'bewildered', Rajendra Prasad added. Even the

wore turns, as he remarked condescendingly in the book on Champaran (Prasad 1928, 37). But the urban nationalist intervention transformed all that. Prasad put the point boldly in his autobiography written three decades after Gandhi came to Champaran.

As soon as Gandhiji reached Champaran, fear disappeared from the raiyats' hearts, I know not how. Those who had been afraid even to go to the courts now came in huge numbers to relate their sorrows to Gandhiji. These simple folk somehow took it into their heads that their saviour had arrived, now their grief would end'. (Prasad 1947, 135).

As a consequence of Gandhi's work in Champaran 'the raiyats gained courage and life. No longer were they prepared to tolerate oppression quietly'. (Ibid., 143).

The leaders had passed from a 'discovery' to a 'making'. Nehru, again, provided the classic statement

Through nation-wide action... (Gandhi) sought to mould the millions, and largely succeeded in doing so, and changing them from a demoralized, timid, and hopeless mass, bullied and crushed by every dominant interest, and incapable of resistance into a people with self-respect and self-reliance, resisting tyranny, and capable of united action and sacrifice for a larger cause. (Nehru 1936b, 173).

### III

The apparent inconsistencies in this nationalist position arose partly from a failure to comprehend the little known world of the peasant but also from a failure to seek to comprehend - from a received understanding of how political change and 'modernization' was to be brought about. This was evidently not an understanding that needed testing against the particular conditions of colonial India. 'The nationalist movement in India, like all nationalist movements, was essentially a bourgeois movement. It represented the natural historical stage of development', wrote Nehru (1936b, 172-3; emphasis added).

The 'natural course of history', the 'modern trend'. This was an important notion. Many ideas, like that of 'Pakistan', were wrong simply because they opposed this trend.

To think in terms of Pakistan when the modern trend is towards the establishment of a world federation is like thinking in terms of bows and arrows as weapons of war in the age of the atom bomb. The whole mentality behind this conception of bows and arrows and Pakistan is most dangerous and if we cling to such anachronisms, we shall never solve our problems'. (SW14, 14, 187; see also Nehru 194b, 505-6).

The Indian village and the villager's mentality (and aspirations ?) were also such 'anachronisms'. 'A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent [sic]' (SW14, 554). But 'there seems to be no reason why millions should not have comfortable up-to-date homes where they can lead a cultured existence'. (Ibid., 555).

That pulling up of the people to the level where they could lead 'a cultured existence' was the historical role of the Indian middle classes. As Nehru put it in The Discovery of India, 'I was not an admirer of my own class or kind, and yet inevitably I looked to it for leadership in the struggle for India's salvation' (1946, 41, emphasis added; also SW7, 178). And yet, as he added immediately, this middle class was too weak, too much the product of the colonial structure, to successfully carry through a revolution against it. This, at least, was one special circumstance of India's national movement that needed consideration.

On account of the very uneven and stunted development of capitalism and the sheer size of the country, as well as a number of other, more immediate political factors, India was far from being a well integrated country even as late as the first half of this century. This want of integration made for a greater autonomy in the social and political lives of the people than is common in modern nations. This was noticeable both in the cultural diversity between regions and in the marked cultural gap

between the upper and the lower classes in any region. As yet another expression of this autonomy, sections of the peasantry, and members of other exploited classes, mobilised themselves time and again during this period, as they had done earlier and would continue to do afterwards, on their own terms and often quite independently of a nationalist leadership that wished to stand forth as the 'mobiliser' of the nation.

This cultural gap was perhaps the reason for the general incomprehension that was in evidence when the urban nationalists first had to come to terms with the peasants' world. It is interesting that Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad should use an identical expression to describe what they saw in their first encounter with the politics of the peasant. We have already cited Nehru's amazement at a countryside 'afire with enthusiasm and full of a strange excitement'. (1936a, 51). Rajendra Prasad for his part recalled that 'even before he (Gandhi) had arrived in Champaran, a strange stirring of consciousness had taken place among the people'. (1947, 135). Strange, that is, unexpected, not easily explicable.

In places, Rajendra Prasad's account is more startling even than Nehru's, coming as it does from a man steeped in zamindari culture and in close touch with the rural areas. He recalls, for example, how Gandhi schooled him and others in the task of working with the newly discovered 'nation'.

We used to think that it was enough for us to make a speech at the Congress or some other meeting, to institute proceedings in a court of law where this was possible, or for a member of the legislative council to ask a question in the council... Gandhiji did none of these things. He took evidence from the raiyats...By this very process of giving evidence the raiyats began to lose their fear. We also came to know of such things as we had never even dreamed possible. (Prasad 1947, 137; emphasis added).

Having discovered this strange world, however, and a new way of interacting with it, the leaders proceeded to the task of appropriating it. The logical means for this purpose was the bourgeois idea of 'representation'. But in the semi-feudal culture of colonial (as of post-colonial)

India, the idea of 'representation' carried special marks. It had built into it quite centrally the notion of 'responsibility'. The awareness of this burden had come to some Congress leaders along with their discovery of the nation. 'And (the peasants') faith in us, casual visitors from the distant city, embarrassed me and filled me with a new responsibility that frightened me'. (Nehru 1936a, 52).

Representation was 'a new responsibility'. It meant 'education', the schooling of the 'masses' in the political ideas of nationalism and democracy, and in their own political rights and obligations. This is well brought out in a telling passage that appears in The Discovery of India.

Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: Bharat Mata ki Jai - 'Victory to Mother India!' I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this Bharat Mata, Mother India, whose victory they wanted? My question would amuse them and surprise them, and then, not knowing exactly what to answer, they would look at each other and at me. I persisted in my questioning. At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, would say that it was the dharti, the good earth of India, that they meant. What earth? Their particular village patch, or all the patches in the district or province, or in the whole of India? And so question and answer went on, till they would ask me impatiently to tell them all about it. I would endeavour to do so and explain that India was all this that they had thought, but it was much more. The mountains and the rivers of India, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are parts of this Bharat Mata, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves Bharat Mata, and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery. (Nehru 1946, 44).

What we have represented here is no longer Nehru's discovery of India through the peasant struggle. It is the peasants' discovery of India through Nehru and the Congress.

These notions of 'responsibility' and 'education' could never be paternalistic in quite the colonial way. For the nationalist leadership, locked in an idealistic and emotional struggle that was waged against the colonial power simultaneously on many different fronts, could not but be carried along at times by the enthusiasms and demands of its 'followers'. Yet, there remained an element of the paternal in the leaders' vision of their followers.

These were children surely, with 'loving and hopeful eyes', 'overflowing gratitude' and 'faith in us' (1936a, 52). Schoolchildren. 'My question would amuse them and surprise them, and then, not knowing exactly what to answer, they would look at each other and at me'. 'At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the soil from immemorial generations' -- notice the stereotype learned from colonial ethnography - 'would say...' Impatient children. 'Question and answer went on, till they would ask me impatiently to tell them all about it'. But fairly intelligent (or, in a more pedagogic vocabulary, satisfactory): for at last the 'idea slowly soaked into their brains, (and) their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery'. (Nehru 1946, 44).

These peasants 'took away the shyness' from Nehru and 'taught me to speak in public...how could I be shy of these poor unsophisticated people?' (Nehru 1936a, 57). It is a refrain that runs through his writings. In early 1921, in Faizabad (as in other districts of Awadh) the peasants of some villages looted landlord property.

The poor ignorant peasants were actually told that it was the wish of Mahatma Gandhi that they should loot and they willingly agreed to carry out this behest, shouting 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai' in the process. I was very angry when I heard of this and within a day or two of the occurrence I was on the spot, somewhere near Akbarpur in Fyzabad district. On arrival I called a meeting...and within a few hours five or six thousand persons had collected from numerous villages within a radius of ten miles. I spoke harshly to them for the shame they had brought on themselves and our cause and said that the guilty persons must confess publicly... When I spoke to many of them privately later and heard their artless story of how they had

been misled, I felt very sorry for them and I began to regret having exposed these foolish and simple folk to long terms of imprisonment. (Nehru 1936a, 61; all emphases in this paragraph added).

Writing fourteen years later, Nehru sought to explain his action on this occasion with the statement that he was full in those days of what he conceived to be the spirit of Gandhiji's satyagraha (loc.cit.). But his response was not so different when he toured through the rural areas of Bihar in the wake of the terrible communal killings of 1946, addressing large crowds many of whom had certainly participated in this 'bad business'.

They were the ordinary peasant folk of Bihar, very simple, unsophisticated, and rather likeable. They shouted 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai' and when I spoke sternly to them they seemed full of shame (at) what they had done. Almost everywhere after my speech I asked them to pledge themselves to behave in future and they seemed to do so with some conviction, raising their hands all together. ...I could not make out who were the leaders of this business. Probably they are mostly local village leaders but they have received their inspiration from others. (Patel's Correspondence, 3, 165; emphasis added).

Other leaders spoke in a not dissimilar vein. Here is what Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to a demobilized Royal Air Force officer, a landlord of district Sambalpur, who was adopted as a Congress candidate for the 1946 elections to the provincial assembly of Bihar and Orissa:

The conditions of our country and the ways and habits of our people must not make you impatient or angry... Our people deserve all the sympathy that we can give and all the services that we can render. No sacrifice is big enough for that purpose. Forget that you are a landlord; also try to forget that you are a superior person. (Patel's Correspondence, 2, 326, emphasis added).

It is likely that the Congress belief in the wisdom of the leaders and the innocence of the followers grew as the struggle for independence matured. At any rate, by the 1930s and '40s it was clearly believed that if Congress leaders were (by and large) 'responsible', there were others who were 'irresponsible' and who could easily mislead the brave but naive and ignorant masses. Here was an attitude that was strongly reminiscent of the colonial view of India's 'dumb millions', and it was to become something of a refrain in Congress pronouncements as the party neared its stated objective of capturing state power.

It is noteworthy that the category of the 'irresponsible' now included not merely men like the agents of the landlords and the Hindu Sabhas who were said to have instigated the riots against Muslims in Bihar in 1946: it also extended to more secular and progressive political workers not unlike many who were inside the Congress. The development of this emphasis on 'responsibility' signifies more than the rise of a rich peasant class to a position of dominance within the Congress Party (cf. Low 1977, Introduction; Stokes 1978, Paper 9), or the growing fear of social revolution as the doors of political office gradually gave. It tells us of a particular understanding of the way to social and political change in the subcontinent.

In northern India, at any rate, whereas the 1920s was the decade of the ascendancy of the Congress, the 1930s saw that ascendancy increasingly challenged, by the Kisan Sabhas and the Congress Socialist Party (with their Communist component), by the Muslim League and other communal organisations, so that the anti-imperialist struggle once again came to exhibit a rather more differentiated appearance. In this situation, the question of a 'correct', 'responsible' leadership assumed added importance. It was in this light that Nehru commented in his Autobiography on Baba Ramchandra, that 'remarkable person' who had taken a most prominent part in organising the Kisan Sabha movement in Awadh:



Having organised the peasantry to some extent he made all manner of promises to them, vague and nebulous but full of hope for them. He had no programme of any kind and when he had brought them to a pitch of excitement he tried to shift the responsibility to others... Ramachandra continued to take a prominent part in the agrarian movement for another year and served two or three sentences in prison, but he turned out later to be a very irresponsible and unreliable person. (Nehru 1936a, 53; emphasis added).

The condescension is remarkable, but the comment is noteworthy for other reasons as well. A period in jail, 'sacrifice' in Vallabhbhai Patel's terms, had a special premium by now in Congress circles. It was counted as a major qualification for anyone who wished to be nominated as a Congress candidate in the elections of 1936, 1946 and afterwards, although frequently enough - as in the case of Patel's demobilised Royal Air Force correspondent - the criterion of wealth or some other such electoral asset took precedence over the peculiarly un-bourgeois notion of self-sacrifice. (cf. Patel's Correspondence, 2, 35-6, 238-9).

More interesting still is the way in which the category of the 'irresponsible' person is now carved out. In essence it has come to mean anyone who disagrees with the Congress High Command. 'Representation' was no longer a 'responsibility' alone, and 'education' (against all logic) not necessarily a matter of interaction. 'Representation' was 'leadership' in the narrow sense of controlled guidance, of direction along the correct channels, and of the disciplining of those who strayed. This is amply illustrated by the experience of the powerful Kisan Sabha movement in Bihar during the period of the first provincial Congress Governments from 1937 to 1939.

The Congress electoral victory and the formation of popular ministries in 1937 generated tremendous enthusiasm all over Bihar, as in UP and elsewhere. One result was an outburst of intense and continuous agitation among peasants and industrial workers, and other groups, for the setting right of long-felt wrongs. Regarding labour disputes, for

instance, the authorized Congress account of this period of Congress government in UP noted that there had been

a sense of suppression and immediately on the advent of the Congress Ministry disputes between capital and labour began and continued in one form or the other throughout... Labour, held down for so long, sometimes failed to realise the true implications of civil liberty. (Congress 1937-39, viii-ix).

In Bihar the 'true implications of civil liberty' were evidently even less well appreciated. This at least was the Congress view. Let us remind ourselves that the Kisan Sabha movement here arose in association with the Congress and many of its leaders had been active in that party. Yet the 'responsible' Congress leaders were now deeply perturbed. As the Finance Minister of the Congress Government in the province put it.

Together with (the peasants') restlessness there grew agitational [literally, 'oppositional'] tendencies which became so strong that the kisans appeared unwilling to accept any kind of limitations (on their political activities). (Sinha, n.d., 233).

Regarding the thorny question of bakasht lands which could not be resolved during the period of the Congress ministry, Rajendra Prasad recalled: 'In many places the peasants sought to regain control of such bakasht lands through satyagraha. This the Government had to stop'. (Prasad 1947, 459). Indeed, as the Kisan Sabhas came out into open confrontation with what they had come to describe as the 'zamindar Congress' (see Sankrtyayana 1950, 494ff.), the ministry went much further. It sent out the police in one place after another, much as the previous regime had done, to intervene in favour of the landed classes and maintain 'law and order' without the trouble of detailed local enquires, and then embarked on a campaign of vilification against the Kisan Sabha and its more important workers.

Thus in Saran district, a clash between peasants and zamindars in the village of Amwari brought the inevitable intervention of the local police and Magistracy on the side of the latter: before any local

enquiries could be made, 25 men on the peasants' side (and none from the zamindars') were bound down to keep the peace. Later on, following the arrest of many of these peasants along with Rahul Sankrtyayana and other Kisan Sabha workers who had arrived to support them, Rahul and his Kisan Sabha co-workers had to go on a prolonged hunger-strike in order to obtain the status of political prisoners. To the end, moreover, the Congress refused to grant political prisoner-status to the peasants who had been imprisoned - on the curious ground that they had been engaged in a Kisan struggle not for 'political' reasons but for their own self-interest! The fact that these peasants included full-time kisan workers who had no personal interest in the lands in dispute made no difference either.

The ministry sought also to discredit the activists in the Amwari satyagraha by describing the struggle as a 'conspiracy' hatched by 'anti-national' elements. While the satyagraha was still 'news', a furore broke out over the handcuffing, on his numerous journeys between jail and court, of the widely-respected old Congress worker-turned sadhu-turned Communist, Rahul Sankrtyayana. Photographs of the 'insult' appeared in the provincial press. Upon this, ministerial spokesmen declared that the very presence of a photographer proved the existence of a conspiracy. Indeed, as the peasants revealed a staying power that was quite unexpected and public opinion generally turned against the Government, the ministers went a step further, attempting to discredit the leadership of the peasant movement in Saran by publishing photographs of Rahul's Russian wife and the child he had by that marriage. (Sankrtyayana 1950, 512-28; cf. Gupta 1982; Henningham 1982; Das 1983.)

Long before this, the Bihar Congress had forbidden Congressmen from taking part in Kisan Sabha activity, and the Saran District Congress Committee had asked Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, that extraordinary nationalist and kisan leader who appeared to many to have aroused the peasantry of Bihar single-handed, not to tour Saran as this might lead to 'unrest among the kisans and tenants.' It is a sobering reflection that almost the same terms were used by British officials when, twenty years earlier, in 1917, they had served a notice on M.K. Gandhi not to enter the neighbouring district of Champaran. That identity of terms revealed that the

Congress leadership had taken over not only the colonial perception of unwelcome 'agitators' - Gandhi or Sahajanand - but also the same understanding of the naivete of the peasantry.

National leaders of the Congress, too, had supported the Bihar leadership's position. Sardar Patel, the redoubtable leader of the Bardoli peasants in the satyagraha of 1928, stalked across the country to declare in Saran in April 1938, 'Comrade Lenin was not born in this country and we do not want a Lenin here. We want Gandhi and Ramchandra. Those who preach class hatred are enemies of the country'. (cited Chaudhuri, 1972, 366) Underlying this was the same notion of 'irresponsibility' that Nehru had used in the case of the human Ramchandra, who had 'organised the peasantry...brought them to a pitch of excitement...(and then) tried to shift the responsibility to others' and who 'turned out later to be a very irresponsible and unreliable person'.

about  
It is salutary to learn what Baba Ramchandra himself thought/this question of 'shifting the responsibility to others'. I quote from a letter he wrote in 1939: 'It was felt that if we could link our Kisan movement with some established organization, or gain the support of well-to-do [privileged?] groups and lawyers, then this movement would become the future of India'. (Ramchandra Colln. I, Subject File 1). The initiative, and the aspiration to join the nationalist leaders in moulding 'the future of India' was similar in Gorakhpur and Darbhanga, Midnapur and Kheda, Guntur and many other parts of the country. In Kheda, David Hardiman tells us, the Patidar peasants who mobilised themselves for political action again and again in the early decades of this century 'were always very conscious of the need to maintain allies among the elites'. (Hardiman 1981, 245). But while the Patidars of Kheda under Vallabhbhai's iron leadership were welcome in the Congress camp, many other peasant rebels, as we have seen, were not.

The Congress claimed to be the vanguard of an avowedly political movement aimed at forging a new social and political unity. By the 1930s and '40s, however, the movement was beset by clearer and clearer signs of independent initiatives in the multi-stranded struggle for a changed political order. What the Congress leadership did in this situation was not only to demarcate the 'correct', 'responsible' politics from other kinds, but also to try and separate the 'political' from the 'social' and the 'economic'. This separation too was almost axiomatic in 'modern' (bourgeois) society and appears to have been accepted as such by the Indian nationalist leadership. It was the 'political' question, i.e. the struggle for swaraj, they argued, that required immediate and total attention. The 'social' and 'economic' - the struggles of Hindus against Muslims or caste against caste, of peasants against landlords, and what have you - could wait and, indeed, would largely be resolved automatically with the coming of swaraj.

This suggestion may seem somewhat paradoxical. For this was also the period when Congress leaders, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, began to stress a necessary connection between economic and political freedom and to spell out their notion of swaraj in terms of a more concrete programme of social and economic reform. (cf. Nehru 1936b, 227-8). And yet this was a very selective view. While politics and economics were seen to be inextricably linked at one level, at another they were neatly partitioned. It was not unlike Nehru's acceptance of the 'science' of Marxism, bereft of its political content (cf. Chatterjee, forthcoming, Ch. 5).

It was precisely because of the separation that was made between politics and economics, or more precisely between economics and one kind of politics that the peasant movement in Awadh in 1920-21 could be seen as having, in its origins, nothing to do with 'politics'. The same was true of the Kisan Sabha struggles in Bihar: at best these were narrow, economic struggles, at worst 'anti-national'. Much the same kind of analysis came to be made of the phenomenon of communalism as well.

Communalism, the argument ran, was not a religious but a political problem - a movement promoted by landlords, princes and other reactionaries in their own, narrow class interests. It was, at the same time, for the masses, primarily an economic question, arising from the fact that the Muslims in the country were generally poor and backward compared to the more privileged and in some instances enterprising Hindus. (SW 7, 93, 97, 108). The colonial regime had been responsible for the encouragement of communalism. A nationalist regime would be equally capable of putting an end to it. But the first point to be made was that it was the political question of independence that mattered most.

The question of Pakistan, and any other such question, does not arise at present. The first question which should be in every Indian's heart at present is the question of the independence of the country. Pakistan and such other questions can only be decided after independence is achieved and the government restored to the people of the country. (SW 14, 219, 221, 222).

My contention is that it is the British presence that is the cause of internal chaos, because you have ruled India according to the principle of divide and rule... Go to the pre-British period... We hear of no riots in the reign of even Aurangzeb. (CWMG 48, 263).

Even as it was acknowledged that communalism was a political problem, a separation was made between the 'political' and the 'communal'. It was significant, Nehru declared in his presidential address to the Lucknow Congress in 1936, that 'the principal communal leaders, Hindu or Muslim or Muslim or others, are political reactionaries, quite apart from the communal question'. (SW 7, 190). In a note on the sectarian strife in Bihar 1946, again, he observed that the propaganda of the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha

did not affect the widespread popularity of the Congress among the Hindu masses so far as the political issues were concerned. But it did produce communal feeling and a tendency among the middle class to criticise the Congress for not supporting the Hindu cause as against the Muslim League (Patel's Correspondence, 3, 168).

A similar distinction was drawn between 'politics' and the 'labour movement', so that one could write of the years 1928-30, 'The Labour Movement was becoming class-conscious, militant and dangerous, both in ideology and in organisation. The political situation was also developing fast' (Nehru 1936a, 188).

In all such matters, but especially in the matter of sectarian strife (or 'communalism'), it was 'the question of swaraj first' that defined the only politics that the leaders of the Congress consistently followed. The idea of concerted political struggle to combat the force of communalism on the ground was only briefly entertained. There were a number of efforts to 'settle' the question through negotiations at the top - All Parties conferences, talks between Nehru and Gandhi and Jinnah - for communalism was, after all, a 'political' problem. For a short while after 1936, the Congress also tried out a Muslim Mass Contacts programme, for communalism at this level was an 'economic' problem and the masses had to be educated. But there was no longer any question of putting politics in command and assigning a primacy to the kind of political struggle which the nationalist leadership had been caught up in for a short time after World War I, for the advancement of consciousness and the achievement of radical change in society.

Since then, of course, the leaders of the Congress had appropriated for themselves alone the role of political activists and educators. Gandhi put it succinctly in London in October 1931 when asked whether Indian peasants and workers were doing the right thing in throwing themselves into the class struggle in order to secure social and economic freedom: 'I myself am making the revolution for them without violence'. Asked further what his response would be if the masses, on coming to power, 'decided to put an end' to the landlord and princely classes, he replied: 'The masses at the present time do not regard the landlords and Princes as enemies. But it is necessary to make them aware of the wrong which is being done to them'. (CWMC, 48, 242, 243).

Nehru echoed this sentiment in a speech to the Bihar Provincial Students Conference in 1945. He praised the students of Bihar for the extraordinary part they had played in the 'Quit India' movement of 1942, but then went on to say: 'I encourage you to have academic discussions on political matters, but warn you against taking the initiative in the political field. You must look for guidance from the accepted political party which is the Congress'. (SW17, 510; emphasis added). Indeed, this elitist line had been laid down in some areas as long ago as in 1921, with the peasants being asked to give up 'meetings' and 'disturbances' and leave it to Gandhi to win swaraj (Gopal 1975, 56).

Thus, on the road to Partition and Independence the Indian nationalist leadership evolved a number of political axioms, as it were, which they then propounded sedulously. One of these was that political struggle meant the national struggle as defined by the Congress leaders. Everything else was economic, social, etc., in a word, secondary, at least as long as the British power remained in India. An essential part of this logic was the separation of the 'political' and the 'economic', and a reading of political events as being essentially the one or the other. Hence communalism, the agrarian question, the labour movement, all of which we might see as political phenomena, were in the eyes of the Congress leadership essentially economic problems, albeit problems whose solution lay in another 'political' issue - the obtaining of swaraj.

What happens here is a re-statement of major political problems in terms of underlying 'economic' difficulties. These economic difficulties, in their turn, find their resolution - at any rate until 1947 - in a narrowly defined 'political' domain. The translation of the political into the economic might proceed through several stages, so that we could have a political problem redefined, in the first instance, as 'religious' or 'agrarian' or 'irresponsible'. But every one of these terms was reducible in the end to the economic, and after the attainment of independence their solution too would be seen to lie in the 'economic' sphere.



The 'political' became the preserve of a privileged few - the Congress leadership and those whom they would equip with the necessary understanding for political action. For the Gandhian Congress had adopted a line that could be summed up in the words, 'to the people': a slogan that applies not only to Gandhi's directive to Congress workers to go out into the villages, but also to the leaders' belief in the one-way traffic of political ideas.

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