

## **In Search of Sustainable Empowerment**

### **Swaraj Peeth's Experiment in Banka**

When protests and *dharnas* by thousands have occupied headlines, a peaceful *dharna* by a hundred odd youth in a small place like BDO office of Chandan Block in Banka Dist. of Bihar on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2014 is seemingly a non-event. If however, one knew how alerted the police force got when a few from among these hundred odd including their leader and other sixty odd from Chandan and Belhar Blocks were to collect near a tribal village Faturiya, far and beyond any namesake road or approach in the jungle area, just a month back for a two-day Camp. Forty odd armed police with a heavy armoured car had stationed near the camp site, a village school. They retreated when told about who was to take the camp, though there were many faces they once used to chase, and any gathering of youth in this region would ring a dreadful alarm for them.

A peaceful dharna, sit-in, that too by the youth from this area was unusual, un-expected and suggested some sort of a reversal. It was news even for most of the participants who came because of its leader, Bhola Prasad Yadav, a soft-spoken young man of high reputation for his no-nonsense, honest, truthful nature and low-profile-high-confidence personality.

They had come with issues pertaining to non- partial- or faulty-implementation of welfare, relief and development schemes – water, Indira Housing Scheme, MGNREGA, Old age pension, People know peaceful dharna and may have practiced it too; but to chart thereby a course of peaceful and nonviolent methods for grievance settlement was a different path altogether than the practice known in his area --three warnings to the offender; the fourth is not a warning, it is 'punishment'.

Bhola told the gathering how he got convinced about Gandhiji's idea of gram-swaraj and nonviolent method." If there is '*sacchai*'- righteousness and truthfulness—why should one fear any one; and; why should the other fear us. We should not make the other fear us. Fear can also get us success and fear can give us a sense of empowerment. But I know that such success and empowerment are very temporary, unsure and superficial. We have to learn the ways by which everyone can feel empowered and every one can participate." He told them about his participation in Hind Swaraj camps.

Bhola phoned Rajiv Vora to tell him that many a youth from among them want to join.

Ever since Rajiv Vora from Swaraj peeth started communing to his area 2010 December onwards Bhola had attended some of his meetings and talked to him. He was familiar with the senior dedicated Sarvodaya leader Shri Shivanadbhai and Sarlabahen Jha of Grambharti Ashram, who were instrumental in bringing Rajiv Vora here. Shivanadbhai, who gave his entire life serving this area, says "mere development work doesn't sustain, it could not stop radicalization among the youth. we could not inspire, train and build cadres ...."

Bhola asked Bhuvaneshwar Turi, an energetic and ambitious youth leader, once an Area Commander, who organized Rajiv Vora's meetings locally and brought many to Swaraj Peeth's Swaraj dialogues, Hind Swaraj Study and Shanti Sainik training camps, take him to the four-day annual Hind Swaraj Camp in Delhi in March 2013, organized for senior SP associates of HS Campaign in Bihar and Jharkhand. After listening and interacting with others – Prof. Parthanath Mukherjee, Trustee of SPT and former Director of Tata School of School of Social Sciences, Mumbai; Dr Niru Vora, the organizer, and Director of SP; ar on Gandhi's vision of Swaraj and interpretation of poverty, exploitation of the weak and loss of dignity and power among the ordinary people; civilization, culture and governance; weakening of communities; and meaning of nonviolence... Bhola said as the morning session began on the fourth day " I contemplated the whole night, did not sleep ...read the entire book, Hind Swaraj. What I concluded after hearing you and reading Hind Swaraj is that *aap hamara man uthana chata ho* - you want to raise our morals.... I have made a decision... I am joining you. Later, on way back on the train station he told Sanjeev Parnav, Coordinator of SP Hind Swaraj Campaign in Bihar." I found what I as searching for..." He was not searching for power or platform; he was searching for answers to certain questions, central being "in what sort of order and by what the human dignity of his people is protected and respected", he told Rajiv Vora when the later visit him in his home at Pathar Tona village.

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