IV. CONGRESS WORKERS’ MEETING IN SODPUR, JANUARY 1946

Gandhiji left Sodpur on the 18th of December for Santiniketan. From there he proceeded to the district of Midnapore, returning once again to Sodpur on the 5th where a political workers’ meeting was to be held on the 5th and 6th of January 1946. More than seven hundred Congress workers and journalists gathered together from different parts of Bengal, and the questions which they wanted to discuss were of a widely varied nature. Satish Dasgupta entrusted me with the task of going through the numerous questions and putting them into shape before submission to Gandhiji. An authorized report of the proceedings was drawn up by Pyarelal and was published in the Calcutta papers on the 12th of January 1946.

Among the various questions discussed, there was one dealing with the theory of trusteeship in which I was specially interested.

Q. In many parts of Bengal, the cultivators are Muslims and the proprietors Hindus. Recently in some places, the Muslim tillers have refused to till the land under Hindu owners. What should the Hindu owners do under the circumstances?

A. Gandhiji replying said that the views he was going to express were strictly his own. As they all knew he was not even a four-anna* Congress member and therefore he could not speak as a Congressman. He spoke only in his personal capacity as a satyagrahi.

Although the question had been posed in a communal setting, the real cleavage as he saw it was not communal

* The annual subscription of the Indian National Congress was four-annas or one-fourth of a rupee in those days.
but economic. In Bengal the cultivators might be Muslim and the proprietors Hindu, but in Andhra both the cultivators and proprietors were Hindus and yet the same conflict was in evidence in some parts. His views, continued Gandhiji, on the ownership of land were well known. The only rightful owner of the land was he who tilled it.

The present proprietors were morally entitled to hold land only if they became trustees for it. If the cultivators of the fields of a proprietor, who had become a trustee, refused to till the land for him, he would not sue them or seek otherwise to coerce them. He would leave them alone and try to earn his livelihood independently by his honest industry. If he has been discharging his function as trustee honestly, they would come to him before long in contrition and seek his guidance and help. For, he would use his privilege, not to fill his pockets by the exploitation of the labourers, but teach the latter co-operation and organization so as to increase their produce and generally ameliorate their condition. This would mean that the proprietor must himself become a cultivator ‘par excellence.’

A proprietor who regarded his property merely as a means of satisfying his lusts was not its owner, but its slave. The proprietors of land in Bengal had, therefore, only to adopt his ideal of trusteeship and their troubles would end.

When Gandhiji had gone thus far, I took up a small piece of paper and sent him some more questions on the dais.

Q. Would the trustee’s property be passed on to his children by inheritance?

A. A proprietor who holds his property as a trust will not pass it on to his children by inheritance unless the latter in their turn become trustees and make good their
claim as such. If they are not prepared for it, he should create a trust of his property.

It is demoralizing for an able-bodied young man to live like a parasite on unearned income. A father should inculcate in his children the appreciation of the dignity of labour and teach them to earn their bread by their honest industry.

But this did not seem to be satisfactory to me; for, private ownership was hardly touched by the kind of trusteeship which Gandhiji described that afternoon. As early as 1931 and 1934, Gandhiji had spoken about confiscation of property without compensation if it came into conflict with the best interests of the nation. He had also expressly stated in 1937, that, personally, he did not believe in inheritance. And I, therefore, asked myself why should he not be equally unequivocal in the present meeting.

So on the 7th of January 1946, I addressed a long and perhaps pedantic letter to him on the subject. Gandhiji read it with interest but remarked that there was some confusion in my mind; and if he got the opportunity in future, he would clarify the points raised in the letter. That opportunity actually came in February 1947 in the district of Noakhali, when he went back very nearly to a logically radical position. But, in the meanwhile, the letter which I adressed to him is reproduced below:

Bapuji,

Your answer yesterday regarding the inheritance of a trustee's property did not satisfy me, and I have a quarrel with you on that score.

I am attaching along with this letter your former writings on the subject; the relevant portions being marked in red on pages 3, 9, 25, 26 etc. Let me now argue my case.

You said yesterday that if cultivators or workmen re-
fused to work under a proprietor, he should, on no account, force them to work but would depend on his own strength and God for his food. You also said that within a short time, the cultivators would return to him and beg him for his services. Now, this presumes that the man was not a mere proprietor, but had talents of which the peasants stood in need. Perhaps he had expert knowledge or some organizing ability which helped the peasants to raise better crops or earn more from their labours through his help than otherwise. For such service, the talented man has every moral right to ask for wages, or a commission, as you say. This is perfectly natural, as it is also natural for him to train his own son in such a manner that the latter may develop his talents in turn and employ them in the service of society.

But after having given his son the necessary training, why did you say yesterday, that you would not mind if the trustee handed over the property to the son? There is no harm in a man having faith in his son. But, if as you have said elsewhere, 'the only heir of a trustee is the public,' why should not the property pass on to the community on the death of the man?

There is also a point of law involved in the matter of transfer. If the rich man of today has really become a trustee after inner conversion, then, for him morally, the 'ownership' has already passed on to the community. He can no longer retain the right of disposal over that property on his death, unless the community specifically invests him with that authority. But even if the community takes the latter course, then he should choose the best man for the purpose rather than think of providing for his son in the first instance.

Personally, I believe, the property ought to belong to the State; or better still, to some voluntary organization like
a village commune or a municipality, or an organization like the All India Spinners' Association which is communally owned and run, not for profit but for public welfare alone.

In the future society of your dreams, talented persons will be allowed to earn more than less talented ones; nobody can have any quarrel over natural inequalities between man and man. The man who has earned more may even be allowed to spend more on himself than others, but within limits. But that would create very little disturbance in a society in which no man suffers from want of work and in which equality is the goal. But the right of transfer of unused portions of wealth should, under no circumstances, be left to the will of a private person. For it is this which lies at the root of the organization of capitalism. Capitalism has some good points in its favour, and so have numerous rich men individually. But today, social organization has reached a point when many of the good things which a rich man used to do, can be done much more efficiently by public institutions, based not on force but on voluntary association. That prevents many of the evils of capitalism. Thus, the good of society need not be left any longer to the caprices of those in whose hands money accumulates, not always on account of their personal ability but through the accident of birth. At the same time, such organizations tend to develop the initiative and public sense of a very large number of men and women, if they are worked in the right spirit. That in itself is a very desirable thing.

And, in order to create the organizations referred to above, one of the requisites is that the present law of inheritance should be substantially modified, if not done away with altogether, so that money may be found for financing the numerous democratic institutions referred to above. Of course, this can be done in progressive stages, as new institutions gradually take the place of old ones now run under
private enterprise. The present method of inheritance will be a misfit in the non-violent society of your conception.

Will you not allow me to share with you the assurance that the final extinction of private property, in the sense outlined above, is the natural corollary of non-violence and of the theory of trusteeship? Of course, the new order has to be brought into being by conversion of the privileged classes of today, either by their own effort, or by means of the non-violent non-co-operation of those on whom they depend for the making and retention of wealth; that much is absolutely common ground. But I am asking you just now only about the logical implication of non-violence and not how much of it can be immediately brought into practice.

Yours affectionately,

N. K. B.