The First Congress Ministry and Malabar Peasantry, 1937-39: A Period of Suppression

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The emergence of the peasantry as an important constituent of anti-imperialist nationalist movement in Malabar was a turning point in the nationalist movement of the country. As elsewhere in the country the peasants of Malabar also offered whole-hearted support and active participation in the various anti-imperialist struggles launched by the Congress but the latter did not show matching concern for the class demands of the peasantry.[1] The peasant movement organised by the radical cadres of the Congress Socialists broadened the mass base of the Congress in the district. The resolutions adopted at the Karachi and Faizpur sessions of the Indian National Congress had generated great hopes and expectations in the Malabar peasantry who were struggling hard to secure security of tenure and ending of feudalistic exactions. This paper brings out the various efforts made by the Malabar peasantry during the period of the first Congress ministry and the failure of the ministry to enact tenancy legislations as envisaged in the earlier Congress resolutions and the landlord-police alliance which attempted to crush the organised peasant movement in some parts of Malabar.

The British administration which was based on Indo-British legal system was not in favour of abrogating traditional and hereditary rights of the land-owning aristocrats. It was a subjected peasantry who became the main force responsible for production. The landlord who had no responsibility for production was entitled to a bigger share of the produce.[2] The passing of the first Tenancy Act in Malabar in 1930 failed to ameliorate the grievances of the actual tillers and agricultural labourers.[3]

The Congress Socialist Party when formed of its units in Malabar had the main aim of making the Congress an instrument of struggle as it was thought unwise to make the Congress a forum for compromise with imperialism.[4] They desired to evolve a new political programme for Congress and in a resolution suggested that the Congress should accept the economic policy laid out by Jawaharlal Nehru and to include the organisation of peasants and labourers on socialistic principles as an important item of its constructive programme.[5]

When the nationalist movement became broad based, the Indian National Congress had taken interest in the problems of the peasants. The burning problems like heavy burden of land revenue and rent and hardships of the peasantry under Zamindari system were highlighted at the Kisan Conferences and at the sessions of the Indian

National Congress. The Congress resolutions passed at Karachi in 1931 identified the masses with the Congress and adopted a basic policy declaration which provided for tenancy reforms.[6] The Faizpur Congress in 1936 adopted a resolution recommending 'fixity of tenure' for all tenants.[7] After the Faizpur session of the AICC the peasants had great expectations from the Congress and they pinned their hopes on it. Through out 1937, the peasant activists were engaged in propaganda work for Congress and exhorted workers, peasants and middle class people to join Congress and strengthen the main stream of nationalism.[8]

The elections to the provincial assemblies as per the constitutional reforms of 1935, were held in July 1937 and the Congress candidates were elected with a thumping majority. After the installation of the Congress ministry the demand for amending the Tenancy Act of 1930, was raised in the peasant meetings all over Malabar. During this period one of the techniques of peasant mobilisation was Jathas to the houses of the Janmis for the redress of grievances. For instances, the Peasant Jatha of Kolacheri and Alavil marched to the Raja of Chirakkal to request him to stop the corrupt practices like using false measures and the excessive collections. Jathas of peasants from 9 villages marched with slogans to the Janmi houses of Vengayil Nayanar, to Koodali house, Kottayam Kovilakam, Karakkattidathil Nayanar and Kurumathur Nambiar.[9] In all these Jathas the peasants demanded the abolition of feudal levies and excessive collections.

During this period several reports and letters showing the hardships of the *Verumpattakkar* were published in the nationalist daily *Mathrubhumi*. The heavy rents charged by the Janmis and the consequent debts of the cultivators were the target of attack in the newspaper. Above all, there was no agency to give loans to cultivators on reasonable terms. A committee set up at that time to report on rural indebtedness and setting up of a land mortgage bank excluded *Verumpattakkar* from the purview of the proposed bank.[10] The *Mathrubhumi* in one of its editorials strongly criticised this action of the committee. The paper stated that, it was the *Verumpattakkar* who were responsible for raising crops and the benefit of loans from the land mortgage banks should be extended to them also.[11] In one of the meetings the Malabar District Board passed a resolution requesting the government to exempt rent and *michavaram* for those cultivators who had lost crops due to natural calamities.[12] The peasant leaders contended that the Congress ministry was bound to scale down the debt incurred by the peasantry as promised in the election manifesto.[13] The Congress ministry had responded to the problem of the debt - ridden peasantry by bringing a moratorium bill in the Madras Legislative Assembly in December 1937. The Malabar Janmi Sabha which was revived during the period opposed the bill as illegal and unjust. At the same time the Peasant Association had proposed amendments like the inclusion of agricultural labourers and those cultivators who paid one rupee as profession tax in the scope of the act, mutual service banks and Joint Stock companies in the scope of the act and to exempt *Verumpattakkar* from all their debt.[14] However, owing to the combined opposition of the landlords the Moratorium Act which came into force on 15 March 1938 did not confer any substantial benefit upon the *Verumpattakkar* as requested by the press and the people.

As stated earlier, towards the end of 1938 the demand for amending the Tenancy Act was vociferously made by the Karshaka Sangham. The KPCC meeting held at Calicut on 20 November 1938 also asked

the government to introduce tenancy legislations in Malabar as it was long overdue.[15] Earlier to this, in October 1938 the Karshaka Sangham sent two Jathas from the North and South of the District to meet the Collector in this regard. During this time the Congress-Socialists had secured an increased hold over the KPCC. The Congress Socialists urged complete disregard of landlords in several meetings.[16] The District authorities also reported to government that there has been for some time an agitation urging tenants not to pay their dues to Janmis.[17]

The landlords of North Malabar were alarmed by these developments. They requested the Congress authorities to take action against those Congressmen who stimulated the peasants to the path of agitation.[18] The peasant agitations for a tenancy legislation had seriously strained the relationship between landlords and tenants in different parts of Malabar. The landlords took it as an opportunity to restrict the wasteland cultivation. Further, they restricted customary loans to their regular tenants.[19] The police upon the requests of the landlords had impleaded many peasants in false criminal cases. Intimidation, looting, social boycott, etc., were the charges levelled against them as a matter of "official landlord conspiracy".[20] During the period between 1937–39 there were about 89 criminal cases registered against 348 peasants in Malabar.[21]

In January 1939 in some areas of north Malabar the police began to search for records of the peasant association. The Malabar Collector had reported to government to appoint "punitive police" to control the activities of the association. The Collector of South Canara in a message asked the people to report to the village head man any action of violence on the part of the association. The head man was ordered to send daily reports to the nearest police station regarding such cases. The South Canara Collector and D.S.P. visited Kasaragod taluk to appraise the situation. The Collector of Malabar also visited north Malabar towards the end of 1938. These developments, made the peasantry regard the official actions as a conspiracy aimed at suppressing the peasant movement. The impartiality of the police had also deteriorated during this time as they favoured the landlords who usually met the expenses of the Police camping in villages to tackle the peasant activists.

T. Prakasam, the revenue minister in the Congress ministry, upon receiving many complaints, visited Malabar in December 1938. N. G. Ranga, the Secretary of the AIKS visited north Malabar to assess the situation personally. Ranga was convinced that the landlords of Malabar were not allowing peasants to cultivate wastelands. In tune with the requests of landlords police outposts were set up in their residences and the police officials were siding with oppression.[22] Significant changes were taking place in the Congress organisation in Malabar. The rift within the Congress became apparent in 1939 and the right wing leadership expressed dissatisfaction over the working of the peasants' association. Anyhow, as it was a crucial issue the Government appointed a tenancy committee under K. Kuttykrishna Menon to investigate and report on the tenancy problems of Malabar. The Committee submitted its report in 1940. As the majority report fell short of the demands of the peasantry all the three leftist members submitted dissenting notes. Owing to the outbreak of the war and the consequent resignation of the Congress ministry the recommendations of the tenancy committee was placed in the cold storage.

The foregoing analysis would help one to form the following conclusions. Firstly it could be seen that the election of the Congress ministry to power in 1937 generated great hopes among the peasantry of Malabar who actually deserved a fair deal from their own elected members. In fact the agrarian programme adopted at Karachi and Faizpur session of AICC attracted the peasant masses to the Congress. The membership of both the Peasant Association and the Congress increased enormously during 1937–39 period. In the case of Malabar, enrolment of members to both the organisations were done simultaneously by CSP activists. In 1934, there were only 3000 Congress members in Kerala. During 1938–39 it rose to 60,000.[23] It was possible for the CSP activists to instill anti-landlord and anti-imperialist sentiments in the minds of the peasants which in turn strengthened both the organisations.

Secondly it could be formulated from the above that the Congress did not show matching concern to the urgent and crucial needs of the poor peasantry. This was evidently due to the attitude of the rights in the Congress who opposed the Socialists. It was the rightists who selected the candidates for the election of 1937. They were also responsible for omitting the Agrarian Programme adopted at Lucknow in the Congress manifesto which was translated into Malayalam. Later, on the intervention of the AICC, it was circulated as an appendix to the manifesto. Similarly, when the debt relief act was enacted, the *Verumpattakkar* were not given any relief at all. The police - landlord alliance and the consequent suppression of peasant activities in certain areas of Malabar came to be widely criticised.

Thirdly, the tenancy committee appointed by the Madras government had a majority of Congressmen but the majority report was not at all beneficial to the peasantry who toiled hard to strengthen the Congress party. It could be pointed out that the tenancy report submitted by the committee was quite contrary to the Agrarian Programme envisaged in the Faizpur resolution of AICC. For instance in the said resolution it was stated that the rate of rent from unproductive lands were to be reduced and rent arrears should not be regarded as a ground for eviction. However, these guidelines were totally disregarded while drafting the bill.[24]

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