



The breakout of the Second World War and the Hindu Mahasabha: Rise of Dr.S.P.Mookerjee for the cause of Hindu rights

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ABSTRACT: Germany's attack on Poland on September 1, 1939 led to the breakout of the Second World War. The Working Committee of the All India Hindu Mahasabha met in Bombay on 10th September to decide its duty during the War. At the same time the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha resolved to consolidate Hindu opinion and in doing so they conducted a tour to East Bengal led by Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the then Vice President of Bengal Hindu Mahasabha. The present paper deals with the attitude of the Hindu leaders towards the War and initiatives taken by them for the protection of Hindu interests against communal tyranny. It also elucidates Dr. S.P.Mookerjee's role in protection of Hindu interest and his viewpoint on the necessity of Hindu consolidation at the early period of his political career in Hindu Mahasabha.

KEY WORDS: Hindu Mahasabha, Second World War, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Hindu interest.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee was a fighter for the protection of the legitimate rights and interests of the Hindus. Though he was considered as a communal leader in view of his opponents, there was nothing communal in his attitude towards other communities of India at the initial stage of his political career. The condition of the Hindus of Bengal under the communal decisions at Government level in 1939-40 was precarious and the Hindu interest was ignored. Dr.Syama Prasad came forward to fight for the redress of their grievances and wrong done to them. The son of Ashutosh Mukherjee was basically an educationist but situation brought him to the arena of politics. The year 1939 was a turning point in Dr. Syama Prasad's life as he joined Hindu Mahasabha in that year and came in closer contact with the mass.

The Second World War broke out in September 1939 when Germany attacked Poland. Immediate before the breakout of the War, the fourth session of the All-India Anti-Communal Award Conference was held on September 27, 1939 at the University Institute Hall at College Square in Kolkata under the presidency of M.S.Aney, leader of the Congress Nationalist Party in the Central Assembly. About 500 delegates from all parts of India attended the conference. Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy, the eminent Professor of Chemistry, inaugurated the conference. Many distinguished persons like Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, V.D.Savarkar, then President of all India Hindu Mahasabha, Rabindraath Tagore, C.Y.Chintamani, Bhai Paramanand and several others who could not attend the meeting send Messages wishing the conference all success and intimating their disapproval of the Communal Award.

Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Ramananda Chatterjee, the editor of *The Modern Review* and the *Prabasi*, B.S.Moonje, B.C.Chatterjee, the President of the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha attended the conference along with many other Bengal leaders. The Conference requested all political organisations as well as individuals to oppose the Communal Award unitedly and work in cooperation in fighting the Award. It also urged the Indian National Congress to oppose the decision of the Communal Award actively and take initiative for its reversal.¹ Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee criticised the then Bengal Government for its anti-Hindu and anti-National Policy and demanded the resignation of Hindu Cabinet members.² (H.S,1/9/1939, Work of Bengal Ministry.



URGE FOR HINDU CONSOLIDATION IN BENGAL

By the time the movement for the consolidation of Hindu opinion had already been initiated in Bengal by the Hindu Mahasabha which received spontaneous response from different quarters of the province. Dr. Syama Prasad was one of the **advocators** of this programme. On September 6, 1939 in a public meeting, under the presidency of Dr. Syama Prasad held at Bharat Sebasram Sangha, decision was taken in favour of consolidation of Hindus of Bengal.^{2a}

On the following day the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha in its council meeting at Kolkata decided to promote good feeling between Hindus and other communities in the province with a view to evolving a united and self-governing Indian nation as their programme. The Mahasabha aimed at consolidation of public opinion in Bengal in view to protect legitimate rights and interests of the Hindus and removal of social discrimination within the Hindu community. It also emphasised on the prevention of the spread of communalism in local self-governing institutions.³

BENGAL HINDU LEADERS ON WAR AND INDIA'S DUTY

In the mean time the news of the outbreak of the World War II reached Kolkata. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee along with Poet Rabindranath Tagore, Prafulla Chandra Roy, Nilratan Sarkar, Ramananda Chatterjee and other prominent Hindu leaders of the city like Manmathanath Mukherjee, B.C. Chatterjee, N.K. Basu, Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee issued a statement regarding the War and the duty of Indians which expressed its sympathy towards Poland and asked for standing by the side of Britain for the interest of the Indians themselves. It apprehended of another alien domination over India as a result of Britain's defeat in the War. As India was rendered unarmed and untrained in respect to its defence in those days it was necessary to make India able to defend herself against any foreign attack. Therefore, it advocated for effective military training to the youth of the country irrespective of province, race or faith and expected Bengal to have a militia of her own for defence. For this assistance on the part of India the leaders demanded self-rule for their country. As it read, "For the sake of the peace of the World England should not miss this great opportunity for establishing everlasting friendship with India by restoring self-rule to her... a free India may freely render all possible help for the preservation of democracy."⁴ Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee wired

this statement of Poet Tagore and other Bengal leaders on the duty of India during War to Gandhi at Wardha for his concern.⁵

HINDU MAHASABHA AND THE WORLD WAR II

At the same time the Working Committee of the All India Hindu Mahasabha met in Bombay on September 10, 1939 specially to discuss the international situation created by the outbreak of the War in Europe and determine the attitude to be taken towards the situation. Prior to this meeting through a wire V.D. Savarkar, President of All India Hindu Mahasabha, requested Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee and N.C. Chatterjee, General Secretary of the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha, B.C. Chatterjee and other Hindu Mahasabha leaders of Bengal to attend the meeting at Bombay and place the Bengali Hindu's view before the Working committee.⁶ Dr. Mookerjee went to Bombay to attend the meeting, held at Tilak Hall of the Sardar Griha Hotel, which was attended by a hundred of Hindu leaders from all over India.

In the Working Committee meeting the All India Hindu Mahasabha resolved to defend India from any military attack from outside and considered that the defence of India was a common concern of the British Government as well as the Indians. Therefore cooperation between them was the need of the hour. To make such cooperation effective, the Mahasabha urged the introduction of responsible government at the centre, the revision of the Communal Award, modification of the Arms Act to bring it on a par with that prevailing in England and the expansion of the Indian Territorial Force. The resolution advocated for the removal of the distinction of martial and non-martial classes and demanded complete indigenisation of the army as early as possible and the intensification of the training of the cadets of the Indian Military Academy in all branches of warfare so that an effective defence force might be ready at hand. The Government was also asked to take initiative to encourage the Indian firms to start manufacturing of aero engines and motor engines and was advised to implement modern warfare so that India might be made self-sufficient in armaments.

In another resolution the Mahasabha appealed to all Hindus of India to organise a National militia of the age group between 18 to 40 for the defence of the country during the War.⁷

It is interesting to note here that in the following month Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee inaugurated the first meeting of Indo-Polish Association in Kolkata with a view to establish and



foster permanent cultural relationship between India and Poland by arranging talks, publication of papers, monographs and by making available information about history, art, literature, music and many other cultural activities of Poland to the Indians. Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee expected the organisation to serve the purpose in the best possible manner.⁸ Thus initiative was taken to support the cause Poland.

HINDU CONSOLIDATION IN BENGAL AND SYAMA PRASAD MOOKERJEE IN EAST BENGAL TOUR

After returning from Bombay Dr. Syama Prasad, then Vice-President of Bengal Hindu Mahasabha, set out for a tour to East Bengal districts for Hindu consolidation work. He was accompanied by B.C.Chatterjee, General Secretary of the the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha and N.C.Chatterjee. They left Kolkata on the night of September 18, 1939 and reached Khulna where they were given rousing reception and were taken in a procession to the Municipal Park where Mookerjee hoisted the Hindu flag and delivered a lecture urging the people to stand united by forgetting all the petty differences under the flag for the furtherance of the cause of national progress. After this ceremony they held discussion with the local leaders of different Parties and Associations, and common people on Hindu consolidation.⁹

In the afternoon the Khulna Hindu Mahasabha organized a mammoth meeting at the Municipal Park to accord a fitting reception to the leaders. Syama Prasad drew the attention of the people assembled there in the meeting to the peculiar position in which the Hindus of Bengal were placed at that time under the communal decision and laid stress on the redress of the wrong done to the Hindus. He claimed that it was essential not for the interest of the Hindus but for full development of Indian nationalism. He did not claim for any concession or privilege for the Hindus as they were expected to be satisfied to face the consequences of open and unrestricted competition with other communities. He firmly assured the people that the interest of the Hindu people of Bengal could only be saved if all sections of the community stood united to face the problem before them. If not done so their cause and the cause of Indian nationalism would be retarded beyond measure.¹⁰The enthusiasm which he noticed among the people of Khulna was satisfactory and the response of the people to their visit to the town overwhelmed him.

From Khulna they went to Barisal by train .They were warmly received there and were felicitated at the Barisal Town Hall. Dr.Syama Prasad

asked the citizens of the town to be organized and united for achieving the goal of freedom and reminded them of the necessity of Hindu consolidation not only for the sake of protection of narrow interest of the community but for enabling themselves 'to expose the cause of justice progress and freedom for all communities.'¹¹ From Barisal Dr. Syama Prasad proceeded to Chandipur. There was a Gournitai temple there and it belonged to the Saha community who refused entry to the temple in case of the people who belonged to other castes. Syama Prasad along with N.C.Chatterjee and S.N.Bannerjee went to that area and discussed the issue with the proprietor of the temple and succeeded in pursuing them to through the gate of the temple open to all castes of the Hindus. The leaders then entered into the temple along with the people of different castes. While addressing a the gathering there Dr.Mookerjee made it clear that their intention was not in favour of an anti-Muslim propaganda but to consolidate the Hindus on the basis of nationalism and pointed out that the communal electorate was as a hindrance to the path of Indian nationalism which was required to be abolished.¹² The local Muslim community also greeted Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee in Chandipur. In the afternoon of the 23rd September teachers and students of a local School met Dr.Syama Prasad to present him with an address which was read out by a Muslim student. The address was suitably replied by Dr.Mookerjee. The local Muslim League leader also conveyed their gratitude to him for the interest he showed towards the students. From Chandpur they moved to Comilla where he exhorted the Hindus to organize themselves and help in attainment of India's freedom. In the evening on the same day both Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee and N.C.Chatterjee addressed a large gathering at Maheshprangan.¹³

From Comilla the Party proceeded to Brahmanberia where Dr.Syama Prasad and B.C.Chatterjee addressed a big gathering at Kalibari compound. There Syama Prasad emphasized on the consolidation of the Hindus not for the communal interest but for reconstruction of the Indian nation. He asked the Hindus to register themselves in the Census which was boycotted by the Congress in the previous Census. He depicted various disabilities of the Bengalis residing outside Bengal and demanded the delimitation of Bengal's boundary on a linguistic basis. He was not in favour of immediate abolition of caste system but appealed for the just treatment for the depressed classes. As referred to other communities he asserted that the Mahasabha had no quarrel with them and the aim of their mission was to prepare Bengal for the struggle for freedom.¹⁴



From Brahmanberia they moved on to Mymensing where a warm reception was accorded to them under the leadership of Maharaja Sashi Kanta Acharya Choudhury. They were taken into a car and a procession paraded through the streets of the town. They were put up at Maharaja's castle. In the afternoon Syama Prasad visited the Ananda Mohan College and other schools and associations of that area. In the evening he addressed a public meeting in an open field in front of the Town Hall where a large number of people assembled despite foul weather. He discussed before them the necessity of the consolidation of the Hindus. It was for the protection of their rights and privileges and for the interest of India. He advocated for the rejection of the Communal Award, introduction of Joint electorate with the facility of adult franchise and abolition of untouchability. In this context Mahatma Gandhi and his attitude towards the same practice of the Hindus can be remembered. Mohandas was not against the caste system but he was against the untouchability and wanted the Hindu society to get rid of it. To this point Dr.Syama prasad was on the same boat with Gandhi. Not only that he asserted that the Hindu Mahasabha was not a communal organisation, but their aim was to attain freedom. He appealed to the Hindus to join the Mahasabha.¹⁵

From Mymensingh Syama prasad and party went to Sherpur on September 28. There he laid stress on industrialization for solving the problem of unemployment of the Hindu youths and on removal of untouchability. Syama prasad's appeal did not go unheeded. The temple of Raghunathji was declared open by Satindra Choudhury.¹⁶

As Public meeting in Noakhali and Serajganj was not permitted by the Government, the Hindu leaders did not go there.¹⁷ yet it was possible for them to meet with the local leaders of that area. The situation of that region was adverse to Hindu community in 1939. Shyamaprasad was able to read the condition of Noakhali and advised the Hindus of the entire province to make a common cause with their fellow men of Noakhali and Serajganj. He was right in those days in view to the incidents of Noakhali in October-November, 1946.

Thus at the beginning of the World War II the Hindu Mahasabha of Bengal took initiative for Hindu consolidation in the province and Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee was the flag bearer of this initiative. Wherever he went, he got huge response from the mass even in some places like Chandpur Muslim leaders and students also felicitated them. It is noteworthy here that in view of Dr.Mookerjee the Hindu Mahasabha was not a communal organisation and he tried to make this point clear to

all. It just wanted to protect the Hindu interest and the Mahasabha had no quarrel with other communities. Their mission was to achieve freedom and in view to reach this goal they wanted to prepare Bengal for the struggle. The Hindu consolidation was necessary not for protection of narrow self-interest of the community but for enabling themselves to expose the cause of justice, progress and freedom for all communities. He demanded abolition of Communal Award, untouchability and advocated for introduction of Joint Electorate with adult franchise. In two places i.e., Chandpur and Sherpur temples were thrown open to all castes of Hindus. At the beginning of his career in politics, it is important to note that Syama Prasad was concerned about the difficulties which the Hindus had to face outside Bengal .That is why he raised his voice for redistribution of Bengal's boundary.¹⁸

IMPACT OF THE TOUR

Being a part of this Hindu consolidation programme Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee was able to come in closer contact with the East Bengal people and got acquainted with their problems. At the end of their tour the Mahasabha leaders issued a statement in Kolkata in which they expressed their gratitude for the huge, 'spontaneous' and 'sympathetic' and overwhelming response they received during their Hindu consolidation tour in Khulna, Chandpur, Comilla, Brahmanberia, Mymensingh, Jmalpur, Sherpur, and Patna. Throughout the entire tour they did not take their stand on any narrow communal plan nor did they appeal for any special favour for the Hindu Mahasabha. They emphasised on the necessity of consolidation of the Hindus for the sake of nationalism to protect their own political social economic and cultural rights against attacks from government. They not only addressed public meetings but discussed with local leaders privately also. The exchange of views between them cleared a lot of misunderstandings in the circle of Hindu Mahasabha. This Hindu consolidation movement paved the way for removal of social discrimination. Due to the effort of Dr.Syama Prasad Mookerjee and other leaders the Gour-Nitai temple was thrown open to different sections of Hindu community in Chandpur and in Sherpur the temple of Raghunath Jew was thrown open to the untouchable classes.¹⁹

II. CONCLUSION

Thus Dr.Syama prasad Mookerjee attached himself to the work of Hindu Mahasabha at the beginning of the Second World War. He was



basically an educationist and educational administrator, yet he was gradually diverted to politics. He wrote in his diary, 'My tendencies lay in the sphere of educational administration and I did not feel attracted by the noisy and dusty career of a politician. I thought the best way to serve my country would be through the path of education. Secondly, I belonged to no active political party whose platform I could utilise for rousing public opinion outside the Legislature.'²⁰

The year 1939 was a crucial time for the transitional period of his life. His term for Vice-chancellorship in the University of Calcutta came to an end in 1938. His financial condition was not so sound then and he was worried about 'regular substantial income' while age was advancing and responsibilities were increasing.²¹ At the same time he was disgusted by the insincerity of the Congress leaders. At this moment Swami Pranabananda, founder of Bharat Sevashram Sangha, inspired Syama Prasad to take up the cause of the Hindus and he decided to dedicate himself to the service of the Nation. In Kolkata the 4th Anti-Communal Award Conference was held on August 27-28, 1939 and he took active part in the programme and pushed himself to the arena of Hindu politics as a saviour of Hindu interest against unjust done to them.

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