

## **PEASANT'S STRUGGLE IN BIHAR**

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Radicalism in India has always been subservient to nationalism which, in essence, is the attempt by the 'indigenous' or 'native' bourgeoisie - urban and agrarian- to "capture state power". There existed both right and left radicalism, which have wanted change, but they differ in the process of change as well as ultimate goal of Indian nationalism. The result of this has been a curious inter-mingling of the 'right' and 'left' radicalism in India. History has shown national chauvinists demanding the destruction of feudalism and the so-called "socialists" exhibiting the most vicious forms of chauvinism.<sup>1</sup>

But the 'right' radical nationalism was insignificant in Indian politics and left radical nationalism has significant influence through the Socialists and the Communists. Both of these trends have also tended to utilise the same "mass-base", the peasantry, which by its very nature is both progressive, inasmuch as it desires redistribution of property.

Consequently, the peasantry has been caught in this obfuscating ideological cobweb of "left radical nationalism". The peasantry in Bihar and its premier organisation, the Kisan Sabha, also got entangled in this, first with the "left radical nationalists" of the Congress Socialist Party and then with the "red radical nationalists" of the Communist Party of India.

Right from its formation, the Kisan Sabha under the leadership and its mentor Sahjanand Saraswati did not have very smooth relations with the Socialists. The two groups were almost always out of step. When the Sabha was formed, the Socialists opposed its formation on the question of adoption of zamindari abolition as the policy of the Sabha. The Socialists took a lead on the question of the formation of the All-India Kisan Sabha. Sahajanand showed more caution than the Socialists.<sup>2</sup> And yet, in spite of these, as long as the two were together they worked fairly harmoniously. The reason was that even in the Congress Socialist Party there was no uniformity. The CPI elements within it, like Kishori Prasanna Singh and Nakshatra Malakar, were essentially grass-root organisers who had no problems working with the Sabhaites on basic issues and programmes.<sup>3</sup> As long as the better-known Socialists like Jaya Prakash Narayan, Rambriksha Benipuri, Awadheshwar Prasad Sinha and others kept themselves busy with either provincial level publicity or office work, there was no clash of roles. In any

case, within the Kisan Sabha itself, Sahajanand stood head and shoulder above the others in his pre-eminence. Hence, the problem when it came, was not on day-to-day issues but on wider questions at the national political level.

The major difference came on the question of relationship with the Congress. While by the end of the 1930s, it had become abundantly clear to Sahajanand that the Congress not only stood for the propertied classes but even for the protection of zamindari under various guises and that this aspect of the Congress policy was most represented by Gandhi.<sup>4</sup> The Congress Socialist Party was of the view that any prospective mass movement for freedom could only be initiated by Gandhi and his Congress.<sup>5</sup> The acceptance of Gandhi as the supreme leader drove the Congress Socialist Party into supporting his position against Subhash Bose at Tripuri and again at Ramgarh in the sessions of the Congress.<sup>6</sup> Sahajanand, on the other hand, was convinced that not only was the Congress soft, there was within it, "bickering for loaves and fishes and memberships of boards and legislatures and jobs" making it an organisation in all respects incapable of leadership of "revolutionary change".<sup>7</sup>

Sahajanand, therefore, sought the creation of a united 'left' which would pose an alternative to Gandhian leadership and not be subservient to it. The position he took alienated the Congress Socialist Party. The wavering attitude of the socialist leaders further convinced him that it would be very difficult for them "to cut their umbilical cords with the Congress".<sup>8</sup> For instance, while the socialist leaders had earlier stood by Sahajanand on the question of the Kisan Sabha adopting a separate, red flag for itself,<sup>9</sup> in the AIKS session held at Gaya in 1939, the President, Acharya Narendra Deva, a noted Socialist, questioned the propriety of the red flag replacing the Congress tricolour. However, as he was not able to consistently put his point in view of the earlier support for the red flag by his comrades, "the previous decision of the Kisan Sabha regarding the flag was reaffirmed. The red flag with the hammer and sickle depicted on it was also recognised by the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha."<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding the emerging reservations about the Socialists, Sahajanand included them in his attempt to bring about 'left unity'. The first effort at left unity was before the Tripuri Congress session had adjourned, followed shortly by a meeting at Calcutta. In June 1939, Sahajanand formed a Left Consolidation Committee with N.G. Ranga as representative of the Kisan Sabha and in July the Committee agreed to oppose AICC's ban on Satyagraha action without prior consent of the respective PCC. The ban had been directed against the *bakasht* agitations of the Bihar Kisan Sabha.<sup>11</sup> But Sahajanand held that in any case it could not apply to the peasants as "being in the thick of the fight, they cannot possibly pause to think over this (AICC) resolution (banning agitations without obtaining due approval of the PCC through proper channels)."<sup>12</sup> The Left Consolidation Committee met again in Calcutta with plans for a National Struggle Week from August 31 to September 6, 1939. Then in October, following the outbreak of the World War, there were successive 'Leftist' attempts to organise anti-imperialist conferences, first at Nagpur and then at Lucknow. But in both instances, Sahajanand reports, the

Socialists spurned the unity efforts.<sup>13</sup> Sahajanand and his associates not only got convinced that the Socialists merely wanted to turn the Kisan Sabha into, "the tail of the Congress",<sup>14</sup> but that they were "more interested in making speeches and finding fault than work".<sup>15</sup> His experiences with people like Rahul Sankrityayana, Karyanand Sharma<sup>16</sup> and others like them had in any case made him come to prefer the Communists to the Socialists.

The Socialists, however, did not show much lethargy thereafter. As Sahajanand took the Kisan Sabha nearer the Forward Block in his attempt to find a forum for consistent and militant anti-imperialism, the Congress Socialist Party edged closer to the position of the official Congress leadership so that at the Ramgarh session of Congress in 1940, the Sabha, for all practical purposes, split. The split was finally formalised at the Dumraon Session of the Bihar Pradesh Kishan Sabha in March 1941 at which the Congress Socialist Party described Sahajanand as a "faction leader"<sup>17</sup> Sahajanand was then in jail for his strident anti-imperialist speeches, but without even waiting for him, the Socialists formed a rival Kisan Sabha.<sup>18</sup> The organisation remained on paper and had a brief life only in the late 1940s. The new organisation was really created afresh as the Hind Kisan Panchayat. Thus the socialists left the Kisan Sabha for ever and Sahajanand's dependence on the Communists increased day by day.

From very beginning of the Kisan Sabha, there were many activists in it who had been greatly influenced by the Russian Revolution. Slowly, with the passage of time, many others like Karyanand Sharma were attracted towards the communist ideology and during his long incarceration in the early part of the Second World War, even Sahajanand got to read and appreciate the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and other communist theoreticians.<sup>19</sup> However, many of the peasant activists were reluctant about joining the Communist Party in the beginning so that when the Communist Party of India established its Bihar branch on 19 October 1939, Rahul Sankrityayana was the only notable peasant leader among its founder-members.<sup>20</sup> The leader of the Kisan Sabha, in spite of their differences with the Congress, by and large remained in that party. During the Second World War, however, after the split with the Congress leadership had become apparent and both the Congress Socialists and the Forward Block leaders had deserted the Kisan Sabha, the CPI and its workers started acquiring an important role in the organisation.<sup>21</sup> Many important leaders of the Sabha by then were already communists or became members of the CPI later. Rahul Sankrityayana among the former and Karyanand Sharma among the latter are prominent examples. In addition, at the district level there were many other communist Kisan Sabha leaders like Uma Shankar Shukla and Indradeep Sinha in Champaran, Yogendra Sharma and Chandra Shekhar Singh in Begusarai, Bhogendra Jha and Rajkumar Purbe in Darbhanga, Nakshatra Malakar in Purnea, and many others. thus, slowly the control over the Kisan Sabha's organisational machinery was already passing into the hands of the CPI leaders, though, even till as late as 1940-41, Sahajanand was under the illusion that "Communists do not count in the Kisan Sabha".

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the CPI characterised the World War as having become a "Peoples' War" and decided that nothing should be done which would hinder the outcome of the war in favour of the Allied powers, who now became allies of the Soviet Union. After that, although the Communists did not give up their work among the peasants, they sought to mobilise them to render help to the British through such measures as the "Grow More Food Campaign".<sup>23</sup> Sahajanand agreed with them and was released from jail. He joined such campaigns alongwith his associates like Judunandan Sharma and Yamuna Karjee and in Mid-1942 started a magazine, *Hunkar*, which later became the mouthpiece of the Kisan Sabha.<sup>24</sup> During the War, the Kisan Sabha on the political front advised its members not to support the Congress movements.<sup>25</sup> On the economic front, it helped the government in trying to control prices by increasing food production. It asked peasants to cultivate fallow land.<sup>26</sup> Through collective efforts, the peasants constructed bunds and irrigation channels. *Hunkar* published informations.

On his release from jail, Sahajanand heartily endorsed the Nagpur resolution and at the Sherghati session of the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha advised restraint to the peasants and announced to stop peasants struggle temporarily to help the government's efforts to defeat the fascist forces in Second World War.<sup>27</sup>

It was a new and different Sahajanand . But such was the political situation that only a month later at Bihta on the occasion of the sixth session of the All India Kisan Sabha, the Kisans were treated to even a new and different veteran peasant leader Indulal Yagnik saying, "There is no question any longer of helping Britain's war. It is now become the bounden duty of every Indian to defend his motherland against Japanese aggression and to secure all possible help from England, America, China and Russia, organising armed resistance against the enemy."<sup>28</sup>

The leaders of the Kisan Sabha appealed peasants to organise themselves on anti-fascist front and the peasant's causes were marginalised for the moment. As at least one bewildered peasant felt, "What are they talking about? Why don't they talk of us? Where is the fire which was there yesterday? Has the *dandi* Swami lost his *danda*?" The peasants in general turned towards Gandhi and a wide spread response was awaiting for the call of Mahatma in 1942.

In this situation the Quit India Movement broke out in August 1942. Even after the government had recovered from the shock of the first major onslaught, it could not decide "whether the plan was the plan of the Congress or whether it was a plan of a wing of Congress (CSP)." In any case, "the results suggested that the Congress had not had time to perfect their organisation."<sup>29</sup> So the attack was obviously from some other quarter. The quarter was identified fairly easily as the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie: "...the student class were the moving spirits..... when checked in Patna the Students at once spread out in the villages and there they found very willing allies in the...population of the Bihar village to whom loot and destruction are great attraction..."<sup>30</sup> And when the peasantry was involved, there was not only wide-scale

disruption of communications through unrooting of rail tracks, cutting of telegraph wires, felling of telephone poles, etc.<sup>31</sup> but also attacks on police<sup>32</sup> and even the military.<sup>33</sup> Policemen were burnt alive in their thanas.<sup>34</sup> Government officials were driven out of their offices. But while all these could be controlled, the peasant content of the movement gave it its most dangerous aspect. In many places, no-rent campaigns were launched<sup>35</sup> and the government only hoped that "a good monsoon will make for a prosperous harvest and less agrarian discontent".<sup>36</sup> In spite of the fact that such discontent was not occurring for the first time, the Viceroy wondered "whether it ought not to be possible to get some clearer impression than I at any rate have at the moment of the underlying causes of this agitation which bubbles up at regular intervals..."<sup>37</sup>

However, the opposition was not silenced and certainly not the crusty old fighter Sahajanand. Although he supported the war against Fascism generally, he spoke up against the brutality of the British police and military against the students and peasants in revolt. The Governor ruefully reported, "on the Left, Swami Sahajanand has already "ratted" on us (by) denouncing our repression."<sup>38</sup> After that, the government tried to drive a wedge between him and his Sabhaite and the CPI associates. Although Sahajanand had deserted the British-led War Front, the Governor stated that "I have information that his lieutenant Jamuna Karjee, a person of more real influence among the Kisans, will oppose the Congress move even if it takes the form of a no rent campaign."<sup>39</sup>

The government could not induce a split between Sahajanand and Jamuna Karjee through these methods but was able to divide the CPI away from them. The CPI continued to wholeheartedly support the war effort while Sahajanand tried to start agrarian movements once again. Sahajanand adopted a rationale distinct from the line of the Communist Party. He claimed that the Kisan Sabha had nothing to do with politics or political parties. It was concerned purely with the redressal of economic grievances.<sup>40</sup> In effect, he tried to delink economics (or agrarian movements) from politics (support to the anti-Fascist War). The Communists did not accept this logic and the two sides started drifting apart. The "Sabhaites" started agitating once again on the questions of *bakasht* lands, commutation of produce rent into cash, and most vehemently against the imposition of restrictions on the manufacture of *gur* (jaggery) by the sugar-cane growing Kisans. Slowly, they started feeling their isolation and after 1944, Sahajanand made repeated attempts to form another Left Front and even came near the Congress once again. Neither move, however, succeeded.

After the War, Sahajanand futilely persisted in trying to bring about Left Unity and formed an All India United Kisan Sabha which did not last for long. His attempts to revive his connections with the Congress also did not work out as he could not stomach the vacillations of the Congress leaders on the question of Zamindari abolition and finally on 6 December 1948, Sahajanand resigned from the Congress "right from the membership of the AICC to the primary membership"<sup>41</sup> He continued to work for Left Unity<sup>42</sup> and kept addressing large Kisan meetings all over Bihar exhorting the peasants to fight for their rights.<sup>43</sup> This continued right to the day he

died. And with him for all practical purposes died the independent Kisan Sabha, independent of domination by political parties.

Thus, under the relentless march of what has been called 'Regimentation and Party Rule', the once mighty and united Kisan movement in Bihar was split up by Congressmen, Socialists, Ranga-ites, Forward Bloc-ists, the "Swami-ites" and finally by the Communists. The logic of events demonstrated that an apolitical peasant movement was not possible.

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