

Contribution of Maharaja Laxmishwar Singh in Freedom Movement (1858-98)

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Abstract:-

After the Revolt of 1857 the British Empire Emerged as paramount power in India, Darbhanga Raj Which was the largest and revenue supplier of the British Raj Comedirectly under The Supermacy of British Expire. Laxmishwar Singh. Through his Life span was very short, Contributed much for the nourishment of congress. Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh Born 25 September 1858, died 17 December 1898 Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh was a philanthropist. His statue (by Edward Onslow Ford) was installed in Calcutta in 1904 at Dalhousie Square as a tribute to him. Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh bahadur was only two years old his father's death so Raj Darbhanga was placed under Ward of Court. He was the first Maharaja of Darbhanga to receive a western education, from a British tutor, Mr. Chester McNaughton. Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh Bahadur took over the reins of Raj Darbhanga on 25 September 1879 after attaining his majority. He devoted himself to public works and was recognized as one of the greatest nobles and philanthropists of India at that time. He was made a Knight of the British Empire on 22 June 1897. (Lakshmana Jha-Nithila: A union Republic). He was taught by a British tutor-Mr. Chester Mcnaughton. After attaining majority, Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh Bahadur took over the reins of Raj Darbhanga. He entirely devoted himself to public work and was recognized as one of the greatest nobles and philanthropists of India at that time. Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh Bahadur was one of the founders of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Raj Darbhanga was one of the major donors to the party despite maintaining his proximity to the British Raj (The Knights of England. Author: William Arthur Shaw). Among his beneficiaries were stalwarts of the independence movement such as Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Abdul Kalama Azad, Sub has Chandra Bose, and Mahatma Gandhi (Courage and Benevolence: maharajadhiraj Kameshwar Singh; published by Maharajadhiraj kameshwar Singh Kalian Foundation). During British rule, the Congress Party wanted to hold their annual convention in Allahabad but they were denied Permission by the Government to use any public place for this purpose. The Maharaja of Darbhanga bought an area and allowed Congress to hold their annual convention there. The annual convention of Congress of 1892 was held on December 28 on the grounds of Lowther Castle, purchased by the then Maharaja of Darbhanga.(Dr. Perm Chandra Thakur Mithila Ki Siksha Avam Sanskrit ke Vikash me Darbhanga Raj kaa yogdan (2002) unpublished thesis L.N.M.U.Darbhanga). The area was leased to the Indian national Congress by the Maharaja to thwart any attempts by British officials to deny the Indian National Congress a place to hold their annual conventions. (Let bridge, Roper. The Golden Book of India).

Introduction

It is usually presumed that the Zamindars of British India were extremely servile to the Government and they were showing an excessive willingness to please the foreign rule in our country but the house of Darbhanga Raj is a brilliant exception to this. As a matter of fact the latter half of the 19th century occupies a prominent position in the history of the freedom struggle of India Although there was dissatisfaction against the British rule in India but the political awakening in Mithila very slow because Maharaja Maheshwar Singh died on 20 Oct. 1860 and his successor Maharaja Laxmishwar Singh was only four years old then. The Estate was therefore placed under the court of wards administration. This was major event in the political history of Maithili. This happened at a time when there was an upsurge of strong nationalism or patriotic fallings against the British in many parts of India. According to the survey report of C.E. Buckland and the Bengali Encyclopedia that during the life time of Maharaja Laksmishwar Singh (1858-98) "upwards of two crores of rupees were expended on various public objects, such as, famine relief, the construction of roads, contributions for the support of schools and dispensaries". This means that the Maharaja after attaining his majority spent nearly half of the annual income of

the Raj for nation building purposes.

Lakshmishwar Singh was born at a time when the country was passing through a most critical period of its history. Bihar under the able leadership of Kunwar Singh had seriously challenged the British supremacy in India, and made heavy sacrifices during the movement in 1857. But she had yield before the better organization and superiority of British arms. The post-mutiny period brought a sense of much depression for the people of Bihar. The want of leadership was terribly felt hitherto the Zamindars of Bihar had been the social and political leaders of their respective people. But during the mutiny the Zamindars who took up arms against the British Government were thoroughly subdued and their estates confiscated. Others who survived were mostly those who had acted as stooges of the Government and as such fell in popular estimation. Unlike Bengal English educated middle class had not appeared on the scene to take up the leadership of the people. In fact, English education for various regions had not made such headway in Bihar. It was as late as 1863 that the first college in Bihar was established at Patna. To man the admission and even for the few districts high English Schools. English educated persons had to be recruited from Bengal. The advent of these English educated Bengalis helped not only the growth of English education, but also political consciousness in Bihar. The first English newspaper. The Bihar Herald was started in 1872 by Guru Prasad Sen, a leading lawyer of Patna. The Bihar Bandhu, a Hindi weekly was likewise started in Patna in 1874 by a non-Bihari, Pt. Cassava Ram Bhatta. Thus there was practically no political life in Bihar till the late seventies of the 19th century. During the period of problems of Bihar sometimes attracted the attention of the British Indian Association and the Indian Association of Calcutta only. Very few Biharis took interest in the activities of these associations. As we know Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh had received adequate liberal education. He was a keen student of History and politics. He had made extensive tour of the various parts of the country. He had heard and read about the great movements of 1857 and the role of Darbhanga House in it. The period also witnessed a number of occurrences produced by bitter racial animosity between the ruler and the ruled. On Nov. 20, 1871 there was a murderous attack on the chief justice of Calcutta High Court, J.P. Norman. On 7 Feb, 1872 Lord Mayo was murdered in the Andaman's by a wasabi prisoner. Nearer his home on 17 May 1872 the sub-divisional officer of Madhubani, J. Barlow, was seriously assaulted when he visited the famous Sauratha Sabha. In the course of investigation it was found that the riot on that day had occurred not owing to any previous conspiracy. But there was no doubt that the Maithili Brahmins: in general bore much hatred against the Europeans. Then followed a series of such assaults on British officers in the following years in different parts of Bihar, in which the sub-divisional officer of Tajpur, Forbes, the Sub-divisional officer of Darbhanga, Johns, the Collector of Saran, Worsely and the Magistrate of Gaya, Harris were the victims. And then the tuiier episode of 1876, in which the European lawyer whipped his Indian Coachman to death on a slight provocation and got himself free by paying a fine of Rs.30/-only. All this must have influenced the mental make up of the young Maharaja. Later events amply demonstrated the Maharaja's strong opposition to the racial arrogance on the part of European officers. By education and temperament he was quite fit for taking an active interest in contemporary Indian politics,

Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh started his public life with his entry into the Bihar Land-holders Association. This was perhaps the first and then the only political organization in Bihar set up in 1878, He was elected as a member and one of the presidents of the association on the very next day of his succession to the throne. In 1880 Henry Fawcett was a candidate for the election of a member to the British parliament from the Hackney constituency. On a previous occasion (1875) he had received monetary help from the British Indian Association of Calcutta because he had taken interest in Indian questions in parliament. So on this occasion also it was decided to help him and the secretary of the British Indian Association, Kristopal Das wrote to the secretary of the Bihar Land-Holders Association Guru Prasad Sen. to that effect Guru Prasad Sen. sought the instruction of Maharaja Lakshmiswar Singh whether the association should co-operate in the matter.

The Maharaja wrote to him on 30 March, 1880 as follows-" I have already subscribed the sum of Rs. 500 towards the fund. I will have no objection to subscribe an extra 500 rupees if you circulate a subscription list amongst the office members. Mr. Fawcett is the only member in parliament who takes an active interest in Indian affairs and therefore everyone should do what he can to help him". Henry Fawcett won election. The question arose whether Fawcett or ten people of the Hackney constituency should be congratulated. In this respect the Maharaja decided the matter in favor of the People of the constituency. In fact he wanted the British public to know that a section of Indians took interest in politics. The Maharaja continued to be the president for the Association for his whole life and guided its destiny till the end

During the year 1880, Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh was elected a member of the British Indian Association though he had not even applied for it. After a few years when Kristopal Das died (1884) the lead was left to the Maharaja. And thence forward the Maharaja remained one of the leading members of the British Indian Association. Besides, the Maharaja was actively associated with the other contemporary political associations in the country, for instance, the Poone Sarvajanik Sabha, established in 1870. The Sabah on many occasions made common cause with the British Indian Association and the Indian Association of Calcutta. For example this Sabah was also active in raising funds for the election expenses of Henry Fawcett Again, from a letter to the Maharaja dated 7 March 1882 to the secretary of the poone Sabah, we get a glimpse of the patriotic fervor and the political awareness of both the Sabah and the Maharaja. The Maharaja supported the Sabah's proposal of sending a few meritorious young men to England for all the profession were the monopolized by the foreigners. Maharaja subscribed Rs.2000/- annually to the Sabah. we do not know if there were any other individual in Bengal or Bihar who was associated with the Sabah at so early a period. Another important political organization of his period was the Indian Association founded on 26 July, 1876. The objects of the Association were to create a strong public opinion in the country and to promote friendly feeling between the Hindus and the Muslims. Surendra Nath Banerjee played a notable role in the development of the activities of this Association.

In 1883, the Association started a movement for raising a national fund with a view to securing the political advancement of the country by means of constitutional agitation in India and England and by other legitimate means. By a resolution other provinces of India were invited to join the movement, The important leaders of the movement were. K.M. Banerjee, Narendra Nath Sen, Anand Mohan Bose, Surendra Nath Banerjee and others. They approached the Maharaja for his co-operation in the movement. The Maharaja, appears to have been watchful of the movement for there was already a rumour that the fund was likely to be used as much against the Government as against the Zammdars. Naturally it took time before the misgivings about the cause finally settle down, it was possible that the Maharaja did not consider it advisable to join the movement publicly. So Surendra Nath Banerjee wrote to the Maharaja private secretary, Chandra shepherd Bose, on 14th Nov. 1883, that "Not a paisa of money raised will be devoted to the prejudice of the interests of the Seminars. This is a false alarm and its falsity will be apparent, from the fact that Babe Mahesh Chandra Choudhary, one of the trustee is himself a Seminars and a member of the central committee land-holders. "He added" if the Maharaja does not wish his name to appear his only to intimate his wish to that effect and it will be carried out. We have not been able to know the extent of the extent of the Maharaja's co-operation but it is significant that the first branch of the Indian Association in Bihar should have been established at Darbhanga. And the second national conference organized by the Indian Association in 1885, said "Bihar was especially represented in the person of the president of the Bihar land-holders Association by his Highness the Maharaja of Darbhanga.

The delegates attending the conference came from all parts of India- Maratha, Punjab, Madras, Bihar, Orrisa both Hindus and Muslims. The most important object of the agitation was the expansion of legislative council so as to include some elected representatives of the people. As a result a select committee was set up to draft a constitution for the proposed legislative council. Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh's position can be easily understood from the fact that he headed the committee of which Surendra Nath Banerjee was the secretary. The Indian Association also carried an agitation against cadastral survey in Bihar (1893) in its struggle.

Another political organization with which the Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh came to be closely associated was the Indian National Congress. In 1886 the second conference of the Indian National Congress was held in Calcutta. Great was the popular enthusiasm. All parties combined to welcome the delegates who came from different parts of the country, people of the Indian Association were also congress men and they lent whole-hearted co-operation such enthusiasm, in fact, this body had never displayed before. The Loather Castle and made it available in the use of the Congress at Allahabad. In 1894 when the tenth session of the Congress was held at Madras, its resolution no XXII stated that a deputation of the Congress should wait upon Lord Elgin and that in it Bengal and Bihar should be represented by "H.H. the Maharaja of Darbhanga, Sir Ramesh Chandra Mitral and Mr. W.C. Banerjee". This shows that there were no attempt to keep secret the close association of the Maharaja with the Congress.

The Maharaja played a very important role as a member of the Legislative Council of the Governor General. He was nominated to it in 1883 and took his seat for the first time on the 12 March, 1883. The only other Indian members of the council present on that day were Syed Ahmad Khan, Raja Shiva Prasad, Durgacharan Law and Kristopal Das. The Maharaja was then a young man of 27 only. He took a leading part in the discussions on the Bengal Tenancy Bill. He vehemently denounced the Rent Law.

But he showed much greater constructive statesmanship next year in the famous Ilbert Bill controversy. The bill which the Law Member, Mr. Courtney Ilbert had originally introduced in 1883 had to be modified largely on account of the opposition of the members of European and Eurasian communities in India. It was proposed to enable the European British subjects, who would be put on trial before a district of the highest class, to claim a jury of which at least the members might be Europeans or Americans. On the 25th January 1884 the young Maharaja of Darbhanga moved an amendment to this motion claiming that the jury system should be extended to Indians too. He did not like that one section other Majesty's subjects should enjoy a special civic right, which would be denied to the Indians in general. In support of his amendment he adduced the argument that the Bill was originally introduced to amend the criminal procedure code and no special mention had been made and duty. Maharaja Sir Lakshmishwar Singh of Darbhanga made a vigorous protest against the proposal and said:¹⁰ The imposition on the taxpayers of India of a vast system of import duties, with the sole exemption of cotton goods, seems to me very much to resemble a performance of the play of Hamlet from which the part of Hamlet himself is altogether omitted. When import duties have been talked about, whether in the Hershel Committee or elsewhere, as a possible means of relief from our financial difficulties, it is absolutely undeniable that what has been meant primarily is an import duty on cotton goods. With bitter sarcasm he pointed out that object of imposing import duty on the various raw or partly manufactured articles which were used for the manufacture of cloth in India was simply to protect the Lancashire Cotton industry against the competition of Indian cloth. With brutal frankness he said: "It is unnecessary to point out that this is a protective duty-protecting the mills of England against our own mills". Thus he expressed his solicitude for the interest of the Indian cloth eleven years before the rise of the Indian movement on the wake of partition of Bengal. He also condemned the imposition of duty on kerosene oil on the ground that its incidence would fall heavily on the poor.

One of the most significant contributions of the Maharaja to the growth of nationalism in India was his speech in the legislative council of the Governor-General in 1898 on the Amendment of the Indian Penal Code regarding sedition.¹² He proposed an amendment which purported to omit the words "brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt or" from the Bill. He argued against criminal intent and incitement to force as essential ingredients of sedition. But the proposed bill sought to do away with all these. The Maharaja observed: "You have to produce only an unfriendly feeling against government, however mild it may be, and you make yourself liable to be transported for life or at the very least imprisoned with hard labour". The burden of proving innocence was thrown on the prosecuted and the Maharaja pointed out that such a procedure was against all rules. He further showed that there was exceptionally strong public opinion against the Bill. I think that it would be hardly possible to name any occasion upon which a legislative measure has met with so little approval and so much unfavorable criticism from the public.¹⁵ The advocates of the Calcutta bar, the merchants of Calcutta as represented by the Chamber of Commerce, the large body of Europeans and Eurasians in the metropolis as represented by the European and Anglo-Indian Defense Association, the British Indian Association, the great body of educated native opinion in the Bombay Presidency as voiced by the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and the Presidency Association, the inhabitants of Madras, the Indian National Congress, composed of representatives from all parts of India-these form in themselves a sufficiently formidable body of opposition.

Thus Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh enjoyed the confidence of government, zamindars and people. He was a great nationalist and tearless speaker. In short, Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh was an enlightened Zamindar, a man of progressive views, an ardent patriot, a great philanthropist, a veteran parliamentarian and a distinguished public leader.

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