Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The Peasant struggle in Bihar during 1936-1947 is examined within the general framework of the struggle of the Indian peasantry as a social class, having a unity of interests, expressed in common life-style, organized consciousness and organized action. The present study deals particularly with the struggle of the tenants with occupancy rights against the permanently settled landlords in Bihar. It was a struggle conducted under the aegis of the powerful Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, with the support of the All India Kisan Sabha.

The year 1936 is taken to be the starting point, primarily for two reasons: First, agrarian crisis in Bihar can be traced back to the Great Depression, and, more fundamentally to the land system. From 1928 onwards Bihar faced a serious crisis through the thirties. A history in agrarian crisis could begin from 1928. The present study begins from 1936 because organized struggle on the part of the peasantry began in this year at Monghyr, followed by Gaya and Shahabad. By 1936 the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was organized with its programme and charter of immediate demands. Second, the year 1936 is also marked out by the formation of All India Kisan Sabha on April 11, 1936 which had, as a background, the existence of peasant organizations in different provinces like Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha. The struggle in Monghyr, Gaya and Shahabad was that of raiyats with occupancy rights against actual and threatened land eviction. This struggle was suspended in 1939 at Monghyr. At Gaya it had conclusively ended a little earlier. For the
next seven years there was a lull in this struggle owing to (a) conditions of World War II, (b) primacy of national politics in that period, (c) arrests of Bihar kisan leadership connected with this struggle and (d) splits in the Kisan Sabha: first in 1942 when the leaders of the Congress Socialist Party parted company; second in 1944-45, when Swami Sahajanand, the Bihar and All India kisan leader left the All India Kisan Sabha to organize All India United Kisan Sabha. The struggle again started by the end of 1946 going over to 1947.

The year ending pre-independence phase (1947) is taken to be the terminal point because (1) the movement reappeared around this year and highlighted the evils of landlordism in the year of independence of the country; (2) the pre-independence phase ended and the national leadership got unfettered power to fulfill its promises to the peasantry, among other things.

Reasons for the Choice of Bihar

The study of the peasant struggle in Bihar is taken up for the following reasons: (a) the formation of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha preceded and therefore helped the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha. (b) The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was one of the most active and powerful detachments of the All India Kisan Sabha. (c) The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha had to politically fight during its formative years the manoeuvres of the United Party formed by the Zamindars and Planters of Bihar with the blessings of the British Government. At the All India level, the Zamindars of Bihar, like Maharaja of Darbhanga
had important links with Hindu Mahasabha. We show later that
the Hindu Mahasabha, apart from being a communal body, was
against abolition of landlordism. Landlords in Bihar represent-
ted conservative Hindu outlook, and, organized themselves. In
other words, the Zamindars of Bihar were conscious of their
class interests and allied themselves with the most conservative
force in the country. They were politically organized. British
interests and the Zamindar interest had close relationship here
as elsewhere in India. The peasants had to fight this unity of
interests here in this province. (d) The leadership of the
Bihar Provincial Congress Committee was in the hands of "right-
wing" of the Congress. This section of the leadership applied
Gandhi's theory of class "peace" or "compromise" in a manner
which was disappointing to the peasants. It was in Bihar that
the local Kisan Sabha came in conflict with the Congress also,
particularly when the latter was in office under the Government
of India Act of 1935. (e) The Zamindars of Bihar were one of
the biggest Zamindars of India e.g. the Maharaja of Darbhanga.
The political importance of this Zamindar is indicated by the
following. At a conference held at Ranchi on September 4,
1932, the Maharajadhiraja Sriman Kameshwar Singh Sahib of Dar-
bhanga, president of the Conference recommended the formation
of the United Party with the aim of providing an alternative to
the Indian National Congress. (f) The condition of the tenantry

1 Report on the Administration of the Territories now
included in the Province of Bihar and Orissa, 1911-12
(Patna, Bihar and Orissa Government Press, 1913).

2 The Report of the Proceedings of the Conference held
at Ranchi on September 4, 1932.
here was bad. The permanent settlement, the secure position of the Zamindars and the insecurity of the tenantry therein, the operation of tenancy legislation, the natural calamities like floods and famine had been constant factors for making the situation unbearable for the peasants. The fall in prices due to Great Depression, the increasing population, increasing rents, mounting debts and stagnant production of crops further sharpened the economic crisis. This found expression in rural indebtedness, rent arrears, land eviction and attempted land eviction. All the objective conditions for peasant struggle existed here in general. The peasant intervention was the most prominent in the three districts, viz. Monghyr, Gaya and Shahabad, though it was also prevalent in Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Patna, Purnea etc. In these three districts the struggle was the most acute in the areas of Barahiya Tal, Reora and Chapra, respectively.

Reasons for the Choice of Monghyr

The present study deals with the peasant struggle in Monghyr primarily. It takes into account the situation in the other two important centres of struggle. The study of Monghyr assumes significance for the following reasons: (a) as already stated, the movement started first in Monghyr i.e. in 1936 and lasted the longest till May 1939, when it was suspended by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati in a public meeting held at Monghyr.

3 Kisan Sabha Bulletin, issued by All India Kisan Sabha, Bombay, May 26, 1939.
(b) New forms of struggle were initiated here giving a lead to Kisan Sabha of Bihar. (c) The Government pursued a policy of suppression and repression in favour of the Zamindars. This was in contrast with the policy of the Government at Reora in Gaya where the Government satisfied the demands of the peasants. (d) The movement failed here. (e) The local leader here, Karyanand Sharma not only became a Communist in 1940, but, became a leader of the All India Kisan Sabha. Even after independence till his death, he remained the leader of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha. Though the local leader at Gaya, Yadunandan Sharma, became an All India leader, he did not become a Communist. (f) A number of Communists participated in the movement. (g) The availability of primary sources - official unpublished documents facilitate the study of the peasant struggle in Monghyr primarily. Further they provide for a comparison at best with the other two districts, namely Gaya and to a lesser degree Shahabad.

Themes of Study

The study is divided into six chapters, apart from the introduction. In chapter two the problem of tenantry in South Bihar under the model of permanent settlement is delineated. North Bihar is left out because it faced different problems and was governed by different tenancy laws. It is shown in this chapter that the problem of landlordism, high rents, rural

indebtedness and threatened land-eviction became major problems of tenantry during the period of this study. Secondly, it is maintained here that (a) the scheme of Permanent Settlement consciously provided for intervention of the State on behalf of the tenants and (b) that state intervention was disappointing for the tenants in practice. As such there was ample scope for organized action on the part of the tenants.

In Chapter III we examine the attitudes of the All India Kisan Sabha and the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha towards the problems of landlordism, rural indebtedness and rent. This normative exercise of the peasant movement is given on the basis of actual actions, wherever made possible by availability of evidence. As an essential part of this exercise their definition of a "peasant" and "agricultural labourer" is also provided with a view to understand as to who compose these two categories.

In Chapter IV we deal with the concretisation of the two organizations, i.e. the formation and history of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha and the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha.

In Chapter V we deal with another aspect of the normative exercise, i.e. the relations of these two bodies with political parties like Indian National Congress, Congress Socialist Party and Communist Party of India in order to determine the political consciousness of the peasant movement. Political consciousness indicates the comprehension of a problem and determines the course of action launched by these organizations. It has been shown that progressively the Communists
came to play a dominant role in the peasant movement, as is evident from the available material.

In this context of growing political awakening organized action of the peasants in Monghyr during 1936-39 and 1946-47 is examined in chapter VI. Here the following themes are dealt with: (a) the form and nature of the action; the nature of mobilization in this action; (b) the nature of leadership therein; (c) the policy of the Government towards the action; and (d) the results of the action. The struggle at Monghyr validates our conclusions of the growth of political awakening of the peasant movement.

A Brief Review of Studies in Peasant Struggles

Unfortunately there is not a single comprehensive work on the peasant struggles in India from 1757 to 1947. Such a work is beyond the capacity of an individual researcher. An organized endeavour is necessary even to attempt such a comprehensive study. Pending that, individual studies have been made in this field. They are extremely important and useful. The study of S.B. Chaudhari covers the earliest period. The book shows how the "British Power in this country, even in early days, had to contend almost ceaselessly with the resistance from large numbers of people in very many parts". The book is a "pioneer work" in this direction. However, it is limited by the period it covers. There is no denying the fact that it

5 S.B. Chaudhari, Civil Disturbances During the British Rule in India, 1765-1851 (Calcutta, 1955).

6 Ibid., Introduction, p. xiii.
fills an important gap. The story of the Peasant upheavals is brought up to the present century in another brilliant, short and concise pamphlet. Owing to the very nature of the survey of different movements, it gives an over-all view. It does not make an indepth study of the peasant uprisings. Kalyan Kumar Sen Gupta's study on Pabna disturbances removes this drawback in a small area. It deals with the history of the peasant movement in a district of former Bengal (now in Bangla Desh) in the decade preceding the enactment of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. This is the major work of peasant uprising in a permanently settled area. However, it is an area far away from Bihar. Sukhbir Chaudhary's study is of a general nature dealing with peasant uprisings during 1905 to 1929. It is in this work that peasant uprising in Bihar in the early twentieth century finds a place. It deals with the movement of Bihar peasants in Champaran against Indigo Plantation. The book is too general in nature to provide an indepth analysis of the movements it mentions. The gap is filled by the study of Girish Mishra. It is written with an expertise of an economist. It contains a Chapter on peasant agitations. One

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10 Girish Mishra, "Agrarian Problems of a Permanently

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of the sections deals with peasant agitation during 1936-47 in the district of Champaran. Here again the district of Monghyr does not find a place, for, it is outside the scope of the study. There is another study of peasant revolt in Bengal in 1783 by Narhari Kaviraj. It is a brilliant work, but it is limited by the area and the time it covers.

There are general works which mention some aspect or the other of the peasant uprisings in one or the other part of the country in passing.

An important work regarding peasant movement in Bihar is that of Walter Hauser. It is a study of the genesis, formation, growth and demise of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha till 1942. It deals with the relations of this organization with other parties, and examines its ideology and leadership. It mentions that the most active period of this body was 1936-1942. It does not deal with the organized action of the Bihar Peasants during this period and in the period ending 1946 and beginning of 1947. It does not deal with the actual movement


11 Narhari Kaviraj, Peasant Uprising in Bengal, 1783 (New Delhi, 1972).


13 Walter Hauser, "The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha,

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in any of the districts. Walter Hauser's article on the land policy of the Indian National Congress is relevant to an aspect of the present study. It deals with the attitude of the Indian National Congress towards the agrarian problems, particularly in Bihar. In the process the rift of "left" and "right" in the Congress is brought out. T.R. Metcalf has written an article on the role of the state and the condition of the tenant under the model of permanent settlement. He does not deal with the agrarian unrest in Bihar.

It is no exaggeration to say that most of the studies touch in a general passing manner the peasant struggle in Bihar. There is no study that examines the actual action of the peasants against threatened land evictions of occupancy tenants. It can definitely be stated that no study has been made of this struggle in the district of Monghyr. Only one journalistic article appeared in the daily press in 1939. Other comments found in different newspapers are at best partial and written by those engaged in the kisan movement. They serve as source


14 Walter Hauser, "The Indian National Congress and Land Policy in the Twentieth Century", Indian Economic and Social History Review (New Delhi), vol. 1, no. 1, 1963-64.


16 "Kisan Unrest in Bihar", The Statesman, June 6, 1939.
references of marginal importance.

Sources

This study is based mainly on primary sources like annual administrative reports, police reports, reports on the administration of justice, proceedings of the Home (Political) Department of the Provincial Government, documents of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, All India Kisan Sabha, Indian National Congress, Congress Socialist Party and Communist Party of India. Secondary sources have not been ignored. Interviews with a number of persons connected with and participants in the actual peasant struggle have helped in understanding many details and controversies connected with the struggle. To take an example, the most interesting controversy that came up was regarding the role of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati as a Kisan and a caste leader. Some of those interviewed held that being a leader of the BhumiHar caste association, Swami Sahajanand never launched a struggle for abolition of landlordism as most of the landlords were BhumiHaras. This view also finds expression in an article. There were also those who violently contested this view. Such controversies pose limitations on this very important source of information. Where documentary evidence is scant interviews with participants have filled an important gap.

17 Girish Mishra and Braj Kumar Pandey, "Socio-Economic Roots of Casteism in Bihar", in N. L. Gupta, ed., Transition from Capitalism to Socialism and Other Essays (New Delhi, August 1974).
Limitations

There are a number of limitations imposed by the non-availability of data. First, the very manner in which the permanent settlement was effected posed the problem of lack of information. At the time of the settlement there was no evidence or records of the rights of the tenants. Only the rights of the Zamindars were secured with certainty. The earlier attempts of the Officers of the Company failed. The other safeguards for tenants visualised in the scheme failed to be effective. The institution of Patwari failed to work independently of the landlords and, therefore, those records are not reliable. No definite and comprehensive information regarding the rights of tenants could be obtained to judge the veracity of the respective claims made by the landlords and the tenants during the period of actual struggle. The Survey and Settlement reports do fill an important gap. They are, however, inadequate.

Second, the documents, resolutions and reports, relevant to the period, of the non-official organizations like the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha and All India Kisan Sabha are not maintained at one place. A lot of the material is available with the individuals. Even here the material is not continuous, and there are important gaps.

18 Ranjit Guha, A Rule of Property for Bengal (Lahaye, 1973); and Girish Mishra, op. cit.

The leadership of Bihar peasant struggle is since deceased, particularly the important leaders like Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, Yadunandan Sharma, Karyanand Sharma and Rahul Sankritayan. Their personal papers have not been maintained and are lost by and large. Of course, their written works are of tremendous help. In the absence of these leaders the process of checking and cross-checking of information collected on the basis of personal interviews pose serious problems. If the issue of controversy inspires passions (as in the case mentioned above) it really becomes very difficult to arrive at a sober opinion.

The present study has been undertaken under the above mentioned constraints.