Agrarian Tensions in Oudh and Its Counterforces (1920-22 and 1930-32): A Study of Nehru’s Leadership-paradoxes of A Complex Reality

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Abstract: The paper under consideration intends to make a survey on the issues involved in the agrarian movements in Oudh in the 20s and 30s of the last century. Since both the movements were synchronized with non-cooperation and civil disobedience movement, the prospect of the movement were directly connected with the political progress of the Indian National Congress. It has been focused in the article that Congress support vis-à-vis Nehru’s sympathy for the peasants from the very beginning suffered from utter vacillation. This situation virtually leads us to look into the leadership of Nehru and the contradiction of the Congress party on the question of healing the wounds and sufferings of the peasantry. From this standpoint the article is mainly designed to explore how the peasant radicalism from below was suppressed by the dominant social groups and at a time when Nehru was a leading personality in Indian politics. Infact Nehru was suffering from a contradiction and inconsistencies and had to compromise with anti-forces against the peasantry on India. In this respect the paper ends with the view that Nehru’s policy failed to minimize the dominance of the monopolists and at the same time could not resolve India’s most acute social contradictions.

Key Words: feudal oppression, injustice, History from Below, anti-British movement, No-rent Campaign, check value, class interest, social humiliation, inconsistencies.

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While making a general statement about the growth of peasant movements in South-East Asia, Gerrit Huiser once remarked that for all practical purposes these were a kind of reaction to the introduction or extension of some form of colonialism. He further stated that ‘the large majority of rural dwellers became economically exploited by a relatively small elite; either local or foreign, generally concentrated in the cities or the smaller principal capitals’. A close look at the nature of the agrarian tension that flared up in Oudh (a region of 12 districts in Uttar Pradesh formerly United Provinces) in the twenties and thirties respectively of the last century hardly make any difference of Huiser’s presumption. Practically speaking, the peasant movements under review, too, were steered by the peasants of Oudh themselves so as to challenge the feudal oppression practiced by the Zamindars and Talukdars under the tacit recognition of the British imperial power.

In fact, the study of peasant movements in India has been a neglected area of research by the historians. This neglect has led a scholar to call it an ‘injustice’ to the subject proper. However, in the recent past scholars have turned their attention to this field. Sumit Sarkar and others are inclined to identify it as, History from below.

Jawaharlal Nehru, perhaps for the first time, recorded the peasants’ problem of Oudh in a sensitive manner. At present, we have with us various works like those of Siddiqi, Pandey, Dhanagare, Sunil Sen, Sukhbir Choudhury, Ravindra Kumar and so on, which not only deal with some significant points but have also stimulated further investigations about the problem. Kapil Kumar in his articles and book has tried to judge the peasant uprising of Oudh from a new dimension. But curiously enough, none of the works so far has attempted to explore the factors which promoted Nehru to lull the agitated peasants in spite of the fact that himself engineered a ‘left-wing lobby within the Congress’ and expressed his radical ideas on more than one occasion.

The present paper is intended to look into the peasant movement in Oudh from that standpoint that might give a possible answer regarding Nehru’s leadership.
It is relevant to note here that one of the distinctive features of both the peasant movements in Oudh was that the first one (i.e. 1920-22) synchronized with the non-cooperation movement and that of the 1930s originated with the civil disobedience movement launched by the National Congress. So, for obvious reasons, the prospects of the movements were intimately connected with the volume and progress of the anti-British movement organized by the Indian National Congress efforts throughout the period.

At the outset, it may be recalled that the first agitation was directed against the age-long exploitation of the talukdars. The second one was, however, a sort of 'no-rent-campaign' started by the peasants and led by the Congress of U.P. As a matter of fact in each agitation one witnesses violence, firing, plundering of goods of the merchants and money-lenders and so on. All this was an outburst of the protest of the tenants against illegal exactions, ejectments, beatings and the like.

It may be said that, 'being utterly tired of their economic and social background, the peasants of Oudh (particularly of Rae Bareli and Fyzabad) began to think on the lines of a rebellion, their fury burnt to a flame in 1920-2'. In the meantime, Ram Chandra, who was originally from Maharashtra, organized the peasants and produced a sense of protest. It is said that at this juncture Jawaharlal Nehru was drifted to the movement.

We should not, however, forget to mention that the Congress support vis-à-vis Nehru’s sympathy for the peasants from the very beginning suffered from vacillation. The Congress as a political organization got confused whether to ‘espouse the cause of the tenantry’ or not. The Congress feared that the peasants’ cause would imply involvement in the agitation against the Zamindars which had little to do with the nation-wide movement. At long last, what happened was that, in November, 1921, the All India Congress Committee permitted ‘non-payment of taxes’; and ‘no-rent campaign’ was naturally not broached. According to some, ‘It was intended to direct the peasants’ participation in the non-co-operation movement throwing the ‘no-rent-agitation’ in the background. A relevant
part of Mayer’s report (25 February, 1921) in this regard says, ‘There is nothing to choose locally between a gathering under the auspices of the Kisan Sabha or the Khilafat Committee. Both movements appear to have been captured by the non-co-operating party, and there is one movement only in progress at the present time and that is the Non-co-operation Movement.’\(^{18}\)

Likewise in the wake of the civil disobedience movement in 1930s, a new wave of peasant struggle swept over Uttar Pradesh known as ‘No-Rent Campaign’.\(^{19}\) This time the movement was, by and large, intensified by the great world economic depression (1929-30). But the movement did not succeed; the spirit receded, when a person like Mahatma Gandhi, came to a compromise with the British imperialists.\(^{20}\)

From the above it appears that the peasants could not go beyond the limits determined by the Congress and its leaders. The grievances of the peasants remained unfulfilled. The agitations petered out quickly in the circumstances in which the Congress leaders had a leading role. The question is why did such a situation arise? Is there any possible explanation of it? Surprisingly it was Nehru himself who failed to lead the movements as per expectations. This was more striking as he was quite aware of the nature of the exploitation, mode of eviction, land-structure of the region and so on. Then, having returned from Soviet Russia during 1927-28, he advocated radical approach to the agrarian problems of India.\(^{21}\) At this moment he also supposed to have seen the soul of India as a new thinking took place about the future of India and it was secondary radical change in his being.\(^{22}\) What were the forces that Nehru could not overcome? Why did he play a role which is self contradictory?

From the very beginning of the agitation, say from 1920 onwards, Nehru used to pay frequent visits to the villages and watch the Kisan movements. Sometimes, he led the movements by attending several mass-meetings in some regions of Oudh particularly Pratapgarh district.\(^{23}\) But everywhere he is said to have impressed upon the peasants to eschew violence. The village level leaders, however, always tried to lead the movement in the form of a ‘class war’.\(^{24}\) The ‘spokesmen’ of the Congress in U.P. ‘belatedly
discovered the potential for political agitation in the agitation conditions in Oudh.'\(^{25}\) What happened was that ‘the intermediary Congress leaderships in U.P., between Gandhi and the Kisans, failed to present to the impoverished masses the sort of populist and anti-colonialism that men like Birendra Sasmal and Anil Baran Roy were propagating at the same time among the eastern Midnapore and Bankura peasantry.'\(^{26}\) Nehru had extended support to mass action against the zamindars, ‘but he was at pains to call on peasants to stay calm and struggle non-violently for Swaraj.’ ‘Later (he) even preached Kisan-zamindari unity … and in February 1921 when Baba Ramchandra was arrested (and) a serious riot broke out … Jawaharlal (then in Banaras with Gandhi) urged the excited crowd to obey Gandhi and allow Ramchandra to be arrested quietly.’\(^{27}\)

This again goes to show that the Congress leadership under Gandhiji and his follower Nehru, was ready to compromise with the ruling authority. Barun De is quite right when he argues that ‘perhaps Nehru’s mass appeal lay in the fact that, objectively speaking, he epitomized India’s Freedom Struggle at this stage, when it was caught in some specific contradictions. Upsurging National liberation movements which involved peasant masses (naturally) numerically pre-dominant in a country which suffered from colonialist underdevelopment in the 1920s and 1930s struggled against objective restrictions on the growth of either capitalism or mass social justice. British imperialism itself, its semi-feudal intermediaries in the princely states and Zamindars, as well as the rickety bourgeois groups … semi progressive regional forces in some commercialized sectors of the land and its economy, were some of the factors which objectively hindered the popular aspirations, aroused by Gandhi and Satyagraha as well as by worker and peasant movement.’\(^{28}\)

It may, however, be noted that the leadership from within the peasant (or working groups) was hardly possible in this transitional phase, although the peasant agitation in Oudh took place at a historic moment when the world witnessed a victory of the working class in Soviet Russia. The exploitation and sufferings of the peasants of Oudh, were intense. The poor peasantry became aware of their condition and they also learnt the

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methods of organizing themselves so as to shatter the existing feudal structure. The U.P. Kisan Sabhas, led by Madan Mohan Malaviya, Motilal Nehru and later on by Jawaharlal, speak of a kind of manifestation of their political consciousness in the region in question. But it is remarkable to note that at this stage either Marx’s theory of ‘Urban proletariat as a naturally to peasants’ struggle’ nor Eric Stoke’s thesis of ‘rich peasants’ participation and leadership’, nor even the ‘middle peasant theory’ of Hamaza Alavi, supported by Eric Wolf, did anything to rouse the peasants to take up arms. The peasant movements of Oudh have no relationship with Gramsci’s perception of ‘religion as one of the fundamental components of peasants’ uprisings.’ Nothing of the kind cited above acted upon the minds of the peasants of Oudh. The most remarkable fact was that the huge bulk of poor peasantry along with the agricultural labourers challenged their oppressors to put a stop to their exploitation. But a leadership amongst them was not there. Kapil Kumar has rightly pointed out that ‘the Oudh peasantry which was unfamiliar with modern methods of organization sought out a skilled leadership to guide it in the struggle against the exploiters.’

Finding themselves in such a helpless position, the peasants of Oudh had to depend upon some middle class or elite leaders to gear up their agitation. Consequently, the leadership was supplied by the middle class intelligentsia (i.e. from middle class based Congress organization) in which Nehru was the ‘sole spokesman’. It must be remembered that Nehru was not lacking in progressive ideas. He was no doubt strongly opposed to colonialism, exploitation and oppression. But in no circumstances even if was powerfully influenced by Karl Marx, Nehru was not a thorough or blind Marxist.

But it is an irony of fact that Nehru could never follow up his ideals; he did not heal the wounds of the peasantry. Rather he remained a spectator when the Congress leaders used the peasants’ discontent in furthering their own class interests instead of furthering the interests of the peasantry.

In such a situation some pertinent questions may come to our mind so far as Nehru’s leadership is concerned. What are the contradictions in Nehru’s personality? What precisely did restrain him to implement his radical idea about the peasantry? Why did he fail to do anything constructively for
the peasantry whom he knew as the backbone of Indian economy? Lastly, was there any ‘check-value’ in Indian politics which might have compelled him to negate the wave which had been out to shake the colonial structure of India?

All these questions are relevant. The possible answers may be sought in the conditions and atmosphere in which Nehru had to develop his political thinking during the days of India’s freedom struggle.

The Indian National Congress was engaged in the liberation of the country from foreign domination. Independence was its principal aim. In order to materialize it, it sought the help of all classes and groups. Local or class discontent was utilized to intensify anti-British sentiment. Nehru was a part of this strategy of the Congress. The two movements in Oudh stirred the sentiments of the rural peasantry against the British as also against the landlords. But the nationalist leaders turned their hack on the questions of anti-feudal, anti-talukdari campaigns launched by the rural peasantry. Now let us see what exactly was Nehru’s concern about these movements in the context of developments and events at the national level? In his words, ‘from all India point of view, however, it (Oudh peasants’ movement) was a local affair and very little attention was paid to it.’ The Congress leaders from Allahabad, too, advised the peasants not to adopt any course of violent action. Gandhiji also criticized the peasants for their anti-landlord bias, and his attitude is reflected in his writings: ‘It must not be forgotten that we are non-co-operating with Zamindars … We must try to bring round the zamindars to our side, and isolate the big Zamindars. But if they will not come to us, we must be patient with them. We may not even proclaim a social boycott against them’—such a feeling, the Congress in U.P. followed consciously all along. About Moti Lal Nehru, it is said that his association with the Kisan Sabha was to utilize ‘the peasant desperation’ for his electoral victories. Such a view is reflected in the study of Kapil Kumar and he points out - ‘In the case of those who were brought up in the imperialist cradle, as the landlords were, the question of their being thrown into the imperialist lap did not arise at all.’ Jawaharlal Nehru himself once said, ‘the Talukdars and the big Zamindars had been the spoilt children of the
British Government’, and their ‘chief activity lay in endeavoring to placate the local officers without whose favour they could not exist for long, and demanding ceaselessly a protection of their special interest and privileges.’

This clearly reveals the class interest of the socio-cultural elites of British India.

Nehru’s perception of organized nationalism within the ranks of the Indian National Congress has nowhere been well reflected than in his address to the Indian National Congress in 1936. He announced that, ‘Our direct action struggles in the past were based on the masses and especially the peasantry but the backbone and leadership were always supplied by the middle classes.’ He further described the middle class as ‘Two faced leadership’ which ‘is bound to injure the cause and hold back when a forward move is called for’. In his opinion the Indian leaders and comrades were from the ranks of the middle classes; hence all policies and ideas were governed far more by this middle class outlook than by a consideration of the needs of the great majority of the populations. Incidentally, Gandhi was also influenced by the landlords’ interest on the question of the peasants. In one of his statements he appealed. ‘The Kisan movement must be confined to the improvement of the status of the Kisan, and the betterment of the relations between them and the zamindars. The Kishan must be advised scrupulously to abide by their agreement with the zamindars, whether such agreement is written or inferred from customs.’

All these abundantly show that the Congress was solely guided by its class character. The talukdars, the zamindars were the creation of the British regime and the relations between them and their tenants were, by and large, not happy. Here we may note, no leader, not even Gandhi and Nehru, took into account the ‘social humiliation and exploitation to seek’. According to a modern scholar, ‘Gandhi was championing the interests of the multi-class nationalist alliance … It seems the Congress leadership compromised the interests of the multitudinous peasantry for the sake of a handful of Zamindars.’

Judged in this light it becomes clear as to why Nehru’s position was ‘highly contradictory’. He was a socialist at heart, but he had to support the
bourgeois political organization. In a recent study, Orest Martyshin has made a right assessments about Nehru and his leadership. Martyshin says: ‘He (Nehru) had no organized political support and acted within the framework of the Indian National Congress which was an essentially bourgeois organization. Gandhi held a commanding position in the Indian National Congress, and he himself on many occasions supported the right-wing conservative elements of the I.N.C. (Indian National Congress) in their attempt to retain their influence and to put end to the attacks and demands of the revolutionary youth.’ Martyshin further elaborates the point that ‘here Nehru played a dual role. On the one hand, he was the leader of the left-wing, and on the other he was a man who enjoyed the trust and love of Gandhi with whom he maintained a special personal relationship which no political contradictions could severe, a man who retained contacts with the right-wing leaders of the Congress. Gandhi regarded Nehru not only as the chief spokesman of the left-wing forces, but also as the avowed leader of the Congress, capable of keeping within the bounds of radicalism … Nehru also tried to retain the unity of the Indian National Congress, but he considered political movements in India unthinkable without Gandhi.’ It is likely that Nehru stood for unity and hoped to influence Gandhi in order to avoid split in the Congress organization. About this particular point, Martyshin again opines that Nehru sought to achieve unity in late 1920s and early 1930s, but having failed to commit the Congress to his ideas, he totally submitted to Gandhi’s pressure, ‘placed implicit faith in the latter’s infallible sense and allowed the right-wing forces to offset the effect of revolutionary sounding declarations.’ In the opinion of Martyshin, Nehru realized that in view of the intransigence of the right-wing forces, the continuance of his stand might undermine national unity and he opted for a compromise.—‘As a result in the late 1930s his (Nehru’s) socialist and revolutionary enthusiasm began to recede’.

The analysis of Martyshin undoubtedly goes to explain the background of contradiction in Nehru’s ideology and the nature of his fight. This explains as to why ‘the peasant radicalism from below was suppressed by the moderation of the dominant social groups at the top’ at a moment when
Nehru was a dominant personality in Indian politics. These ‘social groups’ had in their consideration, consciously or unconsciously, a class interest and the maintenance of class exploitation. In this endeavour, the anti-imperialist leadership of the dominant social groups in India subdued the revolutionary potentiality of the peasants and demolished them in their struggle against economic and social oppressors in order to mobilize them behind that stream of national movement which flowed under the banner of Bipan Chandra. In this connection it is relevant to quote and observation of Bipan Chandra. In his consideration the so-called ‘national integration’ (i.e. integration of the right-wing and left-wing, that of the zamindar and the tenants through the efforts of the Congress leaders) was made at the ‘unilateral cost of the peasantry.’

To sum up, Nehru is generally blamed for his inconsistencies and compromise with anti-peasant forces of India. It should be admitted that he was not a ‘protagonist of socialism’ in the true sense of the term and never did he take up this maxim as the national goal. Martyshin says: ‘Nehru was right in the sense that socialism was not on the political agenda in India at the time, that capitalism was a natural phase in India’s transition to future socialist changes. But Nehru did not say how long this transitional phase would last, what its objectives were, and what would the alignment of the class forces be like … The propaganda of socialism by the Indian National Congress was rather confusing, since there was no class content in it.’ Martyshin further adds that Nehru’s socialism ‘was identified with economic development and with a rise in the standard of living of the working people, with the principle of equal opportunities for all citizens of the country. Nehru’s policy did not oust the Indian monopolists, and did not resolve the country’s most acute social contradictions.’

Thus we see why Nehru had to avoid the issues which involved class struggle. His position was really difficult. He had to work within the machinery of the Indian National Congress consisting of right-wing forces who were by and large conservatives, and the party was engaged in a gigantic anti-imperialist struggle. It is different matter that Nehru could have done much more for materializing the idea of socialism, for giving
unity amongst various classes and political forces who were dedicated to socialism, for demolishing the influence of the exploiter in all levels of the state, ‘had he not compromised heavily with the capitalist and conservative quarters and if this compromise had not dulled his sense of social justice and had not compelled him to put aside his earlier revolutionary and democratic ideals.’

Notes and References

13. Jawaharlal Nehru himself has given a vivid description of the economic
condition of the peasants. He records, “This process (illegal exactions, ejectments from land, beatings etc.) was an old one and the progressive pauperization of the peasantry had been going on for a long time. What had happened to bring matter to head and rouse up the countryside? Economic conditions, of course, but these conditions were similar all over Oudh, while the agrarian upheaval of 1920 and 1921 was largely confined to three districts – Pratapgarh, Rai Barili and Faizabad. This was partly due to the leadership of remarkable person, Ramchandra, Baba Ramchandra as he was called (cf. An Autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 52f.

15. op. cit.
16. D. N. Dhanagare, Peasant Movements in India, p. 117.
17. Sunil Sen, Peasant Movements in India, p. 40.
20. Ibid.
22. Dr. Ravindra Kumar, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the Peasantry, p. 2.
23 ‘On June 6,1920,Two hundred and ten peasants from Pratapgarh district, having assembled from distinct rural area, under the leadership of Shri Rama Chandra marched 50 miles to tell their tale of woes, suffering and exploitation to the chief leaders’. (‘For details see Home Political 1920 June, 6/20, National Archives of India, New Delhi.) ‘At Allahabad on the bank of river Yamuna they camped and Nehru,along with other local leader came to see them. They came out unreservedly before Nehru and inhuman treatment and exploitation meted out to them by landlords and made it clear….. see Dr. Ravindra Kumar, op.cit, p. 1.
25. op. cit.

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35. For details see Kapil Kumar, *Peasants in Revolt*, Conclusion, pp 213-233.
38. For details see, ‘The Political and Economic Ideas of Nehru’ in V.T. Patil(ed), *Studies on Nehru*, New Delhi 1987, p.136f.some are, however, inclined to identify Nehru as a Fabian-cf.V.T. patil,*op.cit*,pp. 10-11.
42. *op.cit*.
45. *op.cit*.
47. Cf. *Young India*, 18.5.1905, Cited in Kapil Kumar, *op.cit*, p. 230f.
51. Ibid, pp. 9-10.
52. Ibid, p. 11.
53. Ibid, p. 10.
54. op.cit.
56. R.P.Dutt, India Today, Calcutta, 1970, 0.353f.
58. Orest Martyshin, op.cit, p. 12.
59. op.cit.
60. Orest Martyshin, op.cit, p. 13.