



E-ISSN: 2706-9117

P-ISSN: 2706-9109

www.historyjournal.net

IJH 2024; 6(2): 231-234

Received: 06-07-2024

Accepted: 15-08-2024

Dr. Prabal Saran Agarwal

Assistant Professor, University

School of Law & Legal Studies,

GGSIIPU, Delhi, India

A historical study of the eka movement: Peasants, nationalism and the colonial state, 1921-26

Dr. Prabal Saran Agarwal

Abstract

Almost a century ago, there lived a man belonging to an 'untouchable' caste in the Awadh region of United Provinces of North India, who led a peasant movement in the early 1920s against the mighty Taluqdars or the big feudal landlords of the region and the British Raj. Even with a Rs.1,000 bounty and a dead or alive warrant against him, he avoided capture for many days, was finally put in jail, came out, tried some new strategies but was ultimately lost in the annals of history. New evidences now suggest that Madari Pasi, this Gandhi cap-wearing militant peasant leader with a bow and arrow, lived the last phase of his rebellious life, in jungles organizing the forest-dwellers of district Hardoi. However, in contrast to certain writings which present him as an 'autonomous' player in the peasant movement, evidences show that after leading the Eka peasant movement in late 1921 and early 1922, he got in touch with revolutionary nationalists like Bhagat Singh and became their comrade. Also, during the initial phase of the Eka movement too, he was deeply influenced by the Gandhian ideas of swaraj and swadeshi.

Keywords: Peasant movement, caste, subaltern protest

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to reanalyse the peasant movement Madari Pasi led in light of new evidences especially the hitherto unexplored memoirs of certain revolutionary nationalists, to examine the confrontation between this popular movement and the colonial state and ultimately its close relationship with the nationalist struggle that has been ignored by scholars like Gyan Pandey and others ^[1]. Madari belonged to the 'untouchable' Pasi caste that had been classified by the colonial state as a "criminal" caste ^[2]. He was born in what is now Uttar Pradesh's Hardoi district to Mohan Pasi, a poor farmer in the year 1860. As official records show, Madari Pasi's fortunes grew as he started to own a significant number of cattle, putting him in a much better position in the rural social hierarchy ^[3]. Also, despite being regarded as 'untouchable', the Pasi community was always seen as a 'militant' one, especially due to the role many Pasi figures had played during the 1857 revolt. These factors along with a well-built muscular body - an additional quality for a 'leader' in the Awadhi countryside - put Madari in a position to assume the leadership role in the anti-taluqdari agitations of early 1920s. This movement which he built and led was called 'Eka' i.e. unity - derived from his attempt to build a united peasant front bypassing the differences of religion and caste. And in this process, he was very much influenced by the nationalist politics of the time as I will try to show in this paper.

The Background: Peasant Protests in Early 1920s

The Eka movement formed a part of the series of peasant agitations which broke out in colonial India after the First World War. In certain districts of UP, the upsurge began under the leadership of Fiji-returned indentured labourer and *sanyasi* Baba Ramchandra, who also worked in close coordination with leading nationalist leaders of the province ^[4]. The reasons for the peasant revolt were embedded in the deeply exploitative agrarian structure of the

¹ Gyan Pandey, 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919-22,' in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. 1, p.147-48 and 168-71.

² M.H. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India: The United Province, 1918-22* (New Delhi, 1978), ch.2.

³ Lt Col J.C. Faunthorpe's Report on the Eka Movement, *United Provinces Gazette*. 13 May 1922, pt VIII, p. 273.

⁴ Mridula Mukherjee, 'Peasant Resistance and Peasant Consciousness in Colonial India: 'Subalterns' and Beyond', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 23, No. 41 (Oct. 8, 1988), pp. 2109-2120.

Corresponding Author:**Dr. Prabal Saran Agarwal**

Assistant Professor, University

School of Law & Legal Studies,

GGSIIPU, Delhi, India

Awadh region which was dominated by the Taluqdars (aristocratic hereditary owners of large tracts of land and villages) and zamindars who were comparatively smaller landlords but were usually from the same 'upper' caste Hindu or elite Muslim groups. They leased out land to tenant farmers and extracted huge rents and lots of additional charges from them and also collected land revenue for the colonial state. Tenants also employed agricultural labourers to work on the fields who were usually from the so-called 'untouchable' castes like Pasis. But these tenants had no proprietary rights over the land they cultivated and were arbitrarily thrown out by the zamindars if they failed to pay the rent or give the additional levies.

Nevertheless, the agrarian and economic distress emanating out of this exploitative agrarian structure reached a breaking point only in the late-1910s following the First World War, the Spanish flu, six years of drought, abnormal price rise and a shortage of food grains and fuel. These factors combined with various other forms of institutionalised as well as informal forms of exploitation like charging higher than the recorded rent, non-dispersal of rent receipts, charging extra and arbitrary cesses, the prevalence of grain rents instead of cash rent, the practice of collecting nazrana, hari and hundreds of other additional taxes, forcing begari (forced labour) on the so-called 'lower' castes along with widespread corruption by middlemen like thekedars and karindas (agents of landlords) precipitated huge resentment amongst peasants and landless labourers most of whom were from backward and Dalit castes respectively. Even small zamindars had to face the brunt of the post-war crisis as they could not collect land revenue to pay to the colonial state in these times of distress^[5].

The Awadh Kisan Sabha movement was a reaction to this crisis and was led by Baba Ramchandra and some city-based leaders in late 1910s and early 1920s. It was basically a mobilization of tenant farmers and small zamindars against the atrocities of big landlords and taluqdars. The movement developed a 14 demands-cum-oath charter known as the 'Kisan Pledge', that every participant was expected to take an oath on. Among other things, the demand charter included the refusal to pay more than the recorded rent, receipts for the rents paid, refusal to do begari and pay nazrana, hari etc.^[6]. This movement, however, witnessed a setback with the arrest of Ramchandra and the next peasant agitation, i.e. Eka movement, began in a different location but within the same Awadh region.

The beginning of eka movement

Eka movement was launched by Madari Pasi, Khwaja Ahmed and some other peasants of the Hardoi district from where it spread to other places like Sitapur, Lucknow, Unnao and Kanpur^[7]. The Eka agitators also adopted the pledge of the Kisan Sabha but there were very significant departures made to it, which gave it a more political character. First, under Ramchandra, the movement was

mainly ethical-economical in nature and within the traditional rural universe of the peasants. The peasants imagined a traditional moral economy where inequality embedded in the traditional structure of agrarian society was accepted and the landlord was seen as a legitimate authority i.e. as a benevolent tyrant and the protest was solely against the excesses. However, in the Eka movement, this traditional idea began to break as Taluqdars and Zamindars were attacked not only for economical reasons but also socially. One of the pledges of the Eka agitation demanded that the peasantry resist any kind of oppression from both groups as any hope of justice from them had disappeared. Despite this significant departure, the Eka movement did not demand abolishing the Zamindari and Taluqdari as a system or redistribution of land as it also mainly represented the interest of tenants and petty landowners.

Another important characteristic of the movement was the influence of the national movement on the Eka agitators which has been till now ignored by historians like Gyan Pandey, Kapil Kumar and others. Inspired by Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation Movement and the Khilafat struggle, the Eka *kisans* added three important demands to the Awadh Kisan Sabha charter: fight for self-rule; adoption and promotion of Swadeshi; and a pledge to avoid the colonial judicial system and resolution of all conflicts at the local panchayat level^[8], thereby directly bringing it in confrontation with the colonial state.

Revolutionary nationalists like Shiv Varma and Jaidev Kapoor, being residents of Hardoi, participated in the Eka movement as young schoolboys and Congress volunteers. Both of them recall in their memoirs that in the initial phase, the movement was largely non-violent and worked within the ambit of the Gandhiji's strategy of satyagraha because of the involvement of Congress and Khilafat leaders who played a quite a significant role in popularising the movement. Eka agitators also employed the time tested method of social boycott sanitation workers, barbers and washermen stopped their services to landlords and taluqdars picketing and holding mass rallies to push for their demands. But as the movement took a violent turn at some places and some peasants started resisting Taluqdar and Zamindar repression with force, many Congress and Khilafat leaders distanced themselves from it.

This second phase of the movement led to more violent clashes forcing some landlords to leave the village. Madari Pasi began distributing landowning rights to tenants and petty landholders. The increasing violence in the movement alarmed the establishment and prompted a correspondent from pro-establishment newspaper The Statesman to write on March 9, 1922.

No civilized government can afford to permit an Indian imitation of French Jacquerie to go unchecked; so, sooner a force of cavalry and a few machine guns appear in the disturbed area the better^[9].

And indeed this is what happened. The Eka *kisans* faced massive police crackdown led by large bodies of mounted and armed police and even a squadron of cavalry. Under such severe repression, several Eka leaders including Madari were forced to go underground. He was captured

⁵ W.F. Crawley, 'Kisan Sabhas & Agrarian Revolt in the United Provinces, 1920-21', *Modern Asian Studies*, 5:2 (1971), p. 95-109.

⁶ Report on the Administration of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, 1921-22 (Allahabad, 1922), p. 31-2.

⁷ Clipping from *Englishman* (Calcutta), 28 Feb. 1922 in GDI, Home Dept., Pol. Branch, File 862 of 1922 (NAI, New Delhi).

⁸ Faunthorpe's Report, UP Gazette, p. 309.

⁹ S.G. Kelkar (1975), 'Kisan Unrest and the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1920-1922'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10(52), p.1989-1994.

eventually and released from jail only in the year 1926^[10].

Methods of mobilisation

Despite its failure, the most significant aspect of the Eka Movement was its militant nature and the manner in which it forged unity among peasants cutting across the lines of caste and religion. The leaders of the Eka movement did not reject or brush aside the religious identity of the peasants. Instead, they used the ethics and morality of their faiths to forge a form of broad unity amongst the exploited poor peasants, middle peasants and even petty landlords against the Zamindar-Taluqdar-Colonial State combine. Though even Baba Ramchandra used religious symbols and practices to mobilise and politicise peasants, Madari Pasi put them to more dramatic effect. He identified a unique opportunity in the popular religious practice and ritual of reading Katha, a public religious event in which people from all castes participated. Public recitation of 'Satyanarayan Katha' was identified as an opportunity to mobilise the peasants and spread the message of Eka. According to Shiv Varma, all the meetings of the movement were preceded by Katha, after which the peasants were asked to take an oath over the Gita to make Eka (unity) and to follow the charter of the movement. Further, the peasants were supposed to swear over "sacred" water from the Ganga^[11]. Quite naturally, in this process which was overtly religious, questions of Muslims and caste also came into play. Jaidev Kapoor informs us that one of the Muslim leaders of the movement, Khwaja Ahmed, innovatively used an episode from famous ballad Alha-Udal to solve the question of Muslim integration. Alha, the 12th-century warrior hero, was helped by one Sayyad Mir Talhan in his fight against Prithviraj Chauhan. This episode from a Bundelkhandi ballad, which epitomises the Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb, became the unifying basis for Hindu and Muslim peasants. Muslims were asked to take an oath over the Quran to do Eka and follow the peasant charter after organizing Milad Sharif gatherings i.e. meetings organized to remember Prophet Muhammad^[12]. In popular memory, it is believed that Madari used to carry the Gita in one hand and Quran in the other; though this is unlikely, but this belief is a reflection of communal harmony arrived at during the Eka Movement. Later as the movement progressed and Madari came to be seen as a charismatic figure, he was identified as the reincarnation of Shah Madar, a fifteenth-century Sufi, who was revered by people of all faiths in the Awadh region^[13]. The more problematic question of caste was dealt with an attempt to build a peasant consciousness along the lines of unity of oppressed against oppressors. In one of the meetings, Madari addressed the gathered crowd and said: This is the unity of Hindus, Turks, upper caste, lower caste, small landlords, farmers, peasants, touchables - untouchables...on one side there are Taluqdars-Britishers and people on their payroll, on the other side are we the peasants, workers, farmers and small landlords. If anyone of us is exploited or troubled, all of us should mobilize together against the culprits^[14].

It must be pointed out here that the movement comprised also of small zamindars and tenant farmers who belonged to the so-called 'upper' caste, while the leadership of the movement consisted of peasants from so-called 'lower' castes. This was a positive change from the established norms and signified a momentary subversion of the caste hierarchy; so was the employment of religious symbols - a monopoly of so-called upper caste - by leaders from the Pasi community. In a way, Eka is not merely the name of a peasant movement rather it was really the process whereby the essence of the movement was realised. 'Eka Karo' was a call for peasants to mobilise against corrupt officials and big landlords. It was a call to overcome the differences of caste and religion and mobilise entire peasantry against oppression.

However, it must be clarified here that the 'class' consciousness which Madari tried to build was that of tenant-farmer or that of petty landowners, an outcome of his own social location. The interests of other classes like landless labourers were largely subsumed within the broader category of the kisan.

Interaction with revolutionary nationalists

After getting released from jail in 1926, Madari came into contact with revolutionary nationalists of Hindustan Republican Association (HRA), which aimed at organizing an armed revolution against the colonial state to liberate India and was active in many rural and urban pockets of Awadh. According to Varma and Kapoor, there were attempts by the revolutionaries of HRA to integrate Madari and his associates with their underground movement, build a peasant army and procure arms^[15].

That Madari and HRA revolutionaries were in contact with each other has found mention in some books like Subhash Chandra Kushwaha's Awadh Ka Kisan Vidroh: 1920-1922 but he has only indicated the brief encounters between Madari and revolutionaries like Varma and Kapoor^[16]. What exactly transpired between the two and ramifications of these interactions have not been analysed. My research shows that there were at least three points of contact (two latent and one manifest) between the Eka leaders and the revolutionary nationalists. First was Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. In those repressive days of colonial rule and censorship, Vidyarthi, the fearless editor of Hindi daily Pratap, thoroughly covered the Eka movement in the first quarter of 1922. He was also one of the leaders of the Kisan Sabha in the nearby district of Kanpur, and had reported on Ramchandra-led Awadh Kisan Movement also in great detail. Vidyarthi was a member of the Congress, was also sympathetic to the revolutionary nationalists and provided them with various forms of support: economic as well as ideological. It is likely that through the daily Pratap, a popular newspaper amongst the revolutionaries (Bhagat Singh served as its sub-editor), and surely through Vidyarthi, a lot of young revolutionaries would have come to understand the agrarian problem, which is later reflected in their political writings and statements. The other latent contact between the revolutionary nationalists and the Eka agitators resulted from the same geographical area of operation of both movements. When the Kakori train

¹⁰ Shiv Varma, Unpublished Autobiography, Bhagat Singh Archives and Research Centre, New Delhi.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jaidev Kapoor, Oral History Transcript, NMML.

¹³ Pioneer, 25 May 1922.

¹⁴ Varma, Autobiography.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Subhash Chandra Kushwaha (2018), Awadh Ka Kisan Vidroh, 1920-22, New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.

dacoity took place hardly fifty miles from Hardoi in 1925, the colonial police suspected that Madari's group might have helped the revolutionaries although Madari himself was in jail at that time. Though the police was not able to establish any link, but colonial records claim Madari and his group were aware of the revolutionary nationalists and their activities and had sympathy for them^[17].

Meeting of titans

This brings us to an interesting chapter of history hitherto unknown to historians: the meeting between Bhagat Singh and Madari Pasi. This interaction happened via Varma and Kapoor. Varma, as a school student and Congress volunteer during the heydays of Non-Cooperation and the Eka movement, was greatly inspired by Madari. In 1922 (before Varma joined HRA), he went as a delegate to the Lucknow Session of the UP Provincial Congress and appealed to the leadership to take up the cause of Eka leaders and peasants who were facing brutal repression from the colonial state at that time. But he did not get any positive response. Subsequently, he went to meet Vidyarthi in Kanpur and appealed him to take up the cause of Eka kisans, which the latter took up with great empathy^[18].

Eventually both Varma and Kapoor joined the HRA and worked with Bhagat Singh and other revolutionary nationalists. Bhagat Singh was a young, twenty year-old anti-colonial activist at this time, who was trying to reorganise the revolutionary movement after the arrests of most HRA leaders following Kakori. There were two major centres of the movement at this time: Lahore and Kanpur. In Kanpur, the revolutionaries were guided by radical intellectuals like Vidyarthi, Hasrat Mohani, Satyabhakt and Radha Mohun Gokul to work amongst the industrial workers and the peasantry. In order to understand the issues of the peasantry, this band of young revolutionaries tried to engage with the Pasi community. Hence, Varma and Kapoor established contact with Madari after he was released from jail in 1926. Madari showed sympathy for their cause and told them that he wanted to meet their leader. Varma and Kapoor were perplexed. As they revealed many years later in the interviews given to Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (now Prime Ministers' Museum and Library), they took this issue to Bhagat Singh as they did not have a traditional kind of robust and well-built leader who could meet the expectations of someone like Madari. So, they decided to invite him to a park and here they showed him a full-bodied stranger as their leader, from a distance. Madari was really impressed and gave them lots of traditional weapons for their party^[19].

Bhagat Singh, Varma and Kapoor stayed with Madari for few days as the latter was organising tribal peasants at this time in the forests of Hardoi. According to Kapoor, Madari proposed waging a guerrilla war against the British. But the revolutionaries couldn't make use of his peasant army as they couldn't afford to blow the cover of their secret organization owing to Madari's growing impatience^[20]. Nevertheless, these young revolutionary nationalists grew more and more sympathetic to the cause of workers and peasants, and it was in the year 1928 that they added the

word 'socialist' to their organisation's name, which was now called the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. Undoubtedly this shift was not merely a result of a theoretical engagement with socialist and Marxist literature, rather it was also a product of engagement with popular movements like Eka, trade union struggle in Kanpur and peasant movement in Punjab.

Conclusion

There is no information about the last days of Madari due to non-availability of any authentic archival source till date although some scholars claim that he died in the year 1931^[21]. Madari, became a folk hero in the Awadhi region of Hardoi and Unnao. Today, however, he has been reduced to an icon of a particular caste group and his role as an anti-colonial and anti-feudal peasant leader who successfully established communal unity amongst kisans, challenged caste hierarchy as well as the authority of Taluqdars and colonial state has been largely forgotten. In the present context, when the communal discourse is increasingly getting normalised among large sections of the majority population of this country and has even started penetrating rural spaces, when caste-based atrocities have intensified and agrarian distress is worsening, a historical figure like Madari Pasi and the Eka movement which he led must be remembered for the inspiration they can provide to the people struggling for a better world.

References

1. Pandey G. Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh. In: Guha R, editor. *Subaltern Studies*. 1919-22;1:147-48, 168-71.
2. Siddiqi MH. *Agrarian unrest in North India: The United Province, 1918-22*; c1978. Chapter 2.
3. Faunthorpe JC. Report on the Eka Movement. *United Provinces Gazette*. 1922 May 13;8:273.
4. Mukherjee M. Peasant resistance and peasant consciousness in colonial India: 'Subalterns' and beyond. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 1988;23(41):2109-2120.
5. Crawley WF. Kisan Sabhas and agrarian revolt in the United Provinces, 1920-21. *Mod Asian Stud*. 1971;5(2):95-109.
6. Report on the administration of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, 1921-22. Allahabad: [Publisher]; c1922. p. 31-32.
7. Kelkar SG. Kisan unrest and the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1920-1922. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 1975;10(52):1989-94.
8. Varma S. Unpublished autobiography. New Delhi: Bhagat Singh Archives and Research Centre.
9. Kapoor J. Oral history transcript. New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.
10. Kushwaha SC. *Awadh Ka Kisan Vidroh, 1920-22*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan; c2018.
11. Mohan B. *Krantiveer Madari Pasi*. [Place of publication: Publisher]; c2018.
12. Pal RK. *Eka*. [Place of publication: Navarun Publication]; c2019.

¹⁷ Police Abstract of Intelligence, 4 October 1925, CID office, Lucknow.

¹⁸ Shiv Varma, Oral History Transcript, NMML.

¹⁹ Jaidev Kapoor, OHT, NMML.

²⁰ *ibid*.

²¹ Brij Mohan (2018), *Krantiveer Madari Pasi*, Rashmi Prakashan and Rajiv Kumar Pal (2019), *Eka*, Navarun Publication.