

Understanding Political Discourse and Beedi-Working Class Struggle in Berar: 1900-1947

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Abstract: *Geographically and Geologically, Vidarbha has been an important region of the country; hence, Nagpur as its main city had assumed great importance. It became an industrial city with the establishment of the Empress Mill in 1877 and an important railway node with the completion of the Bengal Nagpur Railway in 1887. Nagpur, the 'city of snakes' was founded by the Gond Raja of Deogarh during the seventeenth century. The province's population was divided into two main linguistic communities: one speaking Hindi or its dialect, Chhattisgarhi, and the other Marathi.*

Keywords: Industrial city, Empress mill, Snakes, Communities

Berar was a fertile cotton-growing area with an annual revenue surplus. The revenues of the Central Province were barely enough to cover the cost of administration. Yet the famines (Recurrent famines between 1896 and 1900) also induced the Government of India to give the province immediate financial aid and to provide it with long-term sources of revenue by leasing Berar from the Nizam of Hyderabad and annexing it to the province in 1903 and remained part of Nizam's domains until it was incorporated in the central Provinces under the constitution of 1935.¹ Shahu, a descendant of Parsoji, Raghuji Bhonsla, 1743 established his capital in Nagpur. He settled their army officers and camp followers on the land to administer the newly conquered territory, while bankers, traders, priests and artisans migrated from western India to swell the towns.² The leading Marathi politicians were drawn by the urban middle classes which came into existence with the growth of modern towns in the region after 1861.

The growth of commercial agriculture after 1861 further inclined notables to support British rule. The development owed much to the quality of leadership exercised by members of the Maharashtrian Brahman caste-a leadership which unified politicians throughout the region using a common ideology, and which had a vigour and sense of purpose generally lacking in more heterogeneous groups.³ The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of various peasants, working class, dalit, non-brahmin movements and the congress organization dominated by Tilakites in the early phase and by Gandhians in the later.

Berar is looking at region-wise economic and social factors which instrumentalized for vigorous political nature of these regions. According to him regional varieties, the role of social agents or the nature of intellectual class in social structure, economic prosperity and growing urbanization significantly impacted cultivating political culture. His work mainly focusing political rivalries between the linguistic region and within the Congress and misses to juxtapose the anti-caste movement vis-à-vis nationalist movement. Agriculture was the main occupation and cotton was the main crop and facilities for processing the cotton crop gave the towns an industrial character, which with their social diversity and intellectual institutions generated a dynamism that fostered an active political life.

British buyers wanted cotton ready for export, and gins and presses sprang up in the towns. The railway route was connected between Nagpur to Bombay and Calcutta.⁴ In 1877, the Parsi entrepreneur, Jamshetji Tata of Bombay, opened the Empress Mill in Nagpur, while other businessmen set up the New Swadeshi Mill in the city in 1902. At the same time, entrepreneurs established additional gins and presses in many places, and after 1900, spinning and weaving mills in Akola, Hinganghat, Pulgaon and Badnera, near Amravati. By 1918 there were 13 spinning and weaving mills and 426 gins and presses.⁵ In 1921, Nagpur was the only town in the province with an electricity supply.

Political Development and Conflict between Nationalist Leaders

In the Marathi region, new emerging middle-class politicians had unified political life with the ongoing conflict between extremists and moderates over the dominance in the region based on ideological primacy. Thus, the politics of ousting the moderate-minded notables from the congress and having Tilakite position and thereby challenging the government in its capital. In the later phase, emergence of a separate Berar movement under some of the Tilakite leadership gave way to a new political approach in the region.

Hindi politicians were more organized than Marathi. Despite these divisive elements, Marathi politicians sought unity in provincial politics between 1919 and 1939, though without permanent success. Among those who attempted this task was the Tilakites, who sought to draw Hindus and untouchables into organizations opposing the Muslims because their political activities were a threat to Hindu interests.⁶ However, the Tilakites found it impossible to sustain opposition to the Muslims on a permanent and large-scale basis or to persuade various groups to support them, rather than Congress. In addition, many Tilakites in Berar were more concerned with their immediate economic interest than with broader religious questions, and they generally tried to win support by ventilating the grievances of Berar regarding its connection with the central provinces.⁷

The nationalist movement in the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by Tilakites and Gandhian leaders. In Tilakites cercle Ganesh Shrikrishna Khaparde, M. S. Aney, and Balkrishna Shivram Moonje were

some of the important leaders and their leadership was challenged by Gandhian leaders such as Jammalal Bajaj and others. By propagating Tilak's ideas Tilakite's leaders mobilized masses on religious lines and also on the issue of the separate Berar region. The Congress, Hindu Mahasabha and other organizational forces worked to absorb Dalit protests in the Nagpur region. Some of the early leadership from the Dalit community got involved with other political forces or became irrelevant to Dalit social and political life. Dalits remained aloof from the national movement and rejected the support networks of both the 'Gandhian' and Tilakite factions of nationalists, though they were heavily involved in working-class militancy.⁸

A working-class movement started emerging from lower castes through mobilizing migrant Dalit labourers in Nagpur's urbanizing city. It was supported by landless labourers, newly educated youth, an increasingly organized working class and the Dalit small peasants. It resulted in opposition to capitalism in the mills and landlordism in the rural areas. Here it was significant that where Punjabrao Deshmukh was voicing peasant demands and other Satyashodhak activists were involved in anti-landlord or anti-money lenders revolts at the time, it was the Tilakite congress group which resisted any change in the Malguzari system. Caste and class radicalism were opposed by the Tilakite and Gandhian Congress leaders, expressed partly by non-Brahmans in the Satyashodhak movement and non-Brahman party but carried on by Ambedkar into the 1930s and 1940s.⁹

The emergence of the Dalit Bidi workers Movement in the Berar region

The decade of the 1920s saw the emergence of the Dalit movement as a conscious, organized force in the social and political life of Bombay Presidency, Nagpur, Madras Presidency and even to some extent in placid Mysore.¹⁰ Early educational and social activities within caste mobilization led to the emergence of Dalit leadership demanding modern administrative jobs and fighting against the stigma of untouchability. The 1920s saw a qualitative shift in the political orientation of the Dalit movement in terms of ideological growth and conflict with existing political forces. The articulation of the Dalit life world related to urban settlement, industrial labourers and agrarian labourers, and emerging legislative, and administrative opportunities had sharp political edges during this time. Some of the early Dalit leadership in the Nagpur region tended to be pro-congress and even pro-Hindu Mahasabha. But this leadership had no significant impact on the masses as they started losing the importance with emergence of Ambedkar's leadership. A relatively strong and independent Dalit movement grew in the Nagpur-Vidarbha region, linked to its social-economic characteristic. The mills of Nagpur and some other major cities provided much-needed employment with Mahars forming a larger section of the emerging industrial working class than in Bombay, comprising nearly 40 per cent of textile workers in Nagpur itself.¹¹

Many of the community were weavers, many more were small cultivators, and a few managed to become relatively affluent traders and

bigger landholders. Many Mahars made good progress and became malgujars (landlord), village patils, money lenders, contractors, shopkeepers, etc. The economically well-off Mahars naturally turned their attention to social reform as they acutely sensed their handicap due to caste.¹² While in the early twentieth century there occurred an awakening of Mahars in all parts of the Marathi-speaking area, this community in Vidarbha seems to have had more opportunity to take hold of the new and build a new world.

The Mahars of Vidarbha were even better off than the Mahars of the other regions of Maharashtra. They accounted for 20 percent of the population in many eastern areas, including the city of Nagpur.¹³ The lack of any fixed traditional caste work provided greater mobility than many other Untouchable castes to enter into new modern opportunities. Colonial modernity had opened up new occupations in the army and on the docks and railroads and in the mills etc., but most of the well-paid job opportunities were closed for lower castes. In Mumbai, Mahars were not supposed to touch the thread, so they didn't get employed in the weaving department. In Berar, weaving was a major occupation of the Mahar people. Because of this, there was no ban on weaving work in the mills. The condition of lower caste people improved because of the textile mills.¹⁴ One of the early leaders was Kisan Faguji Bansode who founded his organization and many schools in his area. He also started several papers, the *Nirikshak Hindu Nagrik* (1910), *Vithal Vidhvasak* (1913), *Mazur Patrika* (1918), and *Chokha Mela* (1931). Other important leaders were Vithoba Ravji Moonpandit, Ganesh Akkaji Gawai, and Kalicharan Nandagawali (wealthy malguzar). Bansode was a labour leader in the Empress Mills in Nagpur, where a large percentage of the workers were untouchables and published *MazdurPatrika* (Worker's newspaper) from 1918-1922 to educate mill labour.¹⁵ In 1926, Bansode brought Ambedkar to Nagpur and introduced him to Indora area with a large Mahar population near the Empress Mills, as the leader of the Mahars.¹⁶ Radhabai Kamble, Previously she had been a member of the Congress INTUC union but when the Independent Labour Party was established in 1936, she became one of the important leaders among mill workers.

The Ambedkar movement which was started in the 1920s began to grow in the Nagpur region as well. The rising generation of working-class leaders, including Revaram Kavade and Dharmadas Nagarare (who were involved in a major 1919 strike and became part of the executive of the Nagpur Girni Mazur Sangh founded by Ruikar in 1923) joined him.¹⁷ One of the significant mobilisations that emerged at the beginning of this movement was the Bidi worker's struggle. Bidi manufacturing is a very lucrative but harmful industry in this province. The Government auctions its right to collect tendu leaves. There are certain local taxes on these and the industry is organised by merchants who do a thriving trade in these. Due to the lack of other industries, this industry attracts labour at very low rates considering the subsistence level of wages. Little tobacco was grown in Berar, and a good deal of it was imported from Gujrat and Nipani in Belgaum.¹⁸ In 1921, 164 Bidi

factories were employing 7680 workers, and in 1931, 866 factories employing 42,240 workers. There were no trade unions in the province in 1919, but by 1935 there were 15 such unions with a membership of 13,377. Industrial growth and modernization occurring in some towns after 1919 were other factors in the growth of political activity. Perhaps the greatest expansion took place in the bidi industry, where the number of factories and workers in various towns and villages increased.¹⁹

The process of collecting *tendu* leaves, and making and packing beedis were all tasks that could be separated and done at home and in factories. This division of the sites of work was accompanied by a division of labour across sites along lines of caste and gender. The multiplicity of production sites made it difficult to determine the economic status of the industry for regulation. As the beedi industry was part of what was designated as the informal sector, it was not easy to introduce legislation.²⁰ The Factories Act did not apply to bidi factories anywhere except in the Bombay Province where bidi factories employing 20 or more persons have been brought under the Act and certain provisions of the Act relating to working hours, sanitation, lighting, employment of children, etc., were made applicable to them.²¹

Two attempts at legislation were made in the colonial period, via the Unregulated Factory Acts of 1936 and the Juvenile Smoking Amendment Act of 1932. In the former, beedi factories were exempted from Factory Acts and were placed in the category of unregulated factories.²²

Unregulated Factories Bill of 1936 was meant to apply to factories which are not governed by the Indian Factories Act of 1934 and are confined to three industries namely bidi making, leather tanning and shellac manufacturing. It was expected that the Bill will eradicate the evil of employment of young children under ten and regulate the employment of children under 14, and give adequate protection to the health and safety of the workers. Also, the regulation of the hours to work and against overcrowding. Under the bill, inspectors were to be appointed with duties similar to those of inspectors under the Factory Act.²³ Among the early efforts in the Legislative Council initiated by R. W. Fulay and Gokulchand. R.W. Fulay introduced most of these legislations and worked with the beedi workers. The Unregulated Factory Act was introduced after considerable deliberation and repeated attempts by the representatives. Fulay's resolution to support this act was further supported in the Central Provinces and Berar beedi workers conference, 1933.²⁴

Along with the legislative history parallel Beedi workers movement was emerging in the region to mobilise Bidi workers against their exploitation. The first instance that we have was the demand raised by L. N. Hardas to allow women to work from home at the same wages. It was raised in conversation with the Royal Commission on Labour representatives. L. N. Hardas and G.M. Thaware were interviewed by the Royal Commission representatives and the Chairman on the matter. Hardas and Thaware were involved with beedi rolling since age 5. They opened schools and literary societies for the workers. Hardas was among the first leaders, who brought together all the Mahar

workers to form cooperatives, especially for women. In their interview, Hardas said 'Women should be allowed to work at their own homes as they are doing in some cases and not in the factory.'²⁵

The Independent Labour Party was very active in Berar on the issue of Bidi workers. On 1 January 1931, L. N. Hardas established *MadhyaprantVarhad Bidi Kamgar Sangh* at Nagpur. Hardas alias Babu Hardas (1904-1939), as he was popularly known, was perhaps the youngest among the pre-Ambedkar leaders. He started a weekly *Maharatha* from Nagpur to spread social awareness among the Dalits; started a cooperative of beedi workers to obviate their exploitation.²⁶ He was from Kamathi village which was ten miles away from Nagpur and it had the Mahar regiment's main office at Kamathi.²⁷ Kamathi had one of the vibrant Bidi worker's movements.

Since then L. N. Hardas, Kalicharan Nanda Gavali, Ramchandrarao Phule, and Sitalprasad Gajbhiye were active in bidi workers' struggle for their "rights, interests, prestige and self-respect". They exercised all legal activities to resolve their problems. Among the 30000 bidi workers of Berar, the large numbers of workers were from the Mahar caste. There was a lack of proper legal action to protect bidi workers' rights. Therefore, the factory owners who had achieved greater financial growth with less investment were exploiting workers with low wages and particularly women workers. The Royal Commission of Labour had examined the condition of bidi workers but the commission's recommendations were not implemented. In 1932, Ramchandrarao Phule introduced the bill regarding the bidi workers in the Central Province and Berar Legislation but this was rejected. The bill demanded that with rolling one thousand bidis workers should get payment of eight annas, and to abolish night shift for women workers, wages cutting methods but these demands were rejected by both the government and factory owners.²⁸

Hardas was the secretary of the Bidi Workers Union and was the first to organize all the Bidi workers from Nagpur up to Gondiya and Chandrapur. He was a graduate and the General Secretary of the Independent Labour Party in the Province. Great enthusiasm and hope were created among the Mahar community about this new young man. He organized an Untouchable Literary League in C.P.-Berar in 1936 and put forward the idea of writing a history of the Mahars. Around 1927, he published a small paper called *Maharattha*. His articles can also be read in the 1933 Janata Weekly.²⁹ Due to Hardas's laborious work in mobilising Bidi workers, he won the election of 1937's legislative assembly against the congress candidate.

Hardas fell sick with tuberculosis. Mahar bidi workers in Kamathi were susceptible to many diseases, and TB in particular took many victims. Hardas died in 1938 at a very young age. He was dead by the age of thirty-five. People came from all over Nagpur and Kamathi to his funeral procession as if for a hero returning from the war. Nagpur's textile mills and bidi factories in Bhandara, Chandrapur, and Nagpur—all were shut down. During the funeral procession, thousands of people sobbed.³⁰ Hardas had departed, but his

heritage was carried on by Narayan Hari Kumbhare. L. N. Hardas died in January 1939 but his struggle was continued by his associates. After the demise of Babu Hardas his memorial was built on the bank of the Karhan River. Every year on January 14, the day of the Tilsankrant festival, people gathered there in his memory. Thousands of people come even today to pay their respects to him."³¹

Untouchable bidi owners were entering the new modern mode of production. This kind of shift has excavated them from caste base economic relations to class base economic relations. The new horizon was largely open for their economic mobility as well as deciding factors for new opportunities in modern avenues. Some prominent untouchables also established Bidi factories in the CP and Berar. These owners were treating their caste fellows the same way. These untouchable factory owners had complained that the touchable workers do not buy their factory-produced *Lal Jhenda Chhapa (bidya)* bidis, hence, they appealed in Janata newspaper under the title 'the appeal of all factory owners ('sarvkar khandaranchi savinay vinanti') to untouchable masses to buy the Bidis produced in their factory.³²

The first conference of the C. P. and Berar bidi workers was held on 1 January 1933 at Kamptee, Anusaya Bai Kale presiding. She urged the workers to make a concerted effort to secure the redress of the wrongs they were subject to. The conference's first resolution urged upon the government the need for legislation for bidi workers guaranteeing uniform wages throughout the year and in no case, less than 8 annas per 1000 bidis, night work of women should be stopped, separate employment of men and women should be encouraged and the Maternity Benefit Bill should be made applicable to bidi workers. The conference also supported Fulay's unregulated Factory Bill. Also, the resolutions requested the government to appoint a court of inquiry to consider the grievances of the Model Mill workers.³³

In May 1933, Bidi workers in Nagpur factories went on strike on account of the owners' proposal to effect a 20 percent cut in the daily wages and Fulay was deputed to bring about a compromise.³⁴ It was reported in the Times of India that in 1935 a strike in the Bidi industry broke out Kamptee over the wage issue. It had affected some factories in Nagpur too, with the result that about 800 operatives are out of employment. The workmen in the other factories are working peacefully, unmindful of the trouble around them. Threats were being held out of the strike being spread to some other bidi factories in the province.³⁵ In 1937, Congress came into power but the struggle for Bidi workers struggle continued for their rights and to legalise them. Under the nationalist government, Bidi workers had to continue their struggle against their sufferings. In 1938 at a conference of bidi workers held at Bhandara under the auspices of the Independent Labour Party, it was resolved to support R. G. Ghodichore's unregulated Factories Amendment Bill, which was designed to put a stop to malpractices in bidi factories, and also the Unregulated Factories Payment of Wages Bill, which seeks a minimum living wage for workers in unregulated factories and to ameliorate the

conditions of employment in Bidi factories. in this conference, D. L. Patil said that Congress had forgotten its pledges and urged support for the Bills, which were meant to promote the welfare of the labouring class.³⁶

In 1939, Raghav Gambhir Ghodichor, MLA from Bhandara -Sakoli constituency brought the Bill to seek justice for Bidi workers. But the Bill was not transformed into an act.³⁷ In the same year about 1000 bidi workers led by R. W. Fulay and P. D. Marathe, carrying red banners and demanding an improvement in their living conditions, marched towards the legislative Assembly and submitted their demands to C. J. Bharuka, the Minister for Industries.³⁸ The news appeared in the Times of India that the Sihora circle of the Bhandara district congressmen have threatened Mahars employed in Bidi factories that they will be paid at a lower rate if they do not join the civil disobedience movement. The bidi workers accordingly convened a meeting under the presidentship of Gopinath Dalal on September 1, to consider the position.³⁹

The plight of Bidi workers was fought alone by Bidi workers, and the Congress government did pay attention to their demands under the hegemonic nationalist agenda. Thus nationalist forces in this region were supporting the interest of landlordism and the elite classes of the region to formulate their nationalism. Bidi workers' struggle in the Berar region remained the main force to build anti-caste organization though it could not emerge as significant organized labour organization.⁴⁰

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