

Zenith of Peasant Movement – Growth of Organisations and Agitations in Karnataka: 1980-1990

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Abstract

The 1980s and 1990s decade mark the beginning of a new trend in the farmers' movements in Karnataka. During this period, the peasant movements in Karnataka took a new turn with the emergence of this Rathai Sangha. The Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha was successful in the mobilization of the peasants in movements and in motivating them towards action. Organisation, appropriate programmes and demands and consequently, the discontentment emerged as peasant movements. Between 1980 to 1990 major agitations carried under the banner of the Raitha Sangha. The peasant movement of Karnataka during the decades of 1980 and 1990 overthrew. This paper traces the reasons for the rise of farmers organisations in Karnataka. This paper has attempted to understand the evident agrarian discontent in this period and the role of the KRRS in triggering discontent into movement

The peasants wanted to remove the structural barriers which were the sources for their discontentment. The exploitative and profitless agricultural market system, exploitative and anti-peasant (as expressed by peasants) government departments, expensive, time consuming and complex procedures of getting loan etc. were some of the important structural barriers for the socio-economic progress. There was also a feeling of relative deprivation among the peasants. They felt that they were deprived of the facilities and development enjoyed by the people in urban areas. They felt that the rural India should get preference over the Urban India as majority of the people live in villages. Thus all these factors were the genesis of peasant movements in Karnataka.

After independence, the first variant, largely known as tenants agitation is discernible in Karnataka as well. It came to limelight during 1950-51 with the Kodagu Satyagraha in the present day Shimoga district, led by the erstwhile socialist party. This party or its variants also resorted to tenants agitations elsewhere in Karnataka, mainly in Uttara Kannada between 1950 and 1972. All these agitations in fact under the socialists had certain common agendas : they were against the prevailing rent system in Kodagu the struggle was against Kolaga, ex., forcible ejection of tenants, against increasing debts and finally, they were against non-implementation of the Tenancy Act. On the contrary in South Kanara (mainly in Bantwal, Sullia, Coodapur), Dharwar (Huliyal), Bellary (in Sandoor), Kolar (mainly in Bagepally, Siddalgatta), and in Chitradurga district the *Pranathiya Raitha Sanghas* under the Communist parties defended the demands of the tenants during the period of 1960s and 1970s. their struggles were principally aimed against the eviction of tenants, enhancement of rent, landlordism, land revenue for small holders, non-distribution of waste land among the poor peasants, etc.. The leftist peasant organisations that is *Pranathiya Raitha Sanghas*, during different intervals organized land grab movement in different parts mainly in Kolar in 1972. Huliyal (Dharwad) in 1968 and in 1979 opposed government order compelling every cane grower to hand over the sugarcane to the sugar factory (in Tumkur district); resorted to Kisan Satyagrahas or long marches in

1972, 1973 and 1979. Despite these struggles the leftist organisations, in fact, hardly made any inroads in Karnataka for four obvious reasons: One, after the land legislation or Tenancy Act the appeal of the left parties dwindled or lost; two, from the inception of the peasant Party organisation, Pranthiya Raitha Sanghas confined their activities to few selected districts wherein tenancy was sharp; three, basically leftist organisations were more concerned about implanting Marxist orthodoxy especially those principles that provided vanguard position to industrial sector or workers than the agriculture one. Fourth, there was a lack of political will to increase the membership also. This can be demonstrated with the fact that the total membership of the Pranthiya Raitha Sangha of CPI(M) was little less than one per cent of the total membership in 1978.¹ All these agitations, which had not affiliated to any parties had certain commonalities. They advocated unity among categories, defended class collaboration and peaceful agitations. Nevertheless, they had certain weakness also. They lacked sophisticated theoretical framework and also conceptual tools – either to confront and negotiate with the Indian States or International capitalism.²

On the basis of analysis of the data and information it can be safely concluded that the unhappiness and unrest was evident among the peasants quite before the decade 1980 – 1990. The roots of the movement were found much before the occurrence of collective mobilization. The peasants were faced with innumerable agricultural and allied problems. They were the victims of draught quite often. Consequently poverty was deeply rooted, illiteracy was widespread and ignorance was seen in all aspects of their life. Obviously, the peasants were docile, conservative and value bounded. Neither had they the necessary knowledge nor political and economic power to launch a struggle for the redressal of their grievances. The organization and leadership which are the pillars of any movement did not exist. The result of all this was that the feeling of unhappiness or dissatisfaction remained dormant in individual hearts of the peasants for years together without a motivating force for action.

The peasant movement in Karnataka during the course of the different agitations and of advancement had undergone many metamorphoses. It opened up spaces for contradictions and subsequently led to marginalization from within. An attempt is, however, being made to locate the causes and the manner in which the movement became a “trend”, a spontaneous emotional outburst, lacking any rationalism itself. It is that the peasant movement of Karnataka during the decades of 1980 and 1990 overthrew, for the first time, all the preconceived notions of an involved, isolated, value-bound peasantry; it opposed political despotism and politico-bureaucratic corruption and threw up in the role in different levels of economy, on politics, ideology, and the state, on liberalization, gender, nation and nationalism, etc. except for throwing up manifold issues, the process for institutionalization even after a decade or so of its inception is still continuing; the euphoria of optimism that the movement created at one time, remains fragmentary. It has not been successful either to bring about expected transformation at the grassroot level or at the political level.³

One key factor in the global peasant revolt is India's Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (the Karnataka State Farmers' Association) from the south Indian state of Karnataka. This farmers movement is struggling for food and people's sovereignty both locally and globally. Although an agrarian movement, Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha goes beyond farmers issues and aims for broad social change at various levels of society. Autonomy, justice, peace and dignity are fundamental tenets of its vision.

Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha has inspired movements in India and around the world to take direct action against multinational companies by creating solidarity and collective action through people's movements. The Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha was formally created in 1980, bringing together many isolated smaller local farmer groups under the leadership of M.D. Nanjundaswamy, H.S. Rudrappa and N.D. Sundaresh. We see our movement as part of a long process of construction of a new society, which is driven by people at the local level but must reach the global level, and which cannot take place without the active and direct involvement of society as a whole.⁴

The emergence of Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha created the necessary conditions for transforming this discontent into a movement. The Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha created awareness among the peasantry, it motivated, educated and activated the peasantry. The farmers became conscious of their rights and dignity. They were no more docile and submissive as they used to be earlier. More importantly the nineteen point charter of demands submitted by the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha to the government included most appealing and attractive demands like loan waiver, remunerative prices, cheap agricultural inputs, reduction in electricity charges, old age pension, treating agriculture as an industry, and reservation of 50 percent of seeds in educational institutions and so on. This was exactly what the peasants of this area wanted. Hence they quickly reacted to the call of peasant leaders. The very strong, appealing and convincing speeches of the leaders made their own impact on the peasants. Thus the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha was successful in the mobilization of the peasants in movements and in motivating them towards action. Organisation, appropriate programmes and demands and consequently, the discontentment emerged as peasant movements⁵ Between 1980 to 1990 following are the major agitations carried under the banner of the Raitha Sangha.

1. Opposing recovery and Attachment :

Jail Bharo and Picketing : Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha had taken out very few exclusive agitations against the attachment of property. It all began in 1982, when, for the first time Jail Bharo and Picketing was adopted. Jail Bharo agitation commenced on April 12, 1982, continued for twenty days and culminated in the arrest of more than 6,000 peasants. Though the agitation had the intentions of spreading to Shimoga, Hassan and Mysore. This Jail Bharo agitation was distinct from its earlier agitation of 1981. When the Raitha Sangha resorted to Road Block in support of remunerative prices. Sangha received wide support from non-peasant categories. On the contrary, this agitation was exclusively adopted to confront the strategy of attachment. This was called off when an assurance was given to the effect that the attachment property would be handed over to the peasantry concerned, and that the cases pending against the peasantry would be withdrawn.

Long March-1982 : The second confrontation came along with the long march to the state capital on October 2, 1982. Though it was a part of awakening the Vidhana Soudha from the deep slumber, the ulterior motive had a larger design: confronting all the political parties in general and the party in power in particular. This long march was a successful venture in terms of the turn out: five lakh peasants attended the rally. Peasants came from far off places like Shimoga, Mandya, Mysore, Hassan and Chikmagalore and support also came from different corners, including the urban areas. With the massive turn out the movement apparently believed that it had emerged as a powerful organisation and that, on this false premise the Raitha Sangha

served an ultimatum to the party in power, but it was in vain. Between 1982 and 1985 the issue did not become the primary agenda, even though the attachment and auctioning of properties of the defaulted peasants continued unabated elsewhere in Karnataka.⁶

Long March – 1985 : This was a period nineteen out of twenty-two districts were reeling under draught for the fifth consecutive year. For the Raitha Sangha it was a zenith period to re-establish its hold over the peasantry and also remerge as a powerful organisation from the setback it had received during the proceeding parliamentary elections. Meanwhile the party (Janata) and also the government was looking for an opportunity to marginalize the peasant movement from within. The opportunity came when NABARD and other similar financial institutions detailed the government about the inbuilt incapacity of these institutions to further advanced the loans in the event of non-recovery from the peasantry. This pretext become a convenient tool for introducing an amending Bill to the Co-operative Act. The Raitha Sangha argued the Bill and started agitation. Rally at Bangalore on November 1, 1985 started. This long march was exclusively meant to oppose the amendment Bill the questions either pertaining to remunerative prices or other related issues did not figure in the agendas of the movement.⁷ All these agitations and discourses did not bring much benefit to the movement in particular and peasantry in general : neither it consolidated the bases of the Raitha Sangha, nor established strong political base in the rural side. In this politics, party in power benefitted by placating one category over other or by declaring concessions to different categories. In this politics the peasantry was appropriated both as a social being as well as a political being.

2. Agitation for Swaraj or Villagition :

Agitation for Gram Swaraj : Agitation for Gram Swaraj, though adopted simultaneously along with the strategy of withholding direct taxes, it was in fact, treated as second phase of the struggle in the totality of non co-operation agitation of the movement. Raitha Sangha expressed two ways of Grama Swaraj : one, be rejecting the goods manufactured by such industries as textile, sugar, oil, sandal and soap; and two, by appropriating the natural resources in and around the villages concerned to produce goods for personal consumption of the peasantry and for attaining self-reliance. For example, in 1981 when the Nippeni peasants resorted to an agitation demanding remunerative prices for tobacco, the Raitha Sangha at the outset extended moral support but declined to take out similar agitation in defense of the Nippani peasants.

Agitation for prohibition : The Raitha Sangha had adopted very ambiguous and contradictory position on the issue of prohibition. In 1986 and 1991 Raitha Sangha demanded to total prohibition in the rural side as well as in the whole of Karnataka. On one side it advocated partial prohibition, and at the same time it pleaded for freedom for preparing alcohol at home from rice and vegetables for personal consumption. Many minor agitations centering around the villages of Shimoga and Hassan districts during this period were under the leadership of women were taken out contesting the rationale behind establishing new arrack shops (as in Hassan in 1982), opposing the practice of auctioning of shops (Elumalahalli and Harikeri in Hassan district in 1982 and 1982 respectively), and finally confronting diversion of water supply from agriculture to liquor industry (Shimoga in 1986). With the spurt of the renewed agitation for total prohibition during 1990s the strategy and

discourse also underwent a change. Serious effort was made to introduce total prohibition in different villages and the Raitha Sangha is credited with success for bringing total prohibition in many villages. It all began with Dharwad district, then spread to Shimoga, Mandya and Belgaum districts. In Shimoga district alone it brought total prohibition in more than thirty-six villages. The Raitha Sangha had succeeded in introducing total prohibition in many villages.⁸

Agitation against Social Forestry : in 1980s Karnataka state in 1980 started social forestry with aid of World Bank. It converts lands into dry and desert areas; toxic roots affect both the grass and the land. In 1982 and 1986 the Raitha Sangha started against eucalyptus plantation in particular and social forestry in general. The fact is that the Raitha Sangha focused on this issue in 1982, only when the plantation was slowly spreading to the areas of its operation, mainly Shimoga, Hassan and Chikmagalur. The strategies adopted to confront the monoculture, notwithstanding the fact that women and children were in the forefront of the movement and they destroying saplings of eucalyptus in Tirumaldevra Betta, Yelugunda, Ramadevarapura, Chandra Halli, Kalavatti in Hassan district peasantry destroyed more than three lakh saplings; two, physically opposing both the eviction of agricultural labourers and the planting of saplings was done in Salar Halli in Hassan district in 1982, M C Halli, Gatakanavi, Rangapura in Chikmagalur in 1986, Agradalli, Suddhara Halli in Shimoga district during 1985; and finally, resorting to court arrest-in fact, during 1982 and 1986 more than 400 people courted arrest in different districts.⁹

3. Agitation in Support of Remunerative Prices:

The price issue had been the major bone of contention from the beginning of peasant movement in different part of Karnataka. Various agitations that the peasant movement resorted to all these years for remunerative prices were ultimately reduced to defend of highlight two crops : sugarcane and paddy. In the former case main focus of the movement was on the issue of arrears and remunerative prices; and this had brought about a trade union character to the peasant movement. On the contrary, the paddy issue in the ultimate analysis, filtered down to demand higher prices for levied paddy or scrapping of the levy system altogether. Nevertheless, no major agitation was taken out in support of the latter; instead, most of the agitations remained or were confined to one or two districts.

Road Block agitation in 1981 : In this agitation, though other issues were also clubbed, but the principal agenda remained and centered around remunerative prices and writing off loans. It was an unsuccessful agitation in terms of the total number persons courting arrest despite the fact that the effect of the agitation was felt in Shimoga, Hassan and also in Davanagere. Among the other agitations taken out in support of sugarcane and the arrear issue, squatting inside the Vidhana Soudha received much acclaim; thereby exalting in the position of the Raitha Sangha. The squatting was but the culmination of local agitations taken out in different areas of Karnataka, ex:-Shimoga, Mandya, Mysore, and Raichur.

Squatting inside the Vidhana Soudha-1982 :Squatting inside the Vidhana Soudha approvingly demonstrated the social and regional bases of the Raitha Sangha in particular and the movement in general; Shimoga, Mysore, Hassan, Mandya and Raichur. Furthermore, while resorting to such strategy the Raitha Sangha

demonstrated that it was often working within its limited and specified agendas. However the squatting precipitated three demands. Ex- fixing of prices for sugarcane on the basis of price index and cost of cultivation, recovering arrears from the sugar factories and finally nationalizing the three private sugar factories. In 1983 nearly 100 peasants, mainly from Hassan, Mandya, Shimoga and Raichur squatted for six days. Finally Raitha Sangha failed to bring any desired changes, except assurances advanced by the government.

Agitation against Procurement of paddy and levy price : procurement for levy paddy become one of the main contentious issue that surrounded the Raitha Sangha during the decade of 1980. It was a part of wooing the peasantry belonging to four districts, ex:- Shimoga, Hassan, Mandya and Mysore. In fact symptoms of confrontation surfaced initially, when the government placed restrictions on the movement of paddy and latter on when a levy slab was imposed on the peasantry. The latter issue consequently was commuted to mill-point levy, making the merchants and mill owners responsible for procuring the targeted paddy. To bring down the retail prices the movement and Raitha Sangha suggested following measures: abolition of the levy altogether, removal of barriers on inter-district movement of paddy and other grains; and abolition of market cess and sales tax. The struggle began in 1980. In 1982 this issue took a dramatic change. In the same year peasants in a rally held at Mandya. Nearly 50,000 peasants attended the rally. Between 1983 and 1984 the Raitha Sangha adopted two strategies to bring the issue of levy to the centre-stage, but in vain, by resorting to correspondence or appeal and by restoring to direct confrontation.

Agitation in support of Other Crops : The Raitha Sangha exhibited an ambivalent attitude toward other crops, of course, time and again it proposed taking out agitations, mostly, as theoretical excises in defense of crops like tobacco, jowar, ragi, cocum, oilseeds etc, but except for tobacco the concern for other crops was either reduced to the levels of appealing or become a concern of the local or regional peasant organisations. In 1983, the peasants of Periyapatna, Hunsur, Arkalgud, K.R. Nagar staged road block demanding remunerative prices for tobacco. The conditions obtaining in these areas had resemblance with the Nippani agitation of 1981, carried under the banner of Shetkari Sanghatana. In both the places peasants were equally exploited by middlemen and market forces. In 1991, the issue of tobacco had retreated to oblivion. In that particular year the strategy shifted to appealing which included issues of subsidy, continuing the practice of distribution of fertilizers and finally judicious sale of tobacco.¹⁰

Farmers' movements in Karnataka articulated the discontent of surplus producers in mid 1980's and 1990's. In Karnataka the movement started with issues specific to their own region.¹¹ In the course of the movement, region specific demands became secondary, giving way to general and populist demands. Rallies and strikes sponsored by leaders of the movements, got massive response and were well-sustained.¹² As the movement spread, the class bias of the leaders and their demands was exposed, thus cutting the support base of the movement.¹³ The Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha had perhaps achieved the zenith of its power of the movement during this period.¹⁴

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