

3**THE STATES PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS**

While the British territories in India were directly ruled by the British authorities, the rest of the country was made up of a large number of princely states, referred to by the Britishers as Native States. These states varied from very large to very small in area and population and were scattered all over the country interspersing the British Indian areas. These areas were ruled indirectly by the British through the princes themselves. The condition of the people in the princely states was much worse than that of those in the British governed territories. Though both the peoples were exploited to the maximum extent by their rulers, the people in the British governed areas benefited indirectly from the process of modernization particularly in the fields of education, transport, communication, industrialization etc. But the princes opposed the process of modernization in their states, since it would threaten the very basis of their existence. The British also did not press for modernization in the princely states since they did not want to incur the displeasure of the princes, whom they, in fact, wanted to use as a bulwark against rising Nationalism.

Demands of people under Native Rulers

The grievances of different sections of these states were an important factor. To begin with, the condition of the peasants was pathetic due to the feudal nature of the economy and society. While the peasantry was taxed heavily and oppressed in several ways such as forced labour, there were no incentives to them from the state i.e. the prince. The bulk of the state revenues instead of being spent on public works like irrigational canals, were spent on the luxuries of the princes and their hangers-on.

The position of the artisans and handicraftsmen in these states was not enviable either. There was gradual decline of Indian handicrafts and small scale industries in the 18th and 19th centuries due to the flooding of Indian markets by the machine-made goods of the west. This decline of Indian handicrafts was not followed by the rise of big industries in the princely states as was taking place in the British governed territories since the princes did not want any kind of modernization, including industrialization, in their states. As a result, all these people were not only deprived of their former income, but were also denied of new employment.

The middle class too had their grievances against the prevailing economic, political and social conditions in these states. The system of education in these states was quite retarded and outdated, and hence they demanded the introduction of modern education. Freedom of the press and other civil rights were completely absent. So, the grant of these civil rights was one of their demands. Since there was no representative body of the people, they demanded the introduction of some form of representative government in these states.

Further, the people of these princely states were not immune to the influence of the rapidly picking up nationalist movements in British India. The example of the people of British India in organizing themselves into the National Congress immensely impressed them. The success of the National Congress, though limited in securing concessions to the people of British India, naturally made the people of the princely states realize the need for organizing themselves first at local level and then at all India level if they were to get their grievances redressed. They were also greatly attracted by the call for "Poorna Swaraj" (complete independence) given by the National Congress. To them, Poorna Swaraj meant freedom not only from their immediate rulers, the princes, but also from their indirect rulers, the British, who were in fact responsible for their plight to a great extent.

The rise of the States people's movements was also due to certain policies and activities of the British. The British aggravated the conditions of the people of the princely states first through the policy of "divide and

rule". Through history a corrupt and decadent ruler was checked to some extent by the challenge of internal revolt or external aggression. But the British through certain provisions of their Subsidiary alliance system freed the princes from both these dangers. Hence, the princes felt free to indulge in gross misgovernance. And later, the British, in pursuance of their divide and rule policy, began to use the princes to prevent the growth of national unity and to counter the rising national movement. The princes, in turn, depended for their self-preservation from popular revolt on the protection by the British power and adopted a hostile attitude to the national movement. The British in fact carried out various measures in order to strengthen the position of the princes. When partial responsible government was established in the provinces in the form of Diarchy in 1919, the Chamber of Princes was created to enable the native rulers to meet and discuss, under the guidance of the British, matters of common interest. Again, when the federal scheme was proposed at the centre by the Act of 1935, the native states were given undue weightage in their representation to both houses of the central legislature. It was proposed that the native states would get 2/5th of the seats in the Upper House and 1/3rd of the seats in the lower house. Above all, the representatives of the states were to be nominated by the rulers of the respective states.

How were they Organized?

The roots of the States people's movements can be traced to the numerous spontaneous local peasant outbreaks against excessive taxation in several princely states like Mewar, Kashmir, Travancore, Mysore, Hyderabad, etc., from the beginning of the 20th century. But all these struggles met with violent repression at the hands of the princes, who were actively supported by the British. Apart from violent repression, lack of proper organization and good leadership were also responsible for the failure of these peasant outbreaks. Thus, peasant radicalism seems to have preceded urban nationalism, which began only in the 1920s in most of the princely states.

Urban nationalism, in the form of urban middle class Praja-Parishads with nationalistic ideas, had started emerging in the princely states, the first of them in Baroda in 1917, followed by the one in the Kathiawar region in 1921, the proximity to Gujarat (the stronghold of National Congress) going important in both cases. In most of the princely states, subjects (later renamed People's) Conferences began to meet annually from 1923 onwards but were as yet a very tame affair.

Along with the appointment of the Simon Commission, the British government also appointed the Harcourt Butler Indian States Committee to recommend measures for the establishment of a better relationship between the states and the central government. Nationalists among the States people, such as Balwantray Mehta and Manilal Kothari of Kathiawar and G.R. Abhyankar of the Deccan, convened an All-India States People's Conference in December 1927, which, though based on West Indian initiative, was attended by 700 delegates from all over India. The AISPC'S aim was to influence the governments of the states to initiate the necessary reforms in the administration by the force of collective opinion of the people and the states and to emphasize popular representation and self-government by the elective principle in all states. The conference also wanted the distinction between public revenue and the private income of the ruler clearly recognized. This was necessary to end the exploitation of public monies for personal expenditure. The conference also pleaded for the separation of the judiciary and the executive so that autocratic fiats would stand abolished. Finally, the AISPC urged the establishment of constitutional relations between British India and the Indian states, and an effective voice for the State's people in this relationship. This, it was felt, would hasten the attainment of Swaraj by the whole of India.

Almost from the time the first conference was called in 1927, the AISPC became a permanent political organization. It was consistently anti-feudal, but not as clearly anti-imperialist as the National Congress. This was to a great extent explained by the fact that as far as the States people were concerned, the feudal system was the more direct exploiter. And one of the immediate results of the setting up of the AISPC was that the

struggles of the peoples of the different states ceased to be isolated: local incidents had acquired an all-India identity.

As a direct consequence of their stand that the states should be treated as integral parts of the whole of India, the AISPC had requested the British government to agree to the people of the states being represented at the First Round Table Conference. The request was not acceded to. The AISPC then presented a memorandum to the Congress advocating an all-India federal constitution in which all fundamental rights and privileges which the Karachi Congress had called for in British India would be accorded to the people of the states as well. The anti-feudal movement, thus, came to be democratized and aligned to the national movement.

In many of the states, particularly in Rajkot, Jaipur, Kashmir, Hyderabad and Travancore, significant movements were launched demanding that the democratic principle should be recognized and the government and administration reorganized. The princes replied with ruthless repression. Some of them tried to stem the tide of popular revolt by inflaming communal passions. The Nizam of Hyderabad, for example, tried to brand the popular movement as anti-Muslim. Similarly, the Maharaja of Kashmir tried to make out that the popular movement was anti-Hindu. In Travancore, It was suggested that he Christians and the Church were behind the agitation and that it was intended to overthrow the Hindu Maharaja.

Till 1939, the AISPC had remained a very moderate and elitist body, confined to drawing petitions and issuing pamphlets. Though it had become more active under its Secretary, Balwantrai Mehta, it continued essentially to be an occasional gathering of middle-class politicians, concerned only with questions of civil rights and responsible governments, and seldom raising specific peasant or tribal issues. But 1936 marked the beginning of a clear change. The fifth session of the AISPC realized the need for mass contacts in place of mere petitions, and the session for first time drew up a programme of agrarian demands such as a 1/3rd cut in land revenue, scaling down of debts, and an enquiry into other peasant grievances.

What was the Attitude of Congress?

Though the Congress Party in its Nagpur Session in 1920 called on the princes to grant at once full responsible government in their states, the Congress resolutions at the same time made it clear that, while people in the states could become individual members of the Congress, they could not use the membership to interfere in the internal affairs of individual states. If they wished to do so, it would have to be in their own individual capacity and not in the name of the Indian National Congress. The Congress felt that political activities in each state should be organized and controlled by the local Praja Madal or States People's Conference.

And as late as 1934 Gandhiji, reiterated the 1920 non-intervention stand. He argued that any movement started externally could not be successful, and that the people of the states should learn self-reliance. However, he too supported the Congress resolution of 1920 that the princes should accord fundamental rights to their subjects.

It was only in 1938 at its Hariipur Session that the Congress included the independence of the princely states as well in its goal of Poorna Swaraj or complete independence. But, at the same time, it insisted that for the present the Congress could only give its normal support and sympathy to the state people's movements, which should not be conducted in the name of Congress. However, the Congress at its Tripura Session (1939) decided that the organization should involve itself closely with the movements in the princely states. As if to emphasize the common national aims of the political struggles in India and in the States, Jawaharlal Nehru became the President of the All India States People's Conference in 1939.

What was their Role in the Integration of India?

With the impending lapse of British paramountcy, the question of the future of the princely states became a vital one. The more ambitious rulers or their diwans were dreaming of an independence which could keep

them as autocratic as before, and such hopes received considerable encouragement from the British Indian Government till Mountbatten enforced a more realistic policy. Meanwhile a new upsurge of the states people's movement had begun in 1946-47 demanding everywhere political rights and elective representation in the constituent assembly. The congress criticized the Cabinet Mission plan for not providing for elected members from the states. Nehru presided over the Udaipur and Gwalior Sessions of the All India States People's Conference (1945 and 47 respectively), and declared at Gwalior that states refusing to join the Constituent Assembly would be treated as hostile. But verbal threats and speeches apart, the Congress leadership, or more precisely Sardar Patel, tackled the situation very clearly, using popular movements as a lever to extract concessions from princes while simultaneously restraining them or even using force to suppress them once the prince had been brought to heel as in Hyderabad.

Thus the Eastern States Union formed by recalcitrant princes crumbled in December 1947 in the face of powerful Praja Mandal agitations in Orissa states like Nilgiri, Dhekanal and Talcher. Junagadh in Kathiawar whose Muslim ruler tried to join Pakistan was brought to heel by a combination of popular agitation with Indian police action. The Congress, exceptionally strong in Mysore since the late 1930's launched a fairly uninhibited Mysore Chalo agitation on its own in September 1947 which forced substantial changes in democratic direction by October. V.P.Menon, who became the Secretary to the new state department persuaded the Travancore Dewan to give up his dream of continued personal power by pointing to the communist menace, while the Telengana armed struggle weakened the Nizam and also provided one important reason for police action i.e. the military intervention. Thus it can be said that the unification of India was made possible not only by the efforts of Sardar Patel but also by the potential presence of mass pressures.