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**The Landed Gentry in Bihar and the Formative Period of Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha,
1882-1899**

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Abstract: *Bihar is one of those states where the dominance of a few landowning communities is clearly discernible during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Over the centuries, the upper caste of Bhumihars had established their superior economic power by virtue of their control over large land-holdings in a predominantly agrarian society. At the same time, they were stirred up by an awareness centering round their caste identity which gradually took an organizational shape.*

Generally, the existing literature on the social history of Bihar traces the beginning of caste unity efforts among the Bhumihars of Bihar from the last decade (probably 1896) of the nineteenth century.¹ Since then, it has remained the accepted norm to toe the line of argument backed on these findings. Recently, what we have noticed that the caste Bhumihars (or Babhans) started organizing themselves purely for caste welfare purposes almost fourteen years back. It was the publication of a notice on 16th July 1882 which announced the first meeting of the Bhumihar Brahman Sabha to be held on 25th August 1882.² The above scheduled meeting was held at 4 p.m. in Pir Bahore Muhalla at Patna College, Patna which was attended by around 500 delegates which included the Bhumihar

¹ Pandey, S.N., *Education and Social Change in Bihar (1900-1921) A Survey of Social History of Bihar from Lord Curzon to Non-cooperation Movement*, Motilal Banarasi Dass, Varanasi, 1975.

² Proceedings of the Bhumihar Brahman Sabha, Aryajeevan Press, Calcutta, 1925, p. 9.

Zamindars of Narhan, Ramgarh and Sadha.³ The Zamindar of Narhan, Brahma Prasad Narayan Singh presided over the meeting. The delegates were encouraged by the active participation of Maharaja Hatuwa and the Zamindars of Ghoshi, Tekari and Amaon, Ganesh Narayan Singh, Ram Bahadur Singh and Baijnath Singh respectively. Aditya Prasad Singh, the Zamindar of Lari (Gaya) was the main inspiration behind this entire show and he initiated the deliberations of the Sabha while expressing his displeasure over the sorry state of affairs of the Bhumihar Samaj.⁴ For the consideration of the Sabha and its delegates, seven resolutions were put forth ranging from spread general and higher education in the community, the establishment of boarding houses and schools with special emphasis on teaching of Sanskrit and to take care of the widows and orphans.⁵ After due deliberations it was decided to place all the seven resolutions for consideration in the next mid-term meeting of the Sabha to be held on 5th November, 1882 at Patna itself.

What is evident that in the early years of its existence, the Mahasabha confined itself to purely social matters banishing from their programme all political and religious reforms. But even there, controversial questions such as inter-dining, inter-marriages, widow re-marriage, sea voyages etc. did not find place in its action programme.

The leadership of the Mahasabha during this period comprised Maharajas, Rajas, Zamindars and big landowners. It remained an organization in its initial years of existence as one which was dominated by these feudal and reactionary elements, who lost no opportunity of expressing their loyalty to the British Raj. In fact, by establishing a Sabha in the name of Bhumihar Brahmans, they used it as a tool for serving their own ulterior motives and always tried to convince the colonial rulers on behalf of the community of their unflinching loyalty to the empire.⁶

The second annual session of the Bhumihar Brahman Sabha was held on 5th November, 1889 in the lawns of Patna College, Patna which was presided over by Raghunath Prasad Singh, the Zamindar of Rupauli. All the earlier resolutions concerning the upliftment of the Bhumihar Samaj were placed for discussion and finally, adopted by the Sabha. This session was attended by large number of community members which included the landed gentry, money-lenders, Advocates, Students and

³ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 10-13.

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ Saraswati, Swami Sahajanad, *Mera Jeewan Sangharsha (My Life Struggle)*, in Hindi, Patna, 1952, Reprint P.P.H., New Delhi, August 1985, pp. 95-96.

peasants. What is noticeable that Pandit Bihari Lal Choubey, the Sanskrit Professor from Patna College moved a resolution thanking the Queen Victoria.⁷

The caste movement among the Bhumihars was somewhat different in its origin and development from those of the Ahirs and Kurmis. The structural conditions that gave rise to it as well as the circumstances under which Bhumihars became aware of their position sharply differed from the two backward/intermediary castes. The Bhumihars or Babhans- from Sanskrit Bhoomidhar, meaning those who hold the earth – constituted an important segment of the Bihari society towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Not only that, it possessed many of the attributes of dominance.⁸ They had strength of numbers,⁹ owned a sizable amount of the arable land locally available and occupied a high place in the local social hierarchy, although the last one was forcefully contested by other competing castes. There were princely houses belonging to this caste such as the Maharaja of Bettiah in Champaran, Tekari in Gaya and Hatuwa in Saran and some fairly big landowners/Zamindars. Owing to the Zamindari system, the Bhumihar Zamindars had established a thorough and firm control, both political and economic, in the countryside unlike the Ryotwari areas of Madras and Karnataka.¹⁰

However, there was greater differentiation within the Bhumihar caste itself than among the Ahirs and Kurmis. Predominantly, an agricultural landowning caste, McDonald observes that they were found in all the grades of tenure holders, occupancy and non-occupancy ryots.¹¹ But the majority of the Bhumihars constituted as pointed out by Arvind N. Das, the substantial tenantry which, in economic terms, would constitute a section of the upper middle and rich peasants.¹² Thus, the Bhumihars with their main occupation of cultivation and known as hard working agriculturists,

⁷ See Proceedings, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁸ Here I have used dominance in the sense of dominant, landowning caste. The concept of dominant caste has been propounded by M.N. Srinivas. For details see Srinivas, M.N., *Social Change in Modern India*, 1966, pp. 10-15 (Indian edition).

⁹ Ibid., Also in 1901 Bhumihars numbered 1072488: Census 1901, vol. VIA, Part II, pp. 100-101.

¹⁰ Hebsur, R.K., "Reactions to the Reservations for Other Backward Classes, A Comparative Study of Four States." A report submitted to the Backward classes commission, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, published in *Report of the Backward Classes Commission*, Second part, Volume III to VII, May 1980, p. 155.

¹¹ McDonlad, Gilbert, *Bihar Polity, 1908-1937: The Bihar Congress and the Political Development of the Region*, University of Western Australia, 1978, p.7.

¹² Das, Arvind N., Peasants and peasant Organizations: the Kisan Sabha in Bihar, in Arvind N. Das (ed.) *Agrarian Movements in India: Studies on Twentieth Century Bihar*, Frank Cass and Company Limited, London, 1982, pp. 49-52.

wielded an important influence in rural society both because of their landholding interests and “their bold, overbearing character and the tendency to combine in strong pugnacious brotherhoods.”¹³

The third annual session of the Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha was held on 28th -29th September 1891 at Gaya and the venue was Badi Maharani Ki Kothi.¹⁴ It was a two day session largely attended by members of the community which included students peasants, landlords, moneylenders and lawyers. Ambika Prasad Singh was elected as president of the ongoing session. The resolutions moved were similar to those passed in previous years. One resolution required special mention wherein Kuldeep Narayan Singh emphasized the need for starting a monthly newspaper of the Bhumihars and the same was seconded by Nem Narayan Singh.¹⁵ The Zamindars of Narhan, Ramgarh, Salemgarh, Sarmera, Newari, Pandui and Lari actively participated in the proceedings of the Mahasabha.¹⁶

During its formative phase, the leadership of the Bhumihar Brahman movement used the forum of the Mahasabha for establishing their own credulity in the eyes of colonial authorities. In fact, letters of praise and appreciation were always presented to the British officials on behalf of the Mahasabha to gain their sympathy and favour. Under such circumstances, any kind of ideological conflict in the movement could not have been visualised. It was only with the debut of Sahajanand in the affairs of the Bhumihar Brahman Mahasabha that seeds of ideological conflict were sown in the movement.

On 18th March, 1899, the fourth annual session of the Mahasabha was held at Muzaffarpur which was attended by approximately one thousand delegates.¹⁷ This session was presided over by the Zamindar of Majha, Shyam Shivendra Shahi who had the backing and support of Langat Singh, the local strongman of the Mahasabha who wielded wide influence due to his economic prosperity and social contribution. It was at Muzaffarpur that resolutions were passed against the system of dowry and to establish a College there. Later on, a College named as Bhumihar Brahman College (presently L.S. College) was established at Muzaffarpur which had the distinction of being the first premier educational institution in north Bihar and the teaching faculty comprised nationalist luminaries like J.B. Kriplani and Ashok Mehta.

¹³ O' Malley, L.S.S., *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers*, Monghyr, Patna, 1926, pp. 53-78.

¹⁴ See Proceedings, *op. cit.* p. 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

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