



Revolutionary Peasants of Bihar

A Case Study of the Peasants Movement in Bihar (1934-40)

**Dr. Parveen Singh, Associate Professor,
Department of Higher Education, Haryana**

Abstract

The process of organization of peasants received a significant push forward with the formation of regional Kisan sabhas. A new wave of young cadre came out from the womb of ongoing national movement, found their destination in the movement of the exploited peasantry. Apart from them some political activists received baptism under the influence of the Left ideology found outlet in organization of those forces which are sympathetic to the cause of peasants. Thus, the culmination of all these forces resulted in the formation the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, which led a peasant movement since 1934 to 1940 under the leadership of Swami Sahjanand Saraswati. A new sense of freedom was born out of the feeling that our own people are in power (Ministry In 1937 after Provincial Autonomy Act of 1935)heightened the spirit of the masses. All these factors combined to make high water mark of the peasant movement.

Introduction

The Bihar state was under the Zamindari system of revenue collection in the British period. This system produced large number intermediaries, which were recognized as landlords, whereas the actual tiller were reduced to the status of tenants. The landlords had lukewarm interest in land management and the extension of agriculture didn't synchronise with the corresponding demographic upswing .As a result , the pressure on the land grew and simultaneous the demand on enhancement of rent on the part of landlords increased manifold. The rules and laws enacted by the imperialist regime were practiced more in breach than in observance. Another factor which multiplied the grievances of the peasantry

was the great economic depression of 1929, which caused economic dislocation of serious magnitude. A large number of land holdings were transferred to zaminders due to non payments of accrued dues. These were called the 'Bakshat' lands. In many cases no pattas (written evidence) were given, when the landlords changed the holdings of tenants, the identity of the holding was never indicated. All these agrarian problems created an environment of unrest among different sections of the peasantry. The growing socio-political awareness led to the rise of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (B.P.K.S.), whose main agenda was to organize the disgruntled peasantry on class lines and to infuse in them the greater understanding of their miseries. Swami Sahjanand Saraswati, the life and soul of this organization was president and Awadh Prasad Singh was its secretary. An analysis of the leadership, class character, methods of agitation and ideology is the objective of this paper.

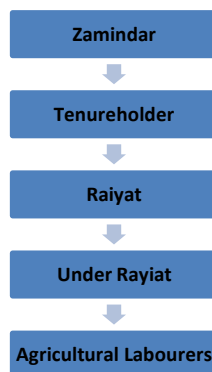
Leadership-Caste or Class Politics

The Bihar state was the major area of peasant mobilization in the 1930s. Swami Sahjanand, the founder of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha and a major leader of All India Kisan Sabha, was joined by many other Left-Wing leaders like Karyanand Sharma, Panchanan Sharma, etc. came from well-to-do, middle peasants, or the urban middle class including professionals, intelligentsia and politicians were credited in spreading the kisan sabha organization to the villages of Bihar. The small peasants and landless labourers never showed any potential for leadership. In the early stage of the movement the dominant caste position or personality of the leaders sometimes sidelined the aspirations of the most suffering peasantry, but, in the later stage the class outlook of these manifested in the programmes and, consequently changed the class composition of the parties. Socially, they belonged to dominant 'Bhumihar' Rajput, Brahmin and Kayasth, caste groups, yet 90% of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was constituted by the 'Kurmi' and 'Keori' castes of tenantry. The noticeable feature in the mobilization and struggle of the Bihar peasantry was that the caste factor was totally absent from the scenario. Thus, the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha emerged as a 'class-oriented' organization.¹ The formation of Congress Ministries in a majority of the provinces in early 1937 marked the beginning of a new phase in the growth of the peasant movements. The political arena underwent remarkable change. A new sense of freedom was born out of the feeling that 'our own people are in power' and a heightened sense of expectation that the ministries would bring in pro-people measures. All these factors

combined to make that period the high water mark of the peasant movement.² After 1940 the All India kisan sabha under the influence of the Communist Party of India turned to the problems of poor peasants and landless labourers or more specifically, we may say that the leadership of movement confined to the communists.

Agrarian Structure

The Bihar state was under Zamindari System that was started by the British in 1793 and which inaugurated new social arrangements on land. During the Mughal period, Revenue Collecting intermediaries were recognized as landlords with proprietary rights, whereas the actual tillers.



were reduced to the status of Tenants by that new settlement. The Zamindars had lukewarm entrepreneurial interest in land management. Extension of agriculture didn't speed up with the corresponding demographic upswing during 1920-30. As a result the pressure on land grew, demand of extra rent and enhancement of rent on part of the landlords also increased.³ Another cumulative effect of this system was sub-infeudation and rack-renting. The 'Zamindar' was the first category in the hierarchy. Next was 'Tenureholders', who took land from the Zamindar, primarily for the purpose of rent collection. Then, came the 'Raiyats' who held land under Tenureholders or directly from the Zamindars. In Khas Mahal area, the Raiyats had hereditary occupancy rights, which protected them from ejection and from frequent enhancement of rent. The fourth, category was that of 'Under-Raiyats'. Often, the Raiyats were treated as 'Under-Raiyats'. This was done to deprive them of their occupancy rights which only a Raiyat enjoyed. The fifth, category was of agricultural labourers known as 'Kamiyas' who belonged to lower castes such as Musahars and Dosadhs.⁴

Ideology, Tactics and Programme

The leading organization of this movement, the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, gradually underwent an evolution, earlier it worked under the aegis of the Indian National

Congress, where its ideologue, Gandhi was not seeking revolutionary change but wanted the existing agrarian relations to be intact and as far as the mechanism of the movement is concerned he believed in non-violence means, or means are ends to him. He forwarded a policy of **class collaboration** in which the landlords and the poor peasants will work together and look after the interests of each other. So, the B.P.K.S. focused on peasants issues like high rents, interest rates and illegal exactions. It never thought of overthrowing the Zamindari system or the landlordism because. It only after its contact with first, the Congress Socialist Party (ideologically close to Marxism and Fabian Socialism, but equally influenced by Gandhism), and later, with the Communist Party of India, became more and more radical. This process of radicalization was also not instant but gradual. Since, the Communist Party of India who is also responsible for radicalization of the Bihar provincial Kisan Sabha under the dictate of the Comintern had to follow the **'United Front Strategy'** – the Indian communists to give up their radical programmes, and to organize an anti-imperialist broad mass based movement, including the working class, peasantry, middle class, through integrating all leftist elements whether in or outside the Congress. But after 1940s the ultimate aim of the B.P.K.S. was complete freedom from economic exploitation and achievement of full economic and political power for peasants. Until, the political freedom was achieved, the kisan movement aimed at the destruction of the Zamindari system.⁵ The organization of the Bihar provincial Kisan Sabha improved at the same time, from 1935 to 1938 there was an over 300% increase in its membership and credit of this phenomenal increase goes to Swami Sahjanand, the chief architect of this organization.⁶ A large number of political workers who relied till then on terrorist methods increasingly lost faith in their efficacy and were attracted by the **'Marxian ideas'** relating to **'class struggle'** and organization of industrial workers and agricultural labourers thronged this organisation.⁷ Thus the ideologies of this movement vacillated between Gandhism and Marxism-Leninism. As far as **tactics** concerned, the B.P.K.S. mobilized through the holding of kisan conferences or meetings at the thana, taluqa, district and provincial levels at which peasants demands were aired and resolutions were passed. These meetings were addressed by the provincial and all-India leaders. These meetings were preceded by a campaign of mobilization at the village level where kisan workers toured the villages held meetings, collected subscription in money and exhorted the peasantry to attend the conferences. The impact on the surrounding areas was powerful indeed and peasants returned from these gatherings with a new sense of

strength and a greater understanding of their own conditions.⁸The B.P.K.S. during early thirties and later in early forties defined and redefined its priorities in **agrarian programmes**. Earlier, Swami under the influence of Indian national congress and Gandhi sought the solutions of the agrarian problems within a reformist frame of reference⁹ but, in 1932 he and his B.P.K.S. parted company with the Bihar congress and started a fervent campaign against landlordism, against landlord-tenant compromises and in the protection of the occupancy rights of tenants.¹⁰ After 1941, he clarified that when B.P.K.S. talked about 'landlordism' it referred to big landed estates holders, feudal chiefs and princes not to the 'grihastha', who earn his livelihood by cultivating, whether he be a petty landlord, raiyat or labourer.¹¹ In 1942, Swami changed his opinion and explained that since the distinction between the poor peasants and the landless labourers was fast vanishing, the problem of rural proletariat were becoming more urgent than those of middle peasants and more prosperous farmers and earlier the rich and middle farmers made use of kisan sabha for their own ends.¹² He now, also found the Gandhian means inadequate for attaining radical change in the agrarian structure.¹³ When the Communist Party of India monopolized the entire All India kisan sabha, Swami owing to the several differences with them left this organization and founded another platform that is **All India United Kisan Sabha**, which stressed abolition of landlordism, curbing the powers of rich peasants and money-lenders in the rural areas.¹⁴

Events

In 1934-35, the tenants in the Banka sub-division of Bhagalpur district refused to pay rent. Similarly, such cases of refusal to pay rents were reported in Kisanganj and Sadar subdivision of Purnea district. These stray incidents were attributed to the Kisan Sabha's occasional calls for boycotting zamindars and non-payment of rent.¹⁵ The most significant agrarian conflict occurred in the Barahiya Tal area of Munger district. The protest began in 1935; it took serious turn in early 1937 and continued up to 1940.¹⁶ The thrust of the dispute was over Bakasht land. These lands were the Zamindar's own lands, distinguishable from the lands cultivated and owned by the peasants. The origin of these lands can be traced to the dispossession by Zamindars' of the owner peasants on grounds of non-payment of rent. The formal dispossession, however, rarely resulted in the charge of cultivators. Evictions on considerable extent began in 1937.¹⁷ All Zamindars belonged to the upper castes, while, the Tenants belonged to backward castes like Dhanuks, Kahars, Kurmis and Banias.¹⁸ Karyanand

Sharma, a kisan sabhaite exhorted the peasantry of Sheikhpura and Lakhisarai not to render begari and resist other kinds of oppressions. The Kisan Sabha under Karyanand organised satyagraha by the evicted peasants.¹⁹ Srikrishna Sinha, who later led the Congress Ministry in Bihar, too enquired about the peasants grievances and brought about a reconciliation between the warring parties. The compromise didn't last long. Violent incidents were reported in Karampur village in the Barahiyatal.²⁰ In a district Kisan Sabha conference, held at Shiekhpora in February 1937, Karyanand advised and encouraged peasantry to forcibly occupy the Bakashtlands.²¹ On March 1 and 2, 1937 the peasantry looted the standing crops of the landlords in villages Gogal, Teus, etc. About seventy peasants including Karyanand Sharma were arrested and the Kisan Sabha activities throughout the district were banned.²² Karyanand's arrest was criticized by all the Socialists, Congressites and Kisan Sabha leaders.²³ The All India Kisan Sabha observed the 'Bihar Kisan Day' on October 15, 1937 as a mark of protest against severe police repression.²⁴ The Kisan Sabha with a membership of 80,000 carried the struggle which was recognised by the political parties.

No doubt the peasants' grievances were not sorted out, the custom of begari was still prevalent in certain districts of Bihar.²⁵ The most important demand regarding rent reduction, removal of indebtedness, end of bhaali system still existed in few areas. However, there was some positive side too. Few landlords were reported to have agreed to grant time to the tenants to pay off the rents. Substantial remissions were allowed in Supaul, Madhipura, Bhagalpur and Munger.²⁶ When the Bihar Provincial Congress assumed office in Bihar (1937), the Kisan Sabha persuaded it to intervene on behalf of the peasants. The relaxation acquired was the Bihar Tenancy (Amendment) Act of 1937. This new act targeted for the cancellation of all enhancements between January 1911 and December 1936, the reduction of all rents commuted during that period, total or partial remission of rent on deteriorated lands, reduction of rent where there had been a fall in the average local price of staple food crops, settlement of a fair rent and penal offence for illegal exactions by the landlords. This target didn't satisfy the Kisan leadership as it fell short of their expectations.²⁷ In real terms, the Kisan Sabha leaders under the influence of the Left ideology wanted the Congress to establish a kind of 'Kisan Raj'. They sought to explain the failure of the Congress regime in terms of class interests. Swami Sahajanand, at a kisan rally (Siwan) on November 26, 1938, observed, "All the fights of the Congress had been fought by the masses, while the capitalists and landlords sided with the imperialist forces. Zamindars and

capitalists seeing that they had no hope from the imperialists were now joining the Congress and monopolizing it".²⁸ The peasants showed positive response. Nearly twenty thousand peasants thronged the Assembly shouting the slogans, 'Give us water; give us bread; remit our all agricultural loans; down with zamindars and save us from oppression.'²⁹ On November 4, 1937 at a meeting of Bihar Provincial Kisan council it was stated 'There are numerous interests which are opposed to the interest of the kisans but the responsibility of the Congress must not be towards the privileged and vested interests.'³⁰ But seeing the impossibility of the peasants demands Sahajanand exhorted the Kisan Sabhaites to agitate and fight for the cause. In this situation, the Champaran district Congress committee called upon Sahajanand to cancel his tour. The Saran District Congress committee banned the participation of the Congressites in Sahajanand's mobilization tour programme.³¹ Accusations and Counter accusations continued to be exchanged. However, the 5th Session of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha at Bachwara (Munger) in 1938 reemphasized faith in peaceful methods.³² certainly, this tactics of Congress proved disastrous for both the peasants and the ongoing freedom struggle. Their leader Jai Prakash Narayan described Bihar Congress leaders as stooges of Zamindars, and congratulated the kisan sabha and Sahajanand for showing the way to conduct an independent kisan movement.³³

At this juncture, the Congress was looking for some modus operandi to end the agrarian dispute. At last, it finally reached an agreement which was branded as a solution but proved to be a hoax, because of violation of the 'Bakasht' clause, which was the crux of the agreement. The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha openly criticized the agreement in February, 1938.³⁴ As a result of this failure of the agreement, tension erupted in Sadar subdivision of the Bhagalpur district. The central cause of this dispute was reduction of rents under Section 112A of the Bihar Tenancy Act as well as the reduction of arrears and restoration of Bakasht lands.³⁵ The rent reduction operation also explained the 'no rent mentality among the Tenants of the Purnea district. Similar incidents occurred in Jamui-sub division, Bharbhinga, Lakhisarai and Gogri thanas of Barahiyatal area.³⁶

Apart from these, another agrarian dispute erupted in June, 1939 in Dharampur Pargana in south-west of the district of Purnea. Discontent developed between the Santal Bataidars and Dharbhanga Raj Tenants over non-granting of receipts especially in batai lands held by the Santal Bataidars.³⁷ Some local and outsider cultivators belonging to upper castes took settlements of vast land from proprietors at Darbhanga on payment of cash rent. Actually, the

Santal cultivators tilled their tenancy on payment of produce rent, that is, they held the tenancy as Under Raiyat, but this status of Under-Raiyat was denied to them, by non-granting of produce rent receipts. When the immediate landlord of the Santal cultivator happened to be the proprietor, the Santal claim was strongly disputed, since any recognition of a Santal as a batai tenant would immediately confer on him the right of occupancy.³⁸ In March 1940 in Dhamdaha village, some Santal Bataidars having reaped and stored the crops refused to part with any share of it without getting a proper receipt. When local police official approached, they were opposed by Santals armed with their traditional bows and arrows.³⁹ The violent agitation was pacified as a result of intervention of the District Magistrate, who made landlords agree to grant receipts to Bataidar Tenants.⁴⁰ Jetha Manghi, a Santal, organised this agitation along with Dula Tuddu. It is also said that an English sub-divisional officer of Purnea, C.H. Mclean, too, encouraged the aggrieved cultivators to demand rent receipts from the landlords.⁴¹

This Santal protest also exhorted the other neighboring non- Santal tenantry against their landlords. In September, 1940, both Santal and non-Santal in Sanjhagat (Purnea) put up a combined resistance to Zamindar of Raja P.C.Pal.⁴² The tenancy belonging to Ben and Dhanuk castes (Consisting of majority of the population) and Santals were devoid of the occupancy right to about 300 bighas of land. Policemen were sent to evict them but they met with stiff resistance. Nakshatra Malahar and Dhuran Yadav led this movement and pleaded for the necessity of a joint action of Dikus and non Dikus.⁴³ Violent incidents occurred between this poor tenantry and the sipahis. Initially Dula was opposed to that but ultimately agreed with him. It was then Malakas accompanied by about 40/50 Tenants, well equipped with bows and arrows, confronted with the lathials of Raja. The cultivators achieved a victory.⁴⁴

Another organised struggle of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was along with the association of red-shirt volunteers (workers of Communist Party of India). Karyanand Sharma raised a score of red-shirt volunteers, trained them in drills with lathis in order to launch satyagraha, Men, Women, and children of the villages of Mehran Chak, Kathwa, Fadarpur, Pali, Sarore and Sheikpura engaged in that programme of Satyagraha by sitting in front of the landlord's plough. Some with the help of the red-shirt volunteers started sowing the fields and cultivating them, thus trying to prevent the landlord's men from ploughing their Bakasht land. This practice led to some minor clashes. The Government promptly

deployed 100 constables.⁴⁵ The Kisan Sabha leaders remained determined on organization and mobilization of the tenantry. From each of 8 villages of Barahiya Tal area, tenants were enrolled to work as red-shirt volunteer and the headquarters of the movement Indupur was put under Panchanan Sharma.⁴⁶ On the other hand the attitude of the Zamindars remained unchanged. Tenants were roughly treated by the Zamindar's well equipped hooligans⁴⁷ but the organized Tenants responded warmly. The standing crops of the Zamindars in the villages of Meharmchak, Kanpur and Repura were stealthily cut. In order to find an amicable solution, the district Magistrate, B.K.Gokhale, convened a conference of the representatives of the zamindars and the tenants, Nand Kumar Singh, Shyam Prasad, Dwarika Prasad Bachche Babu, Bhuneshwar Prasad were main arbitrators.⁴⁸ In January 1939, they decided to form a panchayat committee consisting of five members. The committee then unanimously decided to entrust the responsibility of cutting the crops of the disputed fields and their storage to the sub-divisional officer Karyanand Sharma supplied list of land which was the Tenant claimed to have cultivated in the different villages. According to the petitions of 13,000 bighas of land, the kisans claimed 8500 bighas.⁴⁹ but, the work of the committee remained stand still, due to non-participation of tenants either for tendering evidence or communicating anything to the committee, because karyanand, having promised the land, was finding it impossible to have it fulfilled by any award of the committee and he being a party to the formation of the Committee, couldn't denounce it openly.⁵⁰ However, the uprooting of crops by the Kisans were reported to be regular. The landlords were said to have requested the kisans not to uproot the crops till the panchayat committee gave its verdict. In another development, the Zamindars reported to have constituted a Kastkar Sabha to protect their interests. Caste and community feelings were also spread by the Zamindars to break the unity of agitating Tenants. These charges were leveled by the Tenants in Kisan Sabha meeting held in Barahiya Tal in March 1939.⁵¹ On May 20, 1939 the members of the Committee prepared the Award. The Zamindars managed to take away the crops as per terms of the award. By May 31, the distribution work was finalized, according to which 800 bighas of land went to the Tenants of their effected villages.⁵²The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha however, wasn't satisfied with this solution. In June 1939, Sahajanand rejected this award saying that all were not given land as claimed by the Government.⁵³ The Government report, however, affirmed that the Kisan Sabha which had promised land to all, was not in line with the terms of agreement. Definitely, at this juncture there was no real solution was found but

the later the was resumed in certain pockets in 1945 and continued in form or another till zamindari was abolished.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The most important contribution of this movement was the strengthening of the peasantry under the banner of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha. Definitely, the demands for which the movement was launched like abolition of Zamindari system of revenue collection, restoration of illegally seized lands, and security of tenures for tenants, abolition of illegal cesses, forced labour and ending of the exploitation by landlord have partial success. But under the leadership B.P.K.S., the peasants' struggle created a climate which laid the foundation of the future agrarian reforms. When we test the demands of the movement, it is clear that the movement was of reformist nature which didn't lead to the revolutionary path and the reason behind this was obvious, the priority of anti-imperialist national struggle. The relationship of the peasants' movement with the nationalist movement was vital and integral in nature. Actually, the initial impetus of the movement came from the rank and file of the Bihar branch of the Indian National Congress, so in the earlier phase the B.P.K.S. couldn't come out of the clutches of the ideology and programmes of Gandhi, the ideologue of the Congress. In later years too, the 'United Front' strategy of the communists also receded the radical agenda. There seems a sort of inability of the B.P.K.S. to develop and sustain itself strongly and free from the crutches of ideologies other political parties. Despite the above shortcomings, the peasantry under the leadership of the Swami Sahjanand made a genuine effort to organize a class-oriented peasant movement. Some scholars argue that it is difficult to arrive at a theory regarding the revolutionary scale of a particular agrarian class because the struggle is of a complex nature. But in this struggle the poor peasants and landless peasantry showed their tremendous potential of organisation and revolution.

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