

## Dhanagare's Misrepresentation of The Civil Disobedience Movement in Awadh During 1930-31

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This paper evaluates the views of Professor D.N. Dhanagare on the Civil Disobedience Movement in Awadh during 1930-31. Though his observations are restricted to Awadh, they are meant for exposing the impact of the civil disobedience on the peasantry of U.P. as a whole. His study is more of a logical rather than of an historical analysis, and is full of unwarranted generalisations. Following are the main questions raised in connection with Dhanagare's views:

1. How far is Dhanagare right in accepting that "the 'no-rent' campaign began in Oudh in early 1930; it was a prelude to the nation-wide civil disobedience movement that the Congress embarked upon in April 1930?"<sup>1</sup>

2. How far is Dhanagare right in saying that "This symbolic protest (breach of the salt law) was designed to side track the mounting discontent of the peasantry", so also for saying "as the civil disobedience became a ritual protest the 'no-rent' campaign receded into the background?"<sup>2</sup>

3. How far is Dhanagare right in saying that the "civil disobedience movement inaugurated by Gandhi in April 1930 was confined to breaches of the salt law?"<sup>3</sup>

4. How far is Dhanagare right in considering that "in U.P. civil disobedience movement in 1930 remained an urban movement?"<sup>4</sup>

5. How far is Dhanagare right in inferring that "Gandhi's presence in the U.P. and his commitments to Irwin, and later to Hailey, inhibited Nehru and his 'left-wing' groups in carrying forward the no-rent agitation?"<sup>5</sup>

Consider the point first given above. It is a well-known historical fact that Gandhi started his civil disobedience movement with breach of the salt law on April 6, 1930. There was no other Congress-led mass

movement earlier in 1030, either in Awadh or elsewhere in U.P. But Dhanagare gives an altogether different picture of the start of civil disobedience in Awadh. If Dhanagare is believed, then events in Awadh happened quite differently than how they happened in other parts of India. According to Dhanagare:

The 'no-rent' campaign began in Oudh in early part of 1930. It was a prelude to the nationwide civil disobedience movement that the Congress embarked upon in April 1930. The campaign, first started in the Rai Bareli district by Rafi Ahmad Kidwai with the blessings of Motilal Nehru, succeeded in rousing the tenantry to withhold rent.<sup>6</sup>

Dhanagare has clearly confused the start of salt agitation in Rae Bareli with the start of 'no-rent' agitation. What was started by Rafi Ahmad Qidwai with the blessings of Motilal Nehru in Rae Bareli in April 1930 was the salt agitation. At no time Qidwai started the no-rent agitation, with or without Motilal Nehru's blessings, in Rae Bareli district. In early 1930 there was no such thing as a no-rent agitation either in Rae Bareli or in any other district of Awadh. Mohan lal Saxena was the incharge of no-rent campaign in Rae Bareli. But he started this campaign in Rae Bareli, not in the early part of 1930 but in the last month of 1930.<sup>7</sup> And the no-rent that Saxena started in December 1930 was a part of Nehru's 'no-tax' which he declared in October 1930.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Dhanagare is absolutely wrong in thinking that the no-rent campaign in Awadh was a prelude to the nationwide civil disobedience movement. In Awadh the no-rent campaign was not a prelude but the culminating scene of civil disobedience movement. The curtain of civil disobedience movement in Awadh, like elsewhere in India, raises with the salt agitation. And Rafi Ahmad Qidwai initiated this agitation in Rae Bareli. Consider the U.P. Intelligence report of April 1930 from Rae Bareli:

On April 6 Rafi Ahmad Qidwai went with ten volunteers to Dalmau with the intention of preparing salt but were forced to return owing to the owner of the land unwilling to grant permission. The manufacture of salt was started in the city on April 8 and on the following day 55 volunteers arrived from the Salon tehsil to take part. Pandit Motilal Nehru was present with his daughter and son-in-law.<sup>9</sup>

Has not Dhanagare confused Qidwai's breaking of the salt law in Rae Bareli with his start of the no-rent campaign? Neither the U.P. intelligence reporting nor the Congress records show that there was any time earlier to 6 April during 1930 when an attempt was made by Qidwai to initiate a no-rent campaign in Awadh which roused the tenantry of Awadh to withhold rent. The no-rent campaign in the

early part of 1930 in Awadh is a fictitious product of Professor Dhanagare's mind.

Come to the second point of Dhanagare now. Dhanagare has inferred the 'mounting discontent of Awadh peasantry' from two false premises. Those false premises are: first, that there was a no-rent campaign in Awadh preceding the all India salt agitation, and second, that the no-rent in question roused the tenantry of Awadh to withhold rent. The objection is not that the Awadh peasantry has been given so much importance by Dhanagare that Gandhi had to start his all India salt agitation in order to sidetrack the mounting discontent of this peasantry, the objection is that the situation of sidetracking did not arise. Since there was no such thing as a no-rent campaign in Awadh in early 1930, no such thing as the rousing of tenantry to withhold rent, therefore, it cannot be said that the salt agitation was designed "to sidetrack the mounting discontent of peasantry.'

Coming to the third point, it is quite misleading to say that the 'civil disobedience movement inaugurated by Gandhi in April 1930 was confined only to breaches of the salt law'. At no time, either in 1930 or after, the civil disobedience was confined to breaches of the salt law. The picketing of liquor and foreign cloth, boycott of the British law-courts, police, no-tax campaign, etc., also started in 1930 itself, though they became much more extensive after 1930, and continued till the final withdrawal of the civil disobedience movement by Gandhi in August 1934. Surprisingly, none of these activities were stopped even during the truce between Gandhi and Irwin. Gandhi explained his plan of civil disobedience to the people in his speech at the prayer meeting held at Sabarmati Ashram on March 11, 1930, i.e. just one day before the start of his *Ḍaṇḍī* March. He said:

Wherever possible, civil disobedience of salt should be started. . . . Liquor and foreign-cloth shops can be picketed. We can refuse to pay taxes if we have the requisite strength. The lawyers can give up practice. The public can boycott the courts by refraining from litigation. Government servants can resign their posts.<sup>10</sup>

Thus before leaving for *Ḍaṇḍī* Gandhi made explicit his entire programme of civil disobedience, which included many other items beside salt. He was doubtful whether he would be allowed to reach *Ḍaṇḍī*. So he gave directions in advance how was the civil disobedience to continue in his absence. According to Nikhil Chakravartty Gandhi's plan was deep-rooted, and his strategy was for a long time struggle.<sup>11</sup> That is why the civil disobedience continued for more than four years

in spite of the Government repression. Unfortunately it is not clear at all on what ground does Dhanagare think that the civil disobedience was confined to the breaches of the salt law. It started with the breaches of the salt law, but took diverse forms as it proceeded. The breach of the salt law was only a prelude to the diverse forms which it later acquired. And the breach of the salt law was not simply a 'symbolic protest' as Dhanagare maintains. It was a challenge to the mighty British empire. Dhanagare may not, but the British knew very well the significance of Gandhi's salt agitation.

Consider now the point four of Dhanagare. Reacting to the involvement of the masses of U.P. (United Provinces of Agra and Oudh) in the civil disobedience Dhanagare writes:

In U.P. civil disobedience in 1930 remained an urban movement. The Congress made an effort to enlist the tenantry but even as late as October there was no response from the countryside. A week after his release from prison in October 1930 Jawaharlal Nehru launched a no-tax campaign but even this saw only 6,249 Congress agitators arrested by the end of November. The first phase of civil disobedience failed to make any impact on the peasant masses.<sup>12</sup>

Dhanagare has painted quite a grim picture of civil disobedience movement. In his fictitious no-rent campaign of early 1930 that was supposed to have been launched by Qidwai, Dhanagare had allowed the 'rousing of peasantry to withhold rent', but he has completely killed their enthusiasm to withhold rent in the real no-rent campaign that was started at the last stage of 1930. Dhanagare clearly means that neither Gandhi's call for salt agitation of March 1930, nor Jawaharlal's no-tax campaign of October 1930 could attract the peasant masses of U.P.

What is the criterion employed by Dhanagare in ending the first phase of the civil disobedience in November or December 1930? So far as the real history of civil disobedience is concerned, it is totally wrong to end its first phase in November 1930. It came to an end only in March 1931 with Gandhi-Irwin pact, because the consequent result of the pact was the suspension of the civil disobedience, at least formally. At the time of the pact the no-rent was going on with its full swing. Because of the whole-hearted participation of peasantry in the no-tax campaign of Nehru, and the failure of landlords to participate in it, the designator 'no-tax' became a misnomer and was dropped in favour of the designator 'no-rent'. Though Nehru gave call for the no-tax in October 1930, in reality it was implemented in Rae Bareilly, the favourite district of Dhanagare, in the month of December of that

year. This becomes clear from the reporting of U.P. Intelligence, 'Mohan Lal Saxena has been placed in charge of the Rae Bareli district no-rent campaign, and it is said that he will declare the campaign open from December 1.'<sup>13</sup> Is Dhanagare right in writing off a campaign before it was even started? How could the no-rent fail in November when it started in December? Dhanagare has given his judgement without looking into the archival sources.

Before further discussion of no-rent consider the role of peasantry in salt agitation which was a prelude to the diverse forms of the civil disobedience. So also let us see whether the movement from March to November 1930 was simply an urban movement. Dhanagare's views do not seem to match with historical reality. U.P. peasantry, like the peasantry of the rest of India was electrified by Gandhi's *Daṇḍī* March. In Awadh the same grass-root leaders took up the leadership of salt agitation who started the peasant agitation of 1920-21. The U.P. Intelligence reported on March 27, 1930 that Jhinguri Singh addressed a 'gathering of about 50 persons at village Roor (Rure) and told them to prepare themselves for *satyāgraha* in connection with the salt law.'<sup>14</sup> Roor (Rure) is the same village in Pratapgarh district which established the first Kisan Sabha around 1918. Jhinguri Singh was the originator of this Sabha, and was one of important leaders of the Oudh Peasant Movement of 1920-21.<sup>21</sup> Certainly the grass-root leaders of other districts might be doing the same what Jhinguri Singh was doing in Pratapgarh. Enthusiasm of peasantry about the salt agitation can be judged by the fact that in Lalganj tehsil of Rae Bareli, according to the U.P. Intelligence, salt was 'manufactured simultaneously in 4,500 houses.'<sup>16</sup> If not all the villages in the tehsil, a large number of villages were involved in salt agitation. And this is the tehsil of the district which is responsible for Dhanagare's views on peasantry. Rae Bareli shows that the salt agitation was for more rural than urban.

Now let us see how far is Dhanagare right in judging that Nehru's no-tax campaign hardly had any impact on the peasantry of U.P. If one studies of U.P. Intelligence reports of 1930-31 one would feel that Nehru's no-tax had a remarkable impact on U.P., particularly on the eastern part of U.P. and Awadh. To stop the no-tax campaign, as soon as Nehru called for it in October 1930, the government introduced the "Instigation Ordinance". However, this ordinance was not of much use. U.P. Intelligence reported on November 8, 1930 that 'In order to avoid arrest under the instigation ordinance in several districts house to house propaganda has been resorted to and village

“chaupals’ have become the places for the preaching of non-payment of taxes instead of the Congress platform.”<sup>17</sup> This shows how serious became no-tax in the first week of November itself. How can one say that Nehru failed? To avoid arrests Congress stopped holding of public meetings. Open activities were replaced by private meetings. It was reported that ‘Nehru had authorised District Congress Committees to inaugurate non-payment campaigns whenever they were satisfied that the local conditions gave any chance of success.’<sup>18</sup> Nehru was rearrested in the second week of November. Dhanagare does not proceed beyond November 1930. With just at the beginning of the no-rent campaign he had brought it to an end. He declared that ‘it failed to make any impact on the peasant masses.’ The ground was given that only 6,249 arrests were made. Congress reached a stage when it could not afford to have arrests. Failure to have arrests certainly does not mean that the campaign failed.

If Dhanagare had observed the economic situation that started developing from November 1930, he would have never declared the end of no-rent campaign in that month. This was the time when the prices of foodgrains came down to a large extent. Just a year ago, i.e. in December 1929 the selling price of wheat was per rupee 7.25 seers. But in December 1930 the price came down to 15.14 seers a rupee. The prices of barley, gram, rice, etc., also came down to nearly 50 per cent.<sup>19</sup> Then how was it impossible for the tenant to pay rent unless the government granted remission on rent? It is the depression that made possible for the Congress to give call for no-rent. As U.P. Intelligence reported ‘Owing to present economic conditions the fall in the prices of grain has afforded a fruitful soil to the Congress in preparing the *ryot* for the non-payment of taxes.’<sup>20</sup> In a way the government helped the Congress. If the government had declared remission on rent to a satisfactory level, it is doubtful whether the Congress would have given a call for no-rent. November 1930 was not the end of no-tax, it was its beginning.

To contradict Dhanagare it would be quite interesting to see the Intelligence reporting of November 22, 1930. ‘Propaganda for the non-payment of rent and revenue is beginning to assume a position of first importance in the rural agitation and arrests of persons for openly preaching non-payment have not succeeded in checking its spread.’<sup>21</sup> How different is the view of Dhanagare? Who is to be relied? Dhanagare or the U.P. Intelligence? Neither the arrests of peasants nor the Instigation Ordinance could stop the spread of no-rent. In support of

this a few instances may be quoted from the various districts of Awadh. Consider the impact of no-rent on the peasantry of Hrdoi, Unnao and Bara Banki in the later part of November 1930. It was reported from Hardoi that the villagers 'have refused to pay rent.'<sup>22</sup> In Unnao district *zamindārs* 'complain that they have been able to realise very little of the rent due.'<sup>23</sup> In Bara Banki district *zamindārs* 'failed to collect any rent.'<sup>24</sup> In the middle of December it was reported from the Kheri district that the '*kisāns* in several circles have not paid their rent.'<sup>25</sup> It was reported from Rae Bareli in the end of January that the 'rents are hard to collect.'<sup>26</sup> The no-rent was strongest in Pratapgarh district. Therefore, the government decided to crush it through violent means. Kahla riot of February 16, 1931 acquired its name in Awadh tenent struggle. The British covered Kahla into as an important village as Rure where the first Kisan Sabha was formed. The police fired at the no-rent campaigners in Kahla because they had a meeting 'in defiance of an order under section 144 Criminal Procedure Code.'<sup>27</sup> The result was three persons died on the spot and several injured and 41 persons were arrested.<sup>28</sup> This was done to terrorise the rural mass of Awadh. Yet Dhanagare thinks that Nehru's no-tax had no impact on peasantry. Lastly, consider the fifth, i.e., the last point of Dhanagare. According to Dhanagare Gandhi's commitment to Irwin, and later to Hailey, inhibited Nehru and his "left wing' groups in carrying forward the no-rent agitation.' Dhanagare's attack refers to the period of truce. But neither Gandhi-Irwin pact nor Gandhi's meeting with Hailey proved any kind of obstruction for Nehru in carrying forward the no-rent campaign.No-rent continued in U.P. throughout the truce period. The reason is simple. Gandhi-Irwin pact did not clarify the position of rent. The matter of rent, according to Nehru, 'could not be discussed with the Government of India as it was a provincial matter.'<sup>29</sup> However, Nehru made the position of rent clear in the second week of March 1931, i.e., immediately after the truce. He said in a meeting with tenants that if they were not in a position to pay, then 'they should not pay or pay less.'<sup>30</sup> In another meeting 'Krishna Kant Malviya declared that Congress was negotiating with Government to reduce rents and revenue to half and they should not pay until the matter is decided.'<sup>31</sup> And Gandhi did not stop either Nehru or Malviya for their no-rent activities, because none of them was breaking the terms of the truce. The terms of rent were not settled in the truce, therefore, Nehru and Malviya had every right to continue preaching the withholding of rent. As a matter of historical fact the no-rent activities of the left-wing group

of Nehru made more progress during truce than earlier. The U.P. Intelligence reported on March 28, 1931 that the rural agitation led by the 'left-wing' of the Congress' reached all the districts.<sup>32</sup> Before the truce they were restricted only to a few districts of U.P. The truce gave them an opportunity to spread over the whole province.

The left-wing of Nehru changed its tactics. The form of agitation was changed 'to avoid possible action by the authorities.'<sup>33</sup> Instead of non-payment of rent they started their agitation 'for remission of rent through the official channels.'<sup>34</sup> This change in the form of agitation did not improve the agrarian situation. In this context U.P. intelligence reported on April 11, 1931 'the idea that full rents need not be paid has become general, and the position of the landlords is increasingly difficult.'<sup>35</sup> Withholding of rent has now a new excuse.

For the first time on April 27, 1931 Willingdon thought in terms of granting remissions on rent and revenue. But Willingdon came out with only 17 per cent remission on rent.<sup>36</sup> The depression at that time demanded the remission of 50 per cent. It was in the context of Willingdon's insufficient rent remission that Gandhi met Hailey, the Governor of U.P. Gandhi's motive becomes clear from Hailey's letter to Emerson written on May 23, 1931.

It was clearly impossible for me to agree to anything that would look like a joint manifesto from myself and him (Gandhi), particularly as his draft could have been understood by the majority of people to embody a decision that remissions granted by us were altogether wrong and that something far more extensive was required.<sup>37</sup>

The meeting of Gandhi and Hailey on May 20, 1931 proved a total failure. Gandhi insisted for more extensive remissions on rent which Hailey refused. Consequently, Gandhi issued his "manifesto" to the Kisans of U.P., on May 23, 1931, coinciding with the date on which Hailey wrote to Emerson. If Hailey had to inform Emerson about the failure of his talk with Hailey. The depression at that time demanded 50 per cent rent remission, therefore, in his manifesto Gandhi too recommended 50 per cent remission. Gandhi said in his manifesto:

I am hoping that payment will begin at once. It may be that you are not able to pay the full 8 annas at once. In that case I trust that you will get suspension, and that no coercive processes will be issued whether for the unpaid balance or for arrears, if any, till the next harvest.<sup>38</sup>

Gandhi was certainly not sold out to Hailey as Dhanagare thinks, he was sold out only to the Kisans. He did not oppose the payment of rent, but at the same time asked them to pay only 8 annas in a rupee

as full payment. Even the condition of paying 8 annas in a rupee was made flexible by him. As the Deputy Commissioner of Rae Bareilly reported 'the Hindi version of "Mr. Gandhi's manifesto to kisans" has created the impression among the tenantry that they need not pay more than they think that they can pay.'<sup>39</sup> Was Gandhi, through his manifesto, asking the tenants to pay rent, or was he asking them not to pay their rent? In a subtle way Gandhi was instigating the tenants not to pay their rent if the Government asked them to pay more than 8 annas in a rupee. The result was, as reported by the Intelligence on June 13, 1931, 'Since the dissemination of the Hindi version of Mr. Gandhi's manifesto, collections have practically stopped.'<sup>40</sup> The recommendation for paying half the rent was as good as the recommendation for paying no rent.

Nehru was giving expression only to Gandhi's views about rent. It was reported that 'Pandit Jawaharlal's speeches have created a bad impression and made the task of the revenue staff even more difficult. His general instructions were to pay half and obtain full receipts.'<sup>41</sup> Once the tenants were not given full receipts, they refused to pay any rent. In their own ways both, Nehru and Gandhi, contributed to the no-rent campaign during the truce. Then on what ground does Dhanagare say that Gandhi's presence in U.P., and his commitments to Irwin and Hailey inhibited the progress of no-rent?

The civil disobedience was suspended during the truce, therefore, technically the no-rent campaign too was suspended. But half-rent campaign was the product of truce, hence could not be suspended during truce. The Government of Willingdon continued facing the same challenge from Gandhi which was faced by Irwin. It is only with the help of peasantry that Gandhi could challenge first Irwin then Willingdon. Yet Dhanagare maintains that the civil disobedience had no impact on the rural mass of U.P.

What is Dhanagare's criterion for distinguishing the first phase of the civil disobedience from its other phases? The issue of demarcation has become difficult because Dhanagare has included both, the salt agitation and the no-tax call given by Nehru, in his first phase. Though not the only way, one way is to consider salt agitation as the first phase of civil disobedience. The second phase can be considered from the time Nehru gave call for no-tax in October 1930 till Gandhi-Irwin pact on March 5, 1931. Third phase can cover the truce period. Though the civil disobedience was formally suspended, in practice it continued. And fourth phase is obviously the phase that

begins when Nehru gave a call for no-tax again in December 1931. But Dhanagare's first phase does not follow this order. How has he ordered his phases does not become clear from his writing. So also only Dhanagare knows what reasons have led him to maintain that the civil disobedience failed to attract the rural mass of U.P. This issue too has become difficult because according to Dhanagare the rural masses were not attracted either to the salt agitation of Gandhi or to the no-tax of Nehru. Dhanagare has written history for the civil disobedience in U.P. which is far from the real history of that time.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is a part of my longer project on Awadh peasant struggle during the colonial rule. Financial support for looking into the files of Police Abstract of Intelligence, U.P., and several visits to Awadh villages, came from the Indian Council of Historical Research in the form of monthly Fellowship from September 1991 to October 1993. I am grateful to Professor Bipan Chandra for going through the original draft of this paper. I am wholly responsible for the mistakes, if any, in analysing the historical data.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. D.N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India, 1920-1950*. Delhi: OUP, 1986, p. 121.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 122.
6. Ibid.
7. See PAI (Police Abstract of Intelligence), U.P. Rae Bareli, November 15, 1930, p. 2248.
8. Ibid., see Pratapgarh, April 5, and Rae Bareli, April 12, 1930.
9. Ibid., Rae Bareli, April 19, 1930, p. 363.
10. See Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 43, pp. 46-7.
11. See a penetrating discussion of this issue by Nikhil Chakravarty in *Mainstream*, April 8, 1995, p. 28.
12. Dhanagare, op. cit., p. 121.
13. PAI, Rae Bareli, November 15, 1930.
14. Ibid., Pratapgarh, April 5, 1930, p. 288.
15. For the Awadh Peasant movement of 1920-21, and Jhinguri Singh's role in it, see "Baba Ram Chandra Papers", Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. These papers also give information about the formation of Kisan Sabha in Rure.
16. PAI, Rae Bareli, July 11, 1931, p. 611.

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17. Ibid., "Rural Agitation", November 8, 1930, p. 2186.
18. Ibid. "Rural Summary", p. 2186.
19. Cited in "the Agrarian Distress in the United Provinces: being the Report of the Committee appointed by the Council of the U.P. Provincial Congress Committee", Allahabad, 1931, p. 5.
20. PAI, Generalsummary, November 1, 1930, p. 2139.
21. Ibid., Congress Miscellaneous, November 22, 1930, p. 2269.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., Bara Banki, p. 2278.
25. Ibid., Kheri, December 13, 1930.
26. Ibid., Rae Bareli, January, 31, 1931, p. 75.
27. Ibid., "Rural Agitation", February 28, 1931, p. 70.
28. Ibid., Pratapgarh, March 7, 1931, p. 201. Late Ramjatan's son gave me a copy of the note prepared by his father on the Kahla firing. Mata Charan and Ramjatan, both Kurmis, organised the Kahla meeting. They escaped bullets. Ramjatan's not contains horrible description of police butchery. I also met a couple of very old eye-witnesses of this firing. One of them composed a song on the event. The song was very sad.
29. *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Autobiography*, New Delhi, Impression of 1980, p. 258. This remark explains why there was nothing wrong in preaching no-rent during truce.
30. PAI, Lucknow, March 14, 1931, p. 229.
31. Ibid., Rural Agitation, March 21, 1931, p. 244.
32. Ibid., March 28, 1931, p. 268.
33. Ibid., April 11, 1931, p. 306.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. See S. Gopal's *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Autobiography*, Vol. 1, 1972, p. 165. Willingdon arbitrarily fixed 17 per cent reduction in rent. The situation demanded 50 per cent reduction. Therefore, Gandhi's recommendation of 50 per cent reduction was justified.
37. See S. Hailey's letter to Emerson, Fortnightly Report, F. No. 33/x I K.W., 1931, National Archives of India, Delhi.
38. Gandhi's Manifesto to the Kisans of U.P. is included in the *Agrarian Distress in the United Provinces*, p. 227.
39. PAI, Rae Bareli, June, 1931, p. 524.
40. Ibid., 'Rural Agitation', p. 520.
41. Ibid., July 11, 1931, p. 604.