

BAKASHT MOVEMENT IN DARBHANGA

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After first world war especially during period of depression (1928-30) *bakasht* land became the bone of contention between the zamindars and the tenants as the zamindars tried to depose the tenants from their private land on a large scale. They invented innumerable excuse to evict tenants from the land. Deprived tenant's resentment articulated into a recurrent demand for the restoration of ryoti rights in the *bakasht* lands to tenants who had lost them in the hands of the zamindars. The *bakasht* movement spread all over Bihar. Kisan Sabha actively organized and motivated the presents in *bakasht* movement. The annual conference of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha held at Waini in Darbhanga in December 1938 resolved to protest the zamindars and fight for the tenant's rights in *bakasht* land. In old Darbhanga district *bakasht* movement got momentum during 1930 - 1940. In Darbhanga the aggressive peasant's protests and mass movements were witnessed at Padri. Pandaul, Radhanagar, Dekuli, Bahera, Raghapur, Laukha and several other places. In fact Darbhanga remained hot on the *bakasht* issue. Attempt to seize the land or obstruct cultivation have been almost daily occurrences and numerous clashes have occurred. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the important of the *bakasht* movement in the history of peasant struggle, which took place in Darbhanga during the period of 1930-40.

The raiyats with occupancy rights faced the problem of *bakasht* in the most acute form during the period, 1930-40. Though, the problem existed even earlier, as is evident from *Khanapuri* stage of land survey.¹ *Bakasht* land means any land as defined in section 120 of Bihar Tenancy Act, 1885, which a proprietor or tenure holder claims to be cultivating with his own stock or by his own servants or by hired labour.² So the proprietor's private land was defined in section 120 of Bihar Tenancy Act thus, "land which is proved to have been cultivated as (*Khamar*) *Zirat*, *Khudkasht*, *Sir*, (*nijot*) or *Khamat*".³

After some times the zamindars thought to settle these lands with occupancy tenants in return for rents, which was wanted without loosing any time. But the situation changed with the outbreak of Ist World War and the years that followed till the economic depression of 1928-30. Due to the depression and sky touching prices of the staple crops such as rice, wheat and maize in the last twenties, it did not prove to be worth as well as advantages to the Zamindars while raising the rents. Secondly, they were afraid that if a tenant was allowed to stay for more than twelve years as specified in the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 the tenant would than have to be recorded as an occupancy *raiyyat* in the survey settlement.⁴

Hence the zamindars designed innumerable excuses to evict these tenants from the lands. Thus, in the years preceding the depression the zamindars substantially added to their self cultivated landed possessions by driving out weaker tenants, by making arrangements for the direct cultivation of these lands they could add to their income. These lands come to be known as *bakasht* or the land which came to be merged with the self cultivated land of the zamindars.⁵

Moreover, when depression set in due to the sudden fall in the price of the crops, rice, wheat maize⁶ an unusually high number of tenants' holding were sold up as result of rent arrears suit. Often the purchaser of the holding was the landlord who was glad by this means to convert what had been *ryoti* land into *bakasht* land.⁷

It will not out of the place to mention here that with the price rise, the incidence of evictions became frequent as in the case of Barhiya.⁸ However, the different categories of peasants never forgot the harassment, loss of legal rights to their lands. Even more resentful, were those tenants who had actually been displaced from their holdings, which had been passed down to them through several generations, to make way for another occupancy tenant or for a share cropper or short term tenant. So, these resentments were articulated into a recurrent demand for the restoration of *ryoti* rights in the *bakasht* lands to tenants, who had lost them during the period of the depression followed by the natural calamities like the earthquake of 1934 and the ravaging flood of 1935.

The bakasht movement first started in Padri (or Parri) circle in south east Darbhanga where the peasants demanded the return of *ryoti* rights in newly *bakasht* lands. "In the Padri circle the discontented peasantry engaged in what the circle manager later described as a violent explosion ofagitation, in course of which rent collection 'almost stopped' and the "Loot of Raj", crops standing in *zirat* and *Dahnal* i.e. (flood affected) lands, was a daily feature".⁹ In June 1936, the local officials of the Darbhanga Raj broke up a large Kisan meeting by driving an elephant into the crowd. Using this incident as a rallying cry, Kisan workers continued their efforts to have the peasant's grievances redressed. In 1939, in response to continuing agitation Shri Krishna Singh, the Chief Minister of Bihar, had to visit Padri. He requested G. P. Danby, Chief Manager of Darbhanga Raj, to look into the matter. Danby made personal investigation and reported that. "The tenants are generally in a deplorable condition..... If we do not give immediate consideration to the tenants, so distressed will they become that I cannot imagine their future. There has been considerable agitations and I am ashamed to say that it is due to some extent to the neglect and lack of sympathy shown to tenants..... I believe the tenants are still loyal to the Raj and would become as good as any other if now and in the future, due consideration were given to them".¹⁰ Danby tried to help the Padri peasantry by lowering the rents and canceling rent arrears.¹¹ But as Chief Manager of Darbhanga Raj, he also supervised the determined effort to ensure that all bakasht holdings were settled holdings on occupancy tenures.¹² Therefore the effort to settle holdings on occupancy tenures diminished the good done by rent remission and arrear cancellation. It opened the new door for a small minority of money lending kisans,¹³ who could only afford to pay the high *salami* rates being imposed and could succeed to influence the local *amlas* in their favour. In this way as the circle manager reported that "35 percent of the tenantry had become landless."

The veteran Kisan Sabha leader Ramnandan Mishra observed, "By starting land settlement the Raj enforcing us to organize bakasht struggle. In several plots of land I found standing sugar - cane crops but the land has been settled with another person for instance, in the village Sihma, the crop of the tenant who has been cultivating it for long."¹⁴ Once agitation began over newly *bakasht* lands, the poor peasants also inspired to claim possession of lands that had been held as *bakasht* by landlords over long period. For this purpose they appealed to provision of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 which endowed share croppers continuously for a long period of twelve years or longer with occupancy rights in the holdings. But this provision has never benefitted to the *raiya*s in lack of power, ignorance or low morale. Moreover under the banner of Kisan Sabhas poor peasants began to campaign for their long due rights in long term *bakasht* land. In August 1938 Ramnandan Mishra reported from Darbhanga that, "In the interest of the cause..... we must get out of the party struggle at least for a year. Kisan problems require our immediate attention. Situation is very critical and serious, how can we leave the Kisans, who are being assaulted, murdered, abused and their crops and property are looted."¹⁵

Under these fierce circumstances, the annual conference of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha held at Waini in Darbhanga on 3-4 December 1938, resolved to use satyagraha as the chief weapon of struggle in defence of the peasant's interests.¹⁶ There were naturally some extreme speeches in the conference. Rahul Sankrityayan advocated intensive satyagraha for the *ryoti* right on *bakasht* land. Henceforth, the kisan movement intensified in Darbhanga and the struggle for the restoration of the *bakasht* land forcibly occupied by the Zamindars from the tenants on one pretext on the other got acute momentum.

In order to defuse the kisan protest in 1938, the Bihar Congress Ministry (with the consult of zamindars while assuring their interest) initiated some redressal measures. Out of it, the legislation concerning newly *bakasht* lands was framed. The Bakasht Restoration Bill provided under certain condition for the return to the tenants of lands which had been sold up in the period from 1929 to 1936, if in return the tenant paid within a period of five years, half the auction price of the holding as well as the legal costs.

Sub : Formulae for the Restoration of the Bakasht Lands, 1938

Area Sold up	Quantity Restorable
Less than 6 acres	All to be restored
More than 6 but less than 15 acres	Half to be restored
More than 15 but less than 30 acres	A third to be restored
More than 30 acres	A quarter to be restored

Source : Indian Nation, 31 July, 1938.

However, the Bakasht Restoration Bill did not prove to be so fruitful as it appeared. Rather it gave the zamindars additional time to find ways to avoid its provisions. It was reported that having learnt of the legislation the land holders of Bhagalpur settled every inch of restorable *bakasht* lands *benami* on an acceptance of *salami*.¹⁷ Another difficulty was tenant's inability to pay the legal.¹⁸ So, one of the strong lacuna that went against the peasant's cause was inability to bring convincing documentation before the courts. The cultivators often found it difficult to prove their claims even when it were just, because the conditions under which the *bakasht* land was let out by the landlords made impossible for them to produce documents. In the absence of reliable oral evidence on their side, the courts have in the past been compelled to decide cases mainly on documentary evidence.

Thus in the absence of documents and evidence, the landlords were benefited, and tenants were put to heavy loss.

In fact, the peasantry had no other alternative but direct action. Again the problem arose in Pandaul area in Darbhanga. There, share cropper and short term tenants, began to claim rights to long *bakasht* lands but the failure on the part of tenants was that they could not prove that they had tilled the land successfully for a period of twelve years or more, as the disputed land had been let out every year by the Darbhanga Raj.¹⁹

Same was the discontent present in Radhanagar. Though the tenants feared reprisals from their landlords, yet their grievances were aggravated by the Kisan Sabha. Hence what to talk of the Radhanagar but for the whole of north Bihar in 1939 intensified *bakasht* protest culminated in the employment of satyagraha. Though, in principle they pretend to have apply non - violence in direct action, yet in practice actually violent crisis occurred.²⁰ Thus in Radhanagar village the struggle incorporated numerous law suits, the social boycott of the landlords by their tenants, and the use of physical force. Similarly struggles were witnessed at Dekuli and Raghapur. But like Gaya, the settlement was not easy in the case of North Bihar. As the Bihar Government reports revealed that neither the local Kisan workers nor the zamindars were co - operating with officially supported efforts to arrange a compromise settlement. However the report disapproved the Kisan workers "hell bent on satyagraha".²¹ At Dekuli in Bahera thana of Darbhanga on 16th March, 1939 tension started between the zamindars and the roytes, on the issue of a cart load rice. The tenants obstructed the cart load rice of the local zamindar. As a result trouble started and one of the zamindars was assaulted. In retaliation the local zamindars and their supporters fired on the tenants and wounded nine of them. The tenants not only limited to this only but they divided the *bakasht* land of their owners among themselves. Therefore in the ploughing season the situation became so serious that the administration had to report that the kisan movement appears to be working to a crisis.' It further pointed out that the agrarian situation continue to deteriorate and reports of attempts or threat to seize *bakasht* land were there in nearly every part of Darbhanga district.²² Lastly at Dekuli attempts to settlement failed and tension increased. But at Raghapur the dispute was settled on the terms very favourable to the tenants.

The same story was repeated in the Pandaul area of Darbhanga in July. Here agitation began when some Darbhanga Raj *amlas* tried to plough the disputed holding with a tractor. The local tenants heavily threw stones and bricks on the tractor and attacked the Raj *amlas*.²³ Thus, by the middle of July according to a Kisan Sabha publicity officer, the agrarian situation was getting more serious day by day.

In this alarming situation, the zamindars adopted several measures to suppress the *bakasht* movement. The zamindars attempted to replough the settled and ploughed lands and uproot the seedlings. In order to give a severe blow to the movement, the police arrested around 200 kisan agitators in Darbhanga by late July. This huge arrest thinned the youth population in the villages.

When *amlas* of the Darbhanga Raj came to plough same disputed holdings in the Pandaul on 6th August 1939, the main protesters were only women, old men and the children. By sitting in front of the plough bullock they stopped ploughing and only left when they had been beaten and jostled by the Raj *amlas*.²⁴ Thus Darbhanga became the battle field the Kisan struggle immensely intensified over the *bakasht* issue during 1939. Hence, now the Kisan Sabha tried to capture even at the Congress party machinery. As the official report indicates, "Attempts to seize the land or obstruct cultivation..... have been almost daily occurrences and numerous clashes have occurred. There has been a large number of prosecution and a number of principal leaders have been arrested. The agitation was intensified by the provincial Kisan Sabha meeting which was held at Sakri close by on 7th and 8th volunteers are now being imported from elsewhere to continue the attack, which is intended to be enlarge into a general attack upon the *bakasht* lands of the Darbhanga estate. It has been necessary to keep Magistrates and armed police continuously on the spot and the large number of arrests have been made. It is clear that this agitation is going to be made a provincial issue as the attack is upon the principal landlords of the province."²⁰

However, the situation became gradually normal except a clash in the Laukaha thana in the Madhubani sub - division of Darbhanga district. In Laukaha *amlas* opened fire on the agitating tenants, killing two and injuring several others. But in fact the struggle was on the wane.

By September, 1939 the protest recurred in subsequent months, but not with same intensity.²⁶ Further in November 1939 there was one notable 'landlord - peasant clash' causing death to a member of peasant party. Same was the situation all over the North Bihar and even in the harvesting season in December no serious incidence held but ordinary disputes between landlords and tenants were reported. With coming to the Second World War the Kisan workers distracted from the *bakasht* issue over the question of what attitude to take towards the War. In January 1940, the situation of the countryside was officially estimated to be usually quite. Thus the *bakasht* struggle which had caused grave anxiety had come to an end.²⁷

The *bakasht* movement in Darbhanga awakened the peasants and sowed the seeds of protest against the feudal atrocities as well as the feudalism on the whole, which culminated in a widespread vehement peasant struggle in post war period and uprooted the feudal bondage finally in 1952.

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