



## Role of Students, Youth and Women in the Socialist Movement: A Critical Appraisal

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The students, youth and woman together constituted the cornerstone of the Indian Socialist movement in general and the province of Bihar in particular during the late 1930s and early 1940s and thereby, strengthened the anti-imperialist movement under the banner of Indian National Congress. Gargi Chakravartty has rightly pointed out that the year 1936 was a milestone in the history of the Leftist mass movements in India.<sup>1</sup> She has further elaborated that a large number of students came under the influence of Leftist ideology and the All India Students Federation (AISF) was formed.<sup>2</sup> The students and youth of the country were acquainted with a new perspective on 'local, national and international issues.'<sup>3</sup> The following year was a period of continuous struggle of students all over the country. An unprecedented number of students' strikes were witnessed during the year and in almost all important instances, it had resulted in victory for them. One of the objects of the AISF was to prepare students to take an active part in the freedom struggle. The CSP leader Minoo R. Masani considered it as a very proper objective for a student body, for it is the minimum political programme on which almost all students, whether they be socialists, Gandhi-ites or nationalists, can collaborate.<sup>4</sup> He further cautioned that a students' organization 'should be political but not partisan, and its doors should be opened for all those students possessing progressive thought.'<sup>5</sup> Masani urged the students to supplement their reading of books by the study of the actual facts of life.<sup>6</sup>

The communist leader P.C. Joshi underlined the growth of 'a genuine students movement' during this period in India which had gone from strength to strength and actually forged

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<sup>1</sup>Chakravartty, Gargi, *P.C. Joshi- A Biography*, New Delhi, 2007, p.16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>4</sup>Extracts from a Report on M.R. Masani's Presidential address at the All India Students' Conference, Madras, 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1938, in Mitra H.N. and N.N. *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. 40, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 412-13.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.,



living links with wider mass movement.<sup>7</sup> He pointed out that the communist and congress socialist students have been the patient builders of this vital but broad students' movement. Joshi maintained that the communist and socialist students were the first to realize the disastrous consequences of the split and did not rest content till they restored complete unity.<sup>8</sup> It is with this perspective in view that the role of socialist students, women and youth of Bihar have to be looked into as an integral component of a broader Left movement and the all-encompassing struggle for Indias' independence from imperialist forces.

As we have noted in the very beginning that the students and youth of Bihar, apart from the peasants and workers, constituted another very important segment of the social composition of the Socialist movement in the state. Jawaharlal Nehru addressed the students as 'members of the republic of youth'<sup>9</sup> and asked them to prepare themselves for the struggle ahead. Even before the formation of All-India Congress Socialist Party, the Council of Action of the Bihar Socialist party in its meeting held on 1st May 1934 at Patna, pledged itself to the task of organizing and participating in youth leagues for the purpose of getting their support to the programme of the party.<sup>10</sup> The proceedings of the founding conference of the AICSP on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1934 at Anjuman Islamia Hall, Bankipur (Patna) were dominated by youngsters who were in majority. Though Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi drew respect, their method could not gain confidence in the eyes of the new generation which had been drawn in the freedom movement. They were largely critical of the Congress leadership and the way it was conducting the national struggle. But at the same time, they did not want to dissociate themselves from the Congress or the struggle launched by it. Still, they considered the Indian National Congress as the biggest anti-imperialist organization in the country.

It was in this background that the Bihar Socialists started organizing the youth leagues throughout the province to enlist their support for the attainment of twin objectives of independence and socialism. Jayaprakash Narayan's younger brother Rajeshwari Prasad

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<sup>7</sup>Joshi, P.C., 'Students Unity', *The National Front*, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1938.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., The Third Annual Conference of the All India Students Federation (AISF) was held at Madras from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1938 which saw a split in the students' movement. At Haripura, the breach was bridged and unity in student ranks restored.

<sup>9</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1940.

<sup>10</sup> Bihar Socialist's Programme- Methods for winning Freedom-What They Stand For, *Searchlight*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1934, in Political Special, File No. 100/1934; p. 24, Bihar State Archives (BSA).



Verma was one of the chief organizers of the Patna youth league under the able guidance of revolutionary Mani Rai.<sup>11</sup>

During the period 1937-1945, labour and Kisan organizations coupled with students and youth leagues and the upsurge in the princely states comprised important issues which gave impetus to the emergence of a broad Left alternative within the Congress. Moreover, this conglomeration also acted as a challenge to the increasingly conservative stance of the Provincial Congress ministries and the majority in the Party high command.<sup>12</sup> The Left in this period included the Socialist, the followers of M.N. Roy and the illegal C.P.I. which worked through the C.S.P. and in fact, provided many of its most effective mass leaders (Krishna Pillai, & E.M.S. Namboodripad and A.K. Gopalan in Kerala, Jeevanandan in Tamilnadu, P. Sundarayya in Andhra and Sohan Singh Josh in the Punjab). The support from the two Congress presidents of these years, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose was felt to be valuable though it remained verbal and largely uncertain.<sup>13</sup> No doubt, there were some internal tensions, particularly the growing alarm felt by Socialists like Jayaprakash Narayan, Minoo R. Masani or N.G. Ranga at the rapid penetration of the C.S.P. by Communist cadres. Nevertheless, a measure of broad unity was still preserved till 1939 and in some ways till 1942. There was a consensus and almost all sections of the Left agreed that remaining within the Congress was justified and it paid rich dividends despite some unavoidable and inevitable compromises. What is significant in the context of the present work/study that students in regions like Bengal now tended to be attracted to one or other variety of the Left since Gandhism had little appeal for them.<sup>14</sup>

In the following years, the Congress Socialists in Bihar continued with their programme to engage the students and youth as a strong pillar of the anti-imperialist front. Jayaprakash Narayan and Rambriksha Benipuri addressed the Shahabad district student's conference on 1-2 April 1939 where they exhorted the audience to strengthen the fight against foreign rule.<sup>15</sup> With the impending world crisis looming large over India, the second imperialist war threatened to upset the existing balance of social forces. The Socialists gathered at Patna on

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Sarkar, Sumit, *Modern India 1885-1947*, Macmillan, 1983, p. 370.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>15</sup> Letter of District Magistrate, Shahabad dated 12.04.1939 to the Chief Secretary, Political Special, File No. 114/1940, BSA.



26<sup>th</sup> September 1939 to discuss the war situation. Among those present in the meeting included Jayaprakash Narayan, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and Faridul Haq Ansari.<sup>16</sup> In his address, Jayaprakash Naryan described England as the home of imperialism. He also noted that capitalist countries feared when power was in the hands of the Kisans and Mazdoors.<sup>17</sup> Those students who were active in Bihar C.S.P. played prominent role during the celebration of Independence Day (26 January 1940) in the province as a protest against India's participation in the imperialist war. The Socialists also intended to use this opportunity as a measure to estimate their following and support base amongst the students and youth of the region. It is precisely because of this reason that they had advised their followers not to apply for licenses for taking out processions under section 30 of the Police Act which was in force but to court arrest by defying government orders.<sup>18</sup> The Socialist student's procession in Patna was led by Rambriksha Benipuri who was arrested along with some other precisionists for defying government orders.<sup>19</sup> Congress flags were hoisted in the premises of Bihar National College and Patna Medical College. The CSP youth were also active in other towns including Muzaffarpur, Gaya and Bhagalpur.

Action was also taken against communist student leaders like Ashraf Ali for taking out processions without permission of the local administration. Several educational institutions in the province imposed small fines on Leftist student leaders for organizing strikes of students on Independence Day. As a result of this attitude of the administration, there was considerable resentment amongst the students who had taken a pledge not to submit to the high handedness of the authorities.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Jayaprakash Narayan urged the people to seize hold of the opportunity and forge ahead with the Socialist programme to start the fight for country's independence. At several places, he addressed large audiences of about ten thousand people.<sup>21</sup> Jayaprakash was arrested under the Defence of India Rules for a speech delivered at Jamshedpur on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1940. As a mark of protest against his arrest, a public meeting was held at the Anjuman Islamia Hall, Patna on 10<sup>th</sup> March which

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<sup>16</sup> Home department, File No. 1, 1939, BSA.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>18</sup> Extracts from Confidential Fortnightly Reports on political events in Bihar 1940-41, PoliticalSpecial, File No. 66, 1940-41, pp. 7-11, BSA.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>20</sup> Extracts from Confidential Fortnightly Report on political events in Bihar during the first half of February, 1940; Freedom Movement Papers / 1940, p. 21, BSA.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 22.



was attended by more than one thousand people. In an emergent meeting of the socialist and Kisan Council of Action, it was decided to observe 14<sup>th</sup> March as Jayaprakash Day throughout the province. The Day was observed even at Ramgarh (the venue of the Congress session 1940) where a meeting was held which was presided by Dr. Rajendra Prasad. What was remarkable that everywhere, students and youth attended protest meetings in large numbers.<sup>22</sup> In the state capital two protect meetings were organized at Bankipore Maidan and Mangles Tank (Mangal Talab), Patna city. At Hajipur, Kishori Prasanna Singh addressed the protest meeting which was attended by large number of local students from adjoining villages. Jayaprakash Narayan was sentenced to nine months rigorous imprisonment.<sup>23</sup> Administrative attempts to suppress student's activities were resisted by the Socialist all over the state. Thus they had established a special chord with the students and youth and concentrated on their political education through summer schools and to build up volunteer corps.<sup>24</sup> Gaya District Congress Committee which was overwhelmingly Socialist in composition intended to recruit 20,000 volunteers for the active assistance of the District Board. These volunteers were meant to act as a second line of support for the nationalist forces in the event of any future struggle for independence. The Gaya District Board had also arranged for scout training in all its schools and these scouts would supplement as Congress volunteers.<sup>25</sup>

Students and youth remained actively involved in the programmes of CSP in Bihar throughout the year 1941. Observance of 'Deoli Day' in the entire province was an important event. Public meetings were held in sympathy with the prisoners who were on hunger strike. Gaya students' federation held a meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> November at Hallet Town Hall. The annual session of the Bihar Provincial Congress Socialist Party was held at Patna from 31<sup>st</sup> October to 1<sup>st</sup> November 1941 under the presidentship of Purushottam Tricumdas. The conference

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<sup>22</sup> Extracts from Confidential Fortnightly Report on political Events in Bihar during the second half of March, 1940; Freedom movement papers / 1940, p. 64, BSA.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>24</sup> Extracts from Confidential Fortnightly Reports on political events in Bihar during the second half of May, 1940, Political Special, BSA.

<sup>25</sup> Extracts from the Report on the events in Bihar during the First half of August 1940, Political Special, p.181, BSA.



was attended by about 4000 people on the first day and about 2000 people on the second day, the majority being students and youth from different corners of the state.<sup>26</sup>

The role of the students and socialist youth in the 1942 struggle is well known. The same has been kept out of the purview of present work. Here, the focus is largely on the youth component of the CSP in Bihar which was quite remarkable in terms of their active involvement in the on-going anti-imperialist struggle. The daring escape of Ramnandan Mishra, a well-known Socialist leader of Bihar along with Jayaprakash Narayan from Hazaribagh central jail in October 1942 gave a great impetus to the movement. Jayaprakash along with Kartik Prasad, Braj Kishore Prasad Singh, Dr. Baidyanath Jha and Shyam Sunder Prasad took shelter in Terai, Nepal and set up a centre for training of Azad Dastas which mostly comprised the socialist youth and students. Suraj Narayan Singh was captain and Yogendra Shukla became commander-in-chief. Other youth who were active included Nar Singh Narayan Singh, Muralidhar Singh, Amir Singh, Kuldeep Jha and Munishwar Prasad Singh. This struggle brought for CSP cadre their hour of glory. Most of them staked their all in the fight. Middle class students were very much in the forefront in 1942 both in the urban and rural areas of Bihar.<sup>27</sup>

After the end of the Japanese war, thousands of young people who had taken part in the 1942 upsurge joined the Socialist movement in the province and thereby considerably enlarged its mass base as well as broadened its social composition. Many of them devoted themselves to the organization of the working class and peasantry, and the socialist influence in the trade union and Kisan movements increased tremendously in several areas of Bihar.

The issue of gender equality and women emancipation attracted greater attention of the Congress Socialists both at the national level as well as in the province of Bihar. The CSP in general drew its inspiration from the progress achieved by Russian women in securing equal rights and opportunities. The socialist leader and professor at Patna College, Gyanchand delivered a lecture on women in Soviet Russia in Patna on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1935 which was the fourth lecture of the series organized by Amala Mukherjee, Honorary Secretary of the

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<sup>26</sup> Extracts from Confidential Fortnightly Report for the period ending the 13th November, 1941, File No. 68/1941, Political Special, BSA.

<sup>27</sup> Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 397.



*Stree Samman* (Women's Conference).<sup>28</sup> Other women who attended the lecture included Mrs. Dhavle, Mrs. Godbole, Mrs. Sethi, Mrs. S.P. Sen, Miss B. Dey, Mrs. A. Sen, Mrs. Sarkar, Mrs. Taraporewala, Mrs. Patel, Mrs. J. N. Ghosh, Mrs. S.P. Verma, Mrs H.L. Dutt, Mrs. R.K. Sharan and Mrs. Jaiswal. Gyanchand pointed out that women in USSR won their economic independence which enabled them to attain proper place in the political and social advancement of the communist state.<sup>29</sup>

The Indian Socialists from the very beginning appealed to the affluent women of the society to discard their privileges for the economic emancipation of countless common women. To achieve this Goal, they emphasized the need for planning of social affairs.<sup>30</sup> Leaders like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay projected the image of self-sacrificing Indian peasant women. Instead of urban working women, the pivot of Congress activities always remained the rural peasant women. As a result, with the increasing participation of women in the freedom struggle, more attention was paid to the problems of the latter. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay drew inspiration from the writings of Amfiteacrov, one of the best authorities on Russian women who calculated the women's share in the revolutionary struggle at a ratio of one to four.<sup>31</sup> Chattopadhyay recognized the importance of right to work as an essential condition for the happiness and well-being of women in the social structure.<sup>32</sup>

The CSP's mass mobilization programme to strengthen the broader anti-imperialist struggle in the province had impressive women participation during the late 1930s. Large number of women participated at micro/local level in various Bakasht agitations demanding restoration of Bakasht lands to the tenants which started with the one at Barahiya Tal Bakasht Struggle.<sup>33</sup> The Reora Bakasht Satyagraha started during the winter of 1938 in Gaya district witnessed large participation of women who fearlessly encountered both the Zamindar's excesses as well as police brutalities.<sup>34</sup> Their anti-British and anti-Zamindari slogans rant the air which

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<sup>28</sup> *Bihar Herald*, 21st December, 1935, No. 30, Vol. IV, New Series, also Political Special File No. 278/1935, BSA.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>30</sup> Editorial notes, *Congress Socialist*, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1936, Vol. 1, No.3.

<sup>31</sup> Chattopadhyay, Kamaladevi, 'Daughters of Revolution', *Congress Socialist*, Vol. 1, (New Series) no. 9, 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1936.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>33</sup> Saraswati, Swami Sahajanand, *Kisan Kaise Ladte Hain?* (Hindi), Delhi, Granth Shilpi, 2002, pp. 83-84.

<sup>34</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh* (Hindi), Delhi, PPH, 1985, pp. 316-19.



included cries such as *Zamindari Ka Naash Ho* and *Inquilab Zindabad*.<sup>35</sup> The Bakasht struggle at Maijhiyawan (1939) in Gaya district was remarkable due to active participation of local upper caste Bhumihar women who remained in the forefront of the Satyagraha.<sup>36</sup> With the on-going agitation gaining further momentum, they were joined by Gwala/Ahir and Koeri women of the adjoining areas.<sup>37</sup> During the struggle when menfolk were put behind the bars, women agitators resisted the landlords' musclemen and finally, forced them to retreat. At Sandha Mauja in the same Zamindari of Raja Haiharr Prasad Narayan Singh, Bhumihar women broke the police barricades, ploughed the field and thereby re-established occupancy rights.<sup>38</sup> Five women *Satyagrahis* were asserted along with others during the Amwari agrarian Satyagraha (1939) in the Saran district led by prominent Socialist and Kisan Sabha leader, Rahul Sankrityayan. Women processionists wearing red clothes paraded the streets of Siwan during the march of peasants from Amwari to the local town.

It was for the first time in the history of labour movement in Bihar that a procession of women labourers paraded the streets of Patna city in the afternoon of 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1939. They shouted labour slogans and carried Congress and red flags. The procession terminated at Mangals Talab (tank) where a large public meeting was held under the presidentship of Rambriksha Benipuri. What further added to the importance of the event was the presence of Jayaprakash Narayan who addressed the workers and applauded their efforts in organizing themselves into a trade union. Again, after two months, women workers/agitators played a decisive role during the Bihariji Mills strike at Patna city and finally, the Patna Mazdoor Union emerged victorious under the guidance of Bihar CSP and the able leadership of Benipuri.<sup>39</sup>

Thousands of women who were part of the CSP cadre participated in the national movement throughout the country in 1940s. Bihar was no exception to that and woman activists used to be able to organize regular *prabhat pheris* and poster exhibitions at Patna. Some of them were very active in the underground activities of Azad Dastar organized by Jayaprakash Narayan. Usha Mehta was in-charge of broadcasting radio network in Nepal/ Terai area. Vijaya

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>37</sup> Saraswati, *op. cit.*, 2002, pp. 20-23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-60.

<sup>39</sup> *Searchlight*, 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1939.





Patwardhan, the younger sister of CSP leader, Achyut Patwardhan helped Jayaprakash Narayan in crossing over the Indian border.

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