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## **Fifty Years of the Peasant Movement**

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THE ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA, THE PREMIER ORGANISATION of the Indian peasantry is celebrating its Golden Jubilee this year. It already held the Golden Jubilee Session in the third week of May.

Today, the Kisan Sabha is the biggest organisation of the peasantry with 8.4 million members, and if the membership of the All India Agricultural Workers Union is also included, the figure goes up to 9.5 million. Not a day passes without some struggle or movement being conducted somewhere in India. In many areas of the country the Kisan Sabha symbolises the aspirations and hopes of the multitude of poor and the collective will of the peasantry. The organisation is growing everywhere, and more and more peasants are joining it and taking part in its activities and struggle.

Fifty years ago, when it was founded in a Conference in Lucknow, the AIKS was a small organisation, and very few people heard about its formation. During these intervening years many heroic battles have been fought and won. The battles which were lost, also left their imprint on the organisation. Thus a great deal of blood has been shed, and many martyrs have given their lives fighting for the democratic rights of the peasants. Many comrades have sacrificed the better part of their youth in the underground or prison.

The entire history of the past fifty years has been a long history of severe repression against the organisation and its workers. But none of the sacrifices have gone waste. Each ounce of blood, energy and time given has strengthened the body and the soul of the organisation. The Kisan Sabha which we see today, with its large membership and an elaborate network of units reaching down to the village level, is a product of this history. It was founded to play a distinct role in the history of the country. For an assessment of the

role played by the organised peasant movement in the last fifty years under the leadership of the Communists, it is essential to understand the actions of the peasantry, first under the feudal leadership and the later under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, and the class limitations imposed on the peasant movements by these leadership.

## **PEASANT STRUGGLES IN NINETEENTH CENTURY**

Though the AIKS was formally established on April 13, 1936, it had not been built in a day. The peasant movements in different parts of the country had existed for the past century. Many of the peasant struggles fought in those days were spontaneous in character, lacked proper direction and in many cases were badly organised. Still they played a role in raising the consciousness of the peasantry to fight against oppression and in defence of their rights.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed uninterrupted anti-colonial activity on the part of the peasantry, and tribesmen led by feudal lords who had lost their privileges. The feudal lords in the Northern *Sarkars* had been strongly resisting British domination ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1807 the whole Delhi regime took up arms; in 1814 at Tuppen of Muneer (near Varanasi). Rajput peasants secured the abolition of the sale of land by public auction of a large village community to a stranger. In 1817 the peasants of Orissa led by local feudal lords, rose up in protest against the introduction of taxation of their rent free service lands. Poona district witnessed the uprising of the peasantry from 1826 to 1829 when the authorities were obliged to cede to them holding subject to low revenue charges. In 1830-31 British troops were sent to suppress a peasant uprising in Bedsore district of Mysore State against the tax increase. In 1835-37 there was an uprising in Gumsur in Madras Presidency. In 1842 an uprising flared up in Sagar. In 1846-47 the peasants in Karnal rose up in revolt. In 1848 Rohillas in Nagpur took up arms. In 1844 in the Kolhapur and Santavadi State bordering Bombay Presidency, there was a large-scale revolt in protest against the British decisions increasing the land revenue to pay the princes' tribute. The peasants of Khandeth in Bombay Presidency rose up in protest against the land settlement which resulted in the increase of land tax.

There were also innumerable uprisings of tribals in this period – of

the Bhils in 1818-1831 and Kolis in 1824 in Bombay Presidency, unrest in Kutch in 1815 and 1832 and revolt in Kittur in 1824-1829. In 1820, there was an uprising of the Mers in Rajputana, and of the Hos tribe in Chote Nagpur in 1831-32.

In 1846 the Khonds rose up in Orissa and 1855 witnessed the Santhal revolt in Bihar.

There was also unrest in the Indian towns usually resulting from the introduction of new taxes, which generally took the form of hartals.

These heroic struggles culminated in the First War of Independence of 1857, when the leadership of the movement was taken up by Sepoys. Explaining the significance of this rebellion Karl Marx wrote:

“Before this there had been mutinies in the Indian Army, but the present revolt is distinguished by characteristic and fatal features. It is the first time that Sepoy regiments have murdered their European Officers: that Mussulmans and Hindus, renouncing their mutual antipathies, have combined against their common master; that disturbances beginnings with the Hindus, have actually ended in placing on the throne of Delhi a Mohammedan Emperor’, That the mutiny has not been confined to a few localities and lastly, that the revolt in the Anglo-Indian army has coincided with a general disaffection exhibited against English supremacy on the part of the great Asiatic nations, the revolt of the Bengal army being, beyond doubt, intimately connected with the Persian and Chinese wars.”

The uprisings were confined to northern and central India. The peasants after driving out the local representative of the colonial administration set up armed detachments for their own defence and defended the village communal lands, which had been expropriated by the British conquerors. The population in the town played an active part in the uprising. They not only liberated a number of large cities like Aligarh, Bareilly, Lucknow, Kanpur and Allahabad but set up a government in each of them.

This popular uprising of 1857-59 was defeated for various reasons the most important being that although the fighting forces had consisted of peasants and artisans, they were led by the feudal

nobility, who showed themselves incapable of leading the national liberation struggle. They could not evolve a united strategy and a united command. The centres of uprising which emerged spontaneously, acted independently of each other. Moreover, the feudal lords did not take any measure to alleviate the lot of the peasantry. When the British Government made concessions to the feudal lords, they dissociated themselves from the uprising. The Sepoy commanders were not able to wage a complex war.

After the British succeeded in suppressing the uprising, they had to learn a lesson and change their tactics. The East India Company was liquidated and India became a colony of the British government. They also made a lot of concessions to the feudal lords thereby winning their sympathy and support. In spite of all this the uprisings left their imprint on the national liberation struggle, which developed in subsequent years.

Then followed the period of intensified exploitation of the country. This exploitation of India as a source of cheap raw materials as well as a commodity market for British manufactures constituted the main form of colonial loot. It helped to promote the development of commodity-money relations in both the towns and villages, and this growth of simple commodity production in a period of formation helped in the further penetration of trading and usury capital into the spheres of agriculture and handicrafts.

## **BOURGEOIS LEADERSHIP TAKES OVER**

Discontentment among the people, especially the peasantry, was rapidly growing; the defeat of Czarism by Japan gave encouragement to the feelings national liberation; and the Russian Revolution of 1905 also made its own impact on the country. The immediate issue which galvanised the atmosphere, was the partition of Bengal which aroused universal indignation throughout the land, leading to the movement for boycott of foreign goods which began on August 7, 1905. Simultaneously, the Punjab was witnessing great unrest among the peasantry on the question of the Colonisation Act. A powerful movement developed against it, led by Lajpat Rai, Ajit Singh and Banke Dayal.

These movements in which the peasantry participated in large numbers, were accompanied by trade union struggles in Bombay

Calcutta and other places. The revolutionaries who at this time took to the path of armed struggles against imperialism helped radicalise the politics of those days. To meet the situation the British rulers resorted to repressive measures; heavy sentences, deportation banning of meetings, detention without trial, etc. But this did not deter the people from their path. The Government had to announce a review of the partition of Bengal and withdrew the Punjab Colonisation Act. These developments and their outcome signified that a new class had come onto the scene, i.e., the bourgeoisie. It was providing leadership to the movement and was able to get concessions.

The outbreak of the imperialist world war in 1914 raised hopes among the people for the liberation of all colonial peoples and Indian revolutionaries abroad, who were mostly peasants, took the initiative to organise a revolt in the Indian Army. They formed the Gadhar Party with headquarters in San Francisco. They raised the slogan of complete independence and sent hundreds of revolutionaries to India to organise a revolt against the British. Many of them were caught and hanged, large numbers had to undergo life imprisonment, and face tortures and deprivation. Although they did not succeed in their mission their impact in arousing the peasantry during the war period should not be underestimated. An overwhelming majority of them later on joined the Kisan sabha when it was formed.

By contrast with the activities and goal of these revolutionaries, the Indian National Congress for its part had expressed its loyalty to the imperialist war in all its sessions held in this period. Even on 1918 at the close of the war at its session in Delhi the Congress Party passed a resolution expressing loyalty to the King and conveying its congratulations at the successful termination of the war.

## **POST-WAR UPSURGE AND THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION**

By December 1917 news of October Revolution in Russia was beginning to filter through to India and the not-too-efficient censorship allowed it to appear in the Press. Many articles appeared and demobilised soldiers returning from the fronts also brought the news. It had a tremendous impact on the Indian people, who welcomed the success of the Russian Revolution with understandable enthusiasm in particular, its slogan of the right to self-determination

of a nation. At the Calcutta Session of the Congress in December 1917, Annie Besant spoke of the Russian Revolutions as one of the factors that fundamentally changed the previously existing situation in India.

As the war neared its end, having cost almost ten million lives, the Indian soldiers began returning home, by sea, on foot, through the endless expanses of the Himalayan passes, covered with blinding white snow. But these were no longer the timid downtrodden peasants and craftsmen who had cowered before the arrogant Englishman, or a conceited zamindar. They had forgotten the smell of freshly turned earth; their hands were no longer accustomed to the plough. Instead they brought with them the smell of fire bayonet, and slash with a sabre. They had acquired a sense of their own worth and dignity and came to believe in their own strength. In their native villages and hamlets they found their holdings ruined or falling into decay, and the land, which had once been fruitful, dried and barren. Clenching their teeth in anger they listened to heart-rending stories, broken by sobs, of the death from hunger of their children, wives and aged parents. They had come to understand that their trouble was caused by the greed and cruelty of the colonialists and landlords. It was no by chance that India was in the throes of an unprecedented upsurge in the post-war period.

Lenin had taken note of the situation. Addressing the Second Congress of the Communist Organisations of the East on November 22, 1919, he stated:

“In this respect you are confronted with a task which has not previously confronted Communists of the world; relying upon the general theory and practice of Communism, you must adapt yourself to specific conditions such as do not exist in European countries, you must be able to apply that theory and practice to conditions in which the bulk of the population are peasants and in which the task is to wage a struggle against medieval survivals and not against capitalism...” (emphasis added)

On February 17, 1920, the Indian Revolutionary Associations headed by émigrés like Raja Mohinder Pratap, Maulana Mohammed Barkatullah and Maulana Obeidullah Sindhi, in an Assembly held in Kabul, adopted the following resolution addressed to Lenin.

“Indian revolutionaries express their deep gratitude and their admiration of the great struggle carried on by Soviet Russia for the liberation of all oppressed classes and peoples, and especially for the liberation of India. Great thanks to Soviet Russia for her having heard the cries of agony from the 315,000,000 people suffering under the yoke of imperialism. This mass meeting accepts with joy the hand of friendship and help extended to oppressed India.”

In reply to this message Lenin wrote:

“I am glad to hear that the principles of self-determination and the liberation of oppressed nations from exploitation by foreign and native capitalists, proclaimed by the workers’ and Peasants’ Republic, have met with such a ready response among progressive Indians, who are waging a heroic fight for freedom. The working masses of Russia following with unflinching attention the awakening of the Indian workers and peasants. The organisations and discipline of the working people and their perseverance and solidarity with the working people of the world are an earnest of ultimate success. We welcome the close alliance of Muslim and non-Muslim elements. We sincerely want to see this alliance extended to all the toilers of the East. Only when the Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Persian and Turkish workers and peasants join hands and march together in the common cause of liberation – only then will decisive victory over the exploiters be ensured. Long lives a free Asia.” (Collected Works, Vol. 31, p. 138)

## **PEASANTRY IN ACTION FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION**

Lenin’s prediction proved to be true. The peasantry in India was drawn into action in a big way. With the starting of the non-cooperation movement the peasantry in various parts of the country became very active. Though not strictly a part of the non-cooperation movement, at the same time, their activities cannot be separated from the movement for national liberation. Peasant struggles became linked up with the struggle for independence since it was the imperialist system of exploitation, which was the main protector of the feudal exploitation in the countryside.

In northern India the Gurudwara Reforms Movement, which started

with the Nankana Massacre, brought the vast Sikh peasant masses into action against British rule, thus making it a part of the liberation movement. In UP had begun the Eka Movement of tenants who were fighting against the extortions and oppression of the landlords. In the south there was the Moplah Rebellion in Malabar (Kerala) an uprising tenants against the oppression of *jenmies* (landlord).

The main slogan of the Gurudwara Reforms Movement was the liberation of Gurudwaras from the control of Mahants who had the patronage of the British imperialists. Bringing the Sikh peasantry into the national mainstream, it soon took the form of an anti-imperialist movement. The Eka Movement was also widespread and militant. It raised the demands of fixed rents, receipts for payments, stoppage of *beggar* for the landlord, free use of water from ponds, and the freedom to graze cattle in the jungles. It was a revolt of the tenants against the unbearable oppression of the landlord.

The Moplah rebellion, again essentially an uprising of the tenants in Malabar, began on August 20 1921. The tenants were Muslims while the *jenmies* were Hindus. The main targets of the attack of the rebellion were the police, military, landlords and moneylenders. The police and military suppressed the rebellion with brutal violence in which 3,266 Moplahs were killed.

The period also witnessed big working class actions- in the textile and jute Mills in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras; in the North Western and Eastern Railway, the coal-fields of Jharia, the P & T Department of Bombay; plantations of Assam; tramways of Calcutta, etc.

## **C.I. NOTES DEVELOPMENT**

The Fourth Congress of the communist International took note of the situation and drew attention to mobilising the peasantry in the struggle for independence. The Congress emphasised that "*the revolutionary movement in the colonial countries would achieve no success unless it gets the support of the peasant masses. The agrarian programme of the Communist in the counties of the East demands the complete elimination of feudalism and all its survivals and aims at drawing in the peasant masses in the struggle for national liberation.*"



*The thesis on the Eastern question adopted at the Congress stated that the Communists must see to it that the national revolutionary parties adopt a radical agrarian programme.*

*Dealing with the agrarian question and describing the situation of the peasantry in the colonial countries the Congress came to the conclusion that*

*“Only the agrarian revolution aiming at the expropriation of large land owners can rouse the vast peasant masses destined to have a decisive influence in the struggle against imperialism. The fear of agrarian watchwords on the part of the bourgeois nationalists (India, Persia and Egypt) is evidence of the close ties existing between the native bourgeoisie and the large feudal and feudal bourgeois landowners and their ideological political dependence on the latter. The hesitation and wavering of this class must be used by the revolutionary elements for systematic criticism and exposure of the lack of resolution of the bourgeois leaders of the national movement. It is precisely this lack of resolutions that hinders the organisations of the toiling masses as is proved by the bankruptcy of the tactics of non-cooperation in India.*

*“The revolutionary movement in the backward countries of the East cannot be successful unless it is based on the action of the masses of the peasantry. For the reason the revolutionary parties in all Eastern countries must define their agrarian programme which should demand the complete abolition of feudalism and its survivals, expressed in the forms of large landownership and farming.*

*“In order that the peasant masses may be drawn into active participation in the struggle for national liberation, it is necessary to proclaim the radical reform of the bourgeois nationalist parties to the greatest extent, possible to adopt this revolutionary agrarian programme.” (Documents of the History of the C.I. vol. Pp. 550).*

## **CHAURI CHAURA INCIDENT:**

### **BETRAYAL BY BOURGEOIS LEADERSHIP**

When in 1922 Mahatma Gandhi launched a mass civil disobedience movement in one district of Bardoli, it gave encouragement to the

people in the rest of the country. A few days later in a little village. Chauri Chaura in UP angry peasants stoned and burnt the village police station, and the unpopular village constabulary was burnt in the flames. This unrest of the peasantry crucial to the Indian Revolution was not to the liking of Mahatma Gandhi. He lost no time in announcing the withdrawal of the movement, disappointing even congress leaders who were then in prison. The reality of the situation was that the reformist control of the movement was weakening.

This concern was reflected in the message telegraphed by the Viceroy to London on February 9, only three days before the withdrawal of the movement:

“The lower classes in the towns have been seriously affected by the non-cooperation movement.... In certain areas the peasantry have been affected, particularly in parts of the Assam Valley, United Provinces, Bihar Orissa and Bengal. As regards the Punjab, the Akali agitation.... has penetrated to the rural Sikhs. A large proportion of the Mohammedan population throughout the country are embittered and sullen... grave possibilities. The government of India are prepared for disorder of more formidable nature than has in the past occurred and do not seek to minimise in any way the fact the great anxiety is caused by the situation.”

The resolution adopted by congress Working Committee on the withdrawal of the movement, on February 12, 1922, makes clear as daylight that Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress leadership were afraid of the agrarian revolution and opposed to it. They were not interested in drawing in the working class and peasantry as classes, into the movement. After deploring the activities of the peasants of Chauri Chuara as inhuman, the working committee resolution instructed the local congress committee “to advise the cultivators to pay land revenue and other taxes due to the government and to suspend every other activity of an offensive character.”

In order that there should be no ambiguity on this question, it further stated.

“The working committee advises congress workers and organisations to inform the *ryots* (peasants) that withholding of rent payment to the zamindars (landlords) is contrary to the Congress Resolutions

and injurious to the best interests of the country.”

The resolution then ended by coming out in open defence of the landlords as against the peasants:

“The working committee assures the Zamindars that the Congress movement is in no way intended to attack their legal rights, and that even where the ryots have grievances, the Committee desires that redress be sought by mutual consultation and arbitration.”

It is clear from the above resolution that the question here was not one of violence or non-violence. It was instead a clear question of defence of the class interests of the landlords-the exploiters against the exploited. Gandhi and the dominant leadership of the Congress called off the movement because it was beginning to threaten those propertied class interests with which they themselves were closely linked.

Thus the class limitations of the bourgeois stood revealed: though it wanted the peasantry to be drawn into the national liberation struggle, did not want the peasantry to come into action as a class. And thus began the struggle between the two approaches, the approaches of the working class, which had by now emerged on the scene, and that of the bourgeoisie.

## **WORKING CLASS LEADERSHIP**

By contrast March 1923, the Executive Committee of the Communist Internation issued a manifesto on the Chauri Chaura sentences where 172 peasants had been given death sentences, asking for protest meetings and a movement for their release.

The peasantry had already had the experience of betrayal by the landlords during the struggles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Chauri Chaura struggle they were able to see the betrayal by the bourgeoisie. The Communists and the Left in the Congress learnt from the experience of these two betrayals by the two classes, who were considered their natural leaders, and decided to organise the peasantry independently, as a class, though working in cooperation

with other anti-imperialist classes and strata including the bourgeoisie.

In May 1923, the formation of the Labour and Kisan Party was announced and its action programme for the peasants included protection against eviction, 20 per cent reduction on all economic rent in ryotwari settlement areas, eventual abolition of Permanent settlement abolition of *beggar*, protection against oppression of zamindars, abolition of salami, free irrigation, abolition of dowry, etc. loans in seed or money without interest, etc.

This was the beginning of the preparations for a platform of action for the peasantry. Subsequently, peasant organisations also came into existence in various places. A Note of Satya Bakta, Secretary, Indian Communist Party dated June 18, 1925, states:

“In order to organise the Indian peasants, labourers and other working people and with a view to bettering their condition, the Indian Communist Party resolves to adopt the following programme:

“In these days *there are several kisan sabhas (peasants’ unions) in UP and other provinces.* They are striving after some reforms. But as long as landlordism exists in India, peasants cannot become happy and prosperous. That they should pay something to the Government is after all acceptable. But there is no reason why middlemen or commission agents should be allowed to exist. But until the victory of the proletarian class, landlordism cannot be abolished entirely.

“Even now the government and leaders of our country, if they really desire the betterment of the peasants can improve the present conditions to a great extent. In our opinion peasants should be entitled to pay their rent direct to the Government who may pay to the landlord their share. They should not be allowed to have any other connection with or control over the peasants. In this way while landlords will loss nothing of their legitimate income, they and especially their servants will no longer be able to rob peasants in the shape of unlawful taxes and gratuities. For this purpose the Indian Communist Party will agitate among the peasants and will *urge upon all new and old kisan sabhas to work in the suggested manner.*”

It is clear from this that kisan sabhas had already come into existence in many parts of the country. Subsequently the Labour

Swaraj Party was formed in Bengal, on November 1, 1925. It was called the Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress. Its programme for the peasantry stated:

Land taxes to be reduced to a fixed maximum and fixity of the interest rate of the Imperial Bank on arrears of rents; fixity of tenure, no ejection cessation of illegal and extra taxation, right of transference, right of felling trees, sinking wells, excavating tanks and erecting pucca structure; fixed term of fishery rights in *jolkars*; fixity of maximum rate of interest to be levied by moneylenders; agricultural cooperative banks to be established to provide credit to the peasants and to free them from the clutches of moneylenders and speculating traders; agricultural machinery to be sold or lent to the cultivators on easy terms through the cooperative banks.

This organisation was a forerunner of the Workers and Peasants Party. On February 6-7, 1926 the Second Session of the All Bengal Kisan Conference was held in Krishna Nagar (Nadia District). It decided to organise a peasants and Workers Party called the Bengal Peasants and Workers Party. While the basic demand mentioned that the ultimate ownership of land would vest in a self-contained autonomous village community, it put forward the following immediate demands:

- 1) Fixity of rates in relation to the rents payable by the tenants: the interest charged on arrears of rent to be equal to the rate of interest charged by the Imperial Bank.
- 2) Cultivator's undivided ownership be recognised on the land he tills.
- 3) Permanency of tenure in land (which the cultivator tills), banning of evictions.
- 4) Stopping of all unjust and illegal cesses.
- 5) Right freely to transfer the land to another without payment of *salami*.
- 6) Right to cut the trees, to dig wells and cut canals and build a house on his land without paying any *salami*.
- 7) Fixing conditions for catching fish in the ponds on the land.
- 8) The highest rate of interest to be charged by the mahajan to be fixed at a rate not more than 12 per cent.

9) Establishing cooperative agricultural banks to give credit to the peasant and thus to release him from the grip of the greedy and professional moneylender.

10) Machinery needed for cultivation etc. to be sold outright to the peasant or to be given to him on rent for use, and the price of the same or the rent amount thereof to be recovered from peasant in easy instalments.

11) To make arrangement for the wholesale sale of jute or other commercial crops so that a just profits rate is guaranteed to the peasant.

It was on February 24, 1927 that the Workers And Peasants Party was formed in Bombay. It resolved that “a political party of workers and peasant be established to voice the demands of these classes within the National Congress, to promote the organisation of trade unions to wrest them from their alien control, to advance the organisation of peasants on the basis of their economic and social requirements and to present a determined and pertinent opposition to the government and thus secure the social, economic and political emancipation of these classes.”

In formulating the economic demands it proposed:

12) The abolition of indirect taxation and the introduction of graded income tax on all income exceeding Rs 250 per mensem.

13) Nationalisation of land wherein all cultivable land will be leased by Government to cultivator.

14) Nationalisation of means of production, distribution and exchange.

15) Rent of land holding not to be excessive.

16) Establishment by the government of State-aided cooperative banks controlled by local organisations for the provision of credit to peasants, at a rate of interest not exceeding seven per cent.

In a programme formulated for the All India Congress Committee it proposed:

“70 per cent of the population which is engaged in agriculture is to be organised into peasant societies, by district, taluk, and village, on

the lines of the village panchayat, based on universal suffrage aiming to secure control of the economic life of the rural areas. Through the agricultural cooperative banks to be established by the State for the provision of cheap credit to the peasants, whereby they will be enabled to free themselves from the grip of Saukars, and to purchase modern machinery and other equipment; limitation by law of the rate of interest at seven per cent per annum; limitation of rent to 10 per cent of the total produce to be paid direct to the State, and bringing into cultivation by State aid cultivable land by present unused.

But the bourgeoisie leadership of the Congress was not prepared to take up the peasant demands.

When a proposal was mooted before the Subjects committee of the Congress that it should side with peasants and workers when a conflict arose between them and the zamindars and capitalists. Pandit Motilal Nehru, the then President of the Congress, contended in reply, that the Congress was not the Socialist or Communist Party. The reason for making this statement was that the Congress was by no means ready to stand up for those who produce all things by their labour.

J M Sengupta, leader of the Bengal Swarajists, made this even clearer. He said that the party includes many zamindars and that without their help so many men of their party would certainly never be able to enter the Councils. So they could by no means help the peasants, going against those zamindars. They tried to cover this defence of the interest of the landlords under the pretext that no class struggle existed in the countryside, and the congress represented the whole country.

It is not accidental that certain juridical measures of reforms in tenancy rights were introduced in India not at the initiative of the bourgeoisie, but by imperialism often in the face of nationalist bourgeois opposition.

## **POPULARISATION OF THE AGRARIAN PROGRAMME**

The formation of the All India Workers and Peasants Party and the subsequent historic Meerut Trial, helped in popularising the agrarian

programme among the Indian masses. The Meerut Trial went on for more than four years. The persons involved in the trial in their statements advocated the programme of the Communists in relation to the working class, peasantry and other toiling sections of the Indian population, along with their unflinching opposition to imperialist rule in the country.

This was the period when the economic crisis of the 30s had engulfed the world. India was the worst hit during this crisis and in 1931 the Central Banking Enquiry Committee registered the general conviction that

“Indebtedness leads ultimately to the transfer of land holdings from the agricultural class to the non-agricultural money-lenders leading to the creation of the landless proletariat with a reduced economic status. The result is said to be loss of agricultural efficiency as the moneylenders sub-let at a rate which leaves the cultivators with a reduced incentive.” (Enquiry Committee Report. P. 59)

The 1931 Census report reached the conclusion that

“It is likely that a concentration of the land in the hands of the non-cultivating owners is taking place.” (*Census of India, 1931, Vol. 1*)

Similarly, the extent of the collapse in prices of agricultural commodities was such, that whereas in 1928-29 the value of agricultural crops, taken at an average harvest price, was about Rs 1034 crore, in 1933-34 it was only Rs 473 crore a fall of 55 per cent.

In the United Provinces, the number of tenants abandoning their land because they could not pay rent, reached as high as 71 440 in 1931. The burden of debt doubled. Peasants were groaning under their heavy indebtedness, their lands were passing into the hands of moneylenders and they were being forced to live the life of paupers.

The peasant organisations emerging in various States now had a clear-cut programme not only for immediate relief but also directed against the system of landlordism. The peasants had realised the necessity of organising themselves as a class which was numerically



not only strong but also the worst exploited under the triple attack of the imperialists landlords and moneylenders and traders. The Indian National Congress was desirous of mobilising them in the struggle for independence since without them it was not possible to bring pressure to bear on the imperialists but it did not want the peasantry to emerge as a class conscious of its rights and determined to put an end to the rule of the landlords.

The Congress started the Civil Disobedience movement but its 11-point charter of demands did not contain any demands of the working class and peasantry against the capitalists and the landlords.

The resolution of the Karachi Session of the Congress where fundamental rights were mentioned in relation to the peasant demands it did not stipulate more than a substantial reduction of land revenue and rent, and total exemption only for the necessary period in the case of uneconomic holdings. There was no reference to abolition of landlordism or even the annulment of at least a portion of the rural debt. It was clear that that Indian National Congress did not want to rouse the peasantry against feudal oppression.

Gandhi's hopes for a compromise were shattered at the Round Table Conference and he had again to continue the movement, which lasted up to 1934, drawing into its fold huge masses. Once again the movement was withdrawn without achieving its aim, and Gandhi withdrew from the Congress exercising his influence from outside.

## **FORMATION OF ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA**

The Communist Party was banned in 1934 but continued to exercise its influence on the working class and on the Left in the Congress. The ideas of Socialism were becoming very popular, and left elements in the Congress, becoming disillusioned with Gandhi formed the Congress Socialist Party, in order to give the Congress a Left orientation. Coming to realise that the vast masses of the peasantry could be brought into the struggle for independence only by taking up the anti-feudal struggle and their immediate demands they were also realising the necessity of organisation the peasantry as a class. They had already come to the conclusion that the struggle for real

political freedom could not be separated from the struggle of the peasantry for an end to landlordism and for radical restructuring of rural society. The Communists were already trying to develop class organisations and had popularised the ideas of independent class organisations of the working class peasants and other sections of the toiling people. Thus it was the Left Congressmen, Congress Socialists and Communists who took the initiative in organising the All India Kisan Sabha.

The First Session was held in 1936, Lucknow to coincide with the holding of the Session of the Indian National Congress. The idea was to project the kisan movement as a part of the national movement though maintaining its separate identity as a class organisation.

### **BROAD BASED ORGANISATION**

The following list of the names of some of the participants in the first All India Kisan Sabha Session is revealing : EMS Namboodiripad, Dinkar Methhta, Kamal Sarkar, Sohan Singh Josh, Lal Bahadur Shastri, K D Malaviya, Mohan Lal Gautam, B Sampooranand, Jayaprakash Narain, Swami Sahajanand, NabaKrishna Choudhury, Harekrishna Mahtab, N G ranga, Indulal Yajnik, R K Khadilkar, Bishnuram Medhi and Sarat Sinha. Many of them became prominent national and state-level personalities in subsequent years. It also suggests how broad-based the Kisan Sabha was from the very beginning and how it tried to attract people of varying political views to join together in defence of the democratic rights of the kisans.

The formation of the AIKS was preceded by a meeting in Meerut in January 1936, where the necessary preparations were made. A clear decision was taken to launch the organisation with a broad-based programme and membership to link it closely with the national movement for independence and to view the fight against imperialism as an integral part of the fight against the feudal social order since the former patronised and provided state support to the latter.

Today with the benefit of hindsight one is struck by the simplicity and directness with which the very first session set out its tasks in the main resolution. To quote:

“The objective of the Kisan movement is to secure complete freedom from economic exploitation and the achievement of full economic and political power for the peasants and workers and all the other exploited classes.

“The main task of the kisan movement shall be the organisation of peasants to fight for their immediate political and economic demands in order to prepare them for their emancipation from every form of exploitation.

“The kisan movement stands for the achievements of ultimate economic and political power for the producing masses through its active participation in the national struggle for winning complete independence.”

It then indicted the zamindari system, “supported by the British government in India”, as “iniquitous unjust, burdensome, and oppressive to the kisans”, and declared that “all such system of landlordism shall be abolished and all the rights over such lands be vested in the cultivators.”

This was the essence of what the kisan movement stood for at the time of the launching of the AIKS. The other issues covered by resolutions included questions of rent, irrigation rates and prices of inputs, prices of marketed agricultural products, indebtedness, forced labour and illegal exactions from the tenants by the landlords and the distribution of landlords land to the landless poor peasants as also the vesting of waste land and grazing land in the village level panchayats. The AIKS also demanded minimum wages for the regulating their unionisation.

Any one reading those resolutions will immediately notice that many of the issues raised by the conference of the AIKS in its first session have remained unresolved till today.

## **PART OF THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT**

The Bombay session of the Central Kisan Sabha Council (CKC) held in August 1936 further elaborated many of the points raised in the founding session. It categorically stated that, since the kisans constituted more than four-fifths of the population, “no political or

economic programme which has the audacity to ignore their needs and demands can by any stretch of imagination, be labelled as a national programme”, and called upon the Indian National Congress to make “the solution of the problems of the peasantry the chief plank of its political and economic policy.” At the same time the CKC felt the need for a political movement, which draws “its main strength and inspiration from the peasantry.”

These two struggles --- the kisan movement and the national movement were seen as “inter-dependent, the strength of the one adding to the other.”

The CKC meeting also strongly emphasised on the need for peasant unity. The AIKS was an “expression of the awakening of the peasantry”, and should represent not only the ryots the tenants and the landless labourers but also all sections of cultivating peasantry --- “in other words, it represents, and speaks and fights for those who live by cultivation of the soil. All these different strata among the kisans will have to combine and fight for removal of all the letters imposed by British imperialism and it’s allies the landlords.”

## **FUNDAMENTAL AND MINIMUM DEMANDS**

The Bombay Session made a separate listing of “fundamental demands” and “minimum demands”. The former included the demands for abolishing intermediary tenures, replacement of existing land revenues by graduated land tax, cancellation of old debts and allocation of land to landless and poor peasants for cooperative farming.

The minimum demands included the cancellation of the rent and revenue arrears; exemption of uneconomic holdings from land revenue; reduction of rent revenue and water rates by half; immediate grant of right permanent cultivation to tenants cultivating land held by zamindars, talukdars, etc., rent remission for these tenants; graduated taxation of agricultural income abolition and penalisation of all feudal and customary dues, forced labour and illegal exactions; a five year moratorium on debts freedom from arrest and imprisonment for debtors and also immunity from attachment for small holdings; licensing for money-lenders; arrangement of credit from the state cooperative and land mortgage

banks over a long period of 40 years to five per cent interest lowering the freight on agriculture goods introduction of one paise postcards; abolition of indirect taxes on salt kerosene sugar, tobacco molasses, etc., stabilisation of agricultural prices minimum wages legislation to recognise collective action of the peasants insurance for cattle fire and health adult franchise and establishment of village panchayats for managing civic affairs and communal land among others.

These show the wide range of issues covered by the AIKS in its campaign which catered to the needs and aspirations of various sections of the peasantry.

From its very beginning the AIKS was alert and reacted to major national and international events. While striving for the country's independence the AIKS had a distinct concept of independence, which was outlined in various resolutions where along with political independence, socio economic independence was emphasised. To quote from the resolution of the Bombay CKC meeting in 1936 again it stated:

“The Kisan must fight for national socio-economic independence Indian a democratic of Britain must be transformed into a free progressive democratic India of the masses.”

There was no room for exploitation and oppression in the concept of the free Indian that the AIKS held. It was never solely concerned with narrow peasant issues and defined the interests of the peasantry in broad terms.

## **FOR WORKERS PEASANT ALLIANCE**

One of the cornerstones of its policies had always been the unity of the peasants with the workers. In its Gaya Session in 1939 the AIKS talked about the objective of building “a democratic State of the Indian people leading ultimately to the realisation of Kisan --- Mazdoor Raj”. Even earlier in its second session at Faizpur the Presidential Address stated:

“It is the sacred duty of every of our kisans to fraternise with the

workers in the village and in the town... There is much to be achieved by both workers and peasants by common effort for their mutual benefit.”

The adoption of the red flag with hammer and sickle, signifying the unity of these two classes, was strongly defended by the General Secretary Swami Sahajananda at the Comilla Session in 1938 on the grounds aspirations of the exploited and the oppressed.”

Its commitment to anti-imperialism was reflected in the resolutions passed in the earlier years condemning the Italian attack on Ethiopia and the Japanese attack on China, and supporting World War began it doggedly opposed the war efforts championed the cause of world peace and later when the fascist forces of Hitler attacked the USSR it firmly came out with the slogan of defeating the fascist hordes to save humanity from fascist enslavement. It mobilised popular opinion against fascism.

On national issues too, the AIKS conferences not only passed resolutions against the colonial rulers but also fought for a determined struggle against British rule and State organised oppression. In fact, many of the leaders of the AIKS were themselves the stalwarts in the national movement and spent many years in British prisons.

## **AGAINST HEAVY ODDS**

The formation of the AIKS was greeted with hostility from many sides. Both the Hindu and Muslim vested interests joined hands against the AIKS and tried their best to disrupt the working of the organisation by terrorising the peasants and using communal propaganda. The British government alarmed by its growing hold on the peasantry intensified its repression by arresting key leaders, from time to time and forcing many others to go underground. A report of the intelligence Bureau of the British colonial government in India said in 1937:

“The Communist leaders are developing a strangle hold upon any future agrarian movement as well as inspiring this with their special methods and outlook of which by no means the least is the belief in

mass violence and the violent overthrow of British rule.”

The right wing of the Congress party led by Sardar Ballavbhai Patel and Dr Rajendra Prasad fought against the collective affiliation of the Kisan Sabha to the Indian National Congress and strongly opposed the separate existence of the kisan organisation had produced such an atmosphere of violence in the countryside that an explosion may occur at any moment.”

In many provinces the Congress leaders took an openly pro-landlord view and used their power in governments formed in the late thirties to suppress the agitation of the peasants. In Bihar they made an alliance with the landlord lobby to fight off AIKS activists.

In its formative years therefore the AIKS had to grow fighting against such heavy odds. But it grew nevertheless. The very formation of the organisations inspired peasants all over the country to take up immediate issues and fight. As opposed to the path taken by the Indian National Congress, which compromised with landlords and other vested interests, and spoke of non-violent resistance, the AIKS rallied the peasants to stand up to the attacks by the armed thugs of the landlords and the police. The Gaya Session of the AIKS in 1939 reported that “the past year has witnessed a phenomenal awakening and growth of the organised strength of the kisans in India.

## **FORMATION OF MINISTRIES**

To keep the mass movement under control, congress decided to implement the Constitution of 1935 and formed the ministries. Congress policy was again put to the test and again it was found that it stood by the side of the landlords against the tenant and the landless. But the organised peasant movement supported by the Congress Left was proving capable of exercising influence, and the Congress Ministries were being forced to give some concessions.

However, the Congress never defined the meaning and importance of national freedom other than as freedom from British rule. It was the Communists, Socialists and the Congress Left, which were trying to propagate the understanding that freedom from foreign rule could

have real meaning only if it was followed by agrarian revolution and completion of the bourgeois democratic tasks.

The masses were getting disillusioned and impatient, and wanted the Congress leadership to launch a final assault on British rule. The leadership wanted to restrain them and use them for pressure and bargaining. The peasant movement thus came again into conflict with the bourgeois leadership of the Congress, especially on the issue of struggle against feudal and semi-feudal relations. The limitations of the bourgeois leadership were starkly revealed and it could be clearly seen that it did not want to come into conflict with the landlord class.

The leadership was prepared to accept and support certain demands of the peasantry, which were directed against the Government, but was not prepared to take up the basic issue of abolition of landlordism. In fact it was afraid of agrarian revolution. Therefore, the kisan sabhas, while supporting the struggle for national independence had not only to strengthen the independent class organisations of the peasantry but also to forge unity with the working class, the most revolutionary class for our society for completion of the agrarian revolution.

## **KISAN SABHA AND THE WAR**

As compared to the Indian National Congress, which lent its support to the war efforts of British imperialism the AIKS came out in firm opposition to the war. Here again there were two different class approaches-one supporting the British imperialist power the other expressing its firm opposition to imperialist war being fought with the sole purpose of redividing the world for the continuation of colonial exploitation.

The AIKS gave a call for struggle against British rule and their Indian lackeys, and launched a no rent, no tax movement. The AIKS was naturally subjected to unprecedented police repression and its open functioning became extremely difficult. Its officers in Bengal and other States were raided and put under lock and key, and its main functionaries were either arrested or forced to go underground.



However, with the attack on the Soviet Union by the German Fascists in June 1914 the Sabha raised the slogan of defeating fascism to save humanity from fascist enslavement. It took the view that on the victory over fascism depended the survival of the first Socialist State as well as the independence of countries including ours. The AIKS therefore considered it the sacred duty of the organisation to support the cause of defence of Socialist State and defeat of fascism.

While the task of fighting fascism was given the priority it deserved the AIKS in its Session in 1914 reminded its members that “the struggle for India’s freedom should not be slackened even temporarily.” The CKC meeting at Nagpur in 1942 demanded transfer of power to a national Government and a declaration recognising India’s right to freedom. It identified the British colonial regime, which was working “in complete isolation from the millions on the land” as the greatest obstacle to the mobilisation of India’s millions in the defence of their country and the successful persecution of the war.”

When on August 9, 1942 Gandhi and other leaders of the Congress were arrested leading to violent protests in many parts of the country, the AIKS expressed its full support to the Congress demand for transfer of power, demanded the released of Gandhi and other national leaders, and condemned the “indiscriminate firing and repression that have been let loose by the Government on the people.”

## **POST-WAR UPSURGE**

The military defeat of the fascist powers headed by Hitlerite Germany and the decisive role played by the Soviet Union altered the alignment of class forces on a world arena in favour of Socialism. This also resulted in the general weakening of imperialism on a world scale. Inspired by this powerful national liberation struggle swept throughout the countries of Asia.

India the largest country of the British Empire witnessed a mass revolutionary upheaval against British rule-peasant revolts of which the heroic armed struggle of the Telengana peasantry was the most important general strikes of workers, student strikes and the states people mass struggle developed on an unprecedented scale. The

demonstrations for the release of INA personnel took the form of a country – wide revolt against British rule. This wave of protest reached a climax with the uprising of the Royal Indian Navy in February 1946 in Bombay, Karachi and Madras. The Union Jack was removed from the ship's masts and the Congress and Muslim League flags hoisted instead. In Bombay the naval ratings carried the Red Flag of the Communist Party along with the other two. The slogans the navy men raised showed the political nature of the action-*Jai Hind, Inquilab Zindabad, Hindu-Muslim Unity. Release INA and other political prisoners. Down with British Imperialism, Accept our demands.*

Rajani Palme Dutt, in his outstanding and seminal work, *India Today*, not only captured the spirit of the time, but gave a keen analytical insight into the significance of the event and the class reactions it engendered:

“The Naval rising and popular struggle in the February days in Bombay revealed with inescapable clearness the alignment of forces in the explosive situation developing in India in the beginning of 1946. It showed on the one hand the height of the movement the courage and determination of the people and the overwhelming mass support for Hindu-Muslims unity and Congress-League unity. It showed that the movement had reached to the armed forces and that therefore the basis of British rule was no longer secure. But it showed on the other hand the unreadiness and disunity of the existing national leadership and their consequent inability to lead the national struggle.

“But now when the masses were really in movement when Hindu-Muslim unity was being realised and practised when the armed forces had united with the civilian population in the common national movement and when the real struggle for freedom had opened the gates of British rule, the attitude of the upper leadership of the national movement revealed a marked change. The upper class leadership of the Congress and Muslim league found themselves in opposition to the mass movement and aligned with British imperialism as the representative of law and order against the people. A whole series of statements and denunciations were issued condemning the “violence” not of the imperialist authorities whose firing slaughtered hundreds in three days but of the unarmed people who had been the objects of military firing Vallabhai Patel issued a statement in which he declared that the Naval ratings ought not to

have taken to arms and that he endorsed remarks of the Commander-in-Chief that there ought to be discipline in the Navy" (*India Today*. P. 583)

The RIN uprising however was followed by militant struggles in the countryside at the head of which, at the many places stood the Communist Party. And by 1946 the AIKS through militant struggles in Punjab, UP, Bihar, Kerala, Maharashtra and Andhra had drawn the attention of all on the question of abolition of landlordism. The slogan of agrarian revolutions was brought onto the agenda in the armed resistance of the peasants of Vayalar and Punnapra in the State of Travancore, the militant Tebhaga struggle of the peasants of Bengal the struggle of the Warli peasants in Maharashtra and the struggle of the Tripura peasants.

Crowning all these struggles was the epochal struggle of the peasantry of Telengana, which has no parallel in the history of the country where peasants fought with arms in hands from 1946-1951 for three years, 1948-51 against the armies of the Indian State.

In the course of the movement guerrilla squads were formed from the village to the district level, which met the terror unleashed by the *Razakars*, and in many instances scared away the landlords in the area. At the peak of the struggle almost 3000 villages, with roughly 30 lakh of the people and an area of 16,000 square miles were liberated and brought under the administration of *Gram Raj*. In this area guerrilla squads of 2000 and a people's militia of 10,000 guarded the villages and about 10 lakh acres of land were distributed among the landless. Among the reforms introduced by the revolutionary leadership was the slashing of usurious interests banning of forced labour and fixation of a minimum wage. This was the real alternative developing to bourgeois landlord rule in the countryside and its significance lay in the fact that if it had been allowed to develop a qualitative change would have come about in the situation combining agrarian revolution with the national liberation movement and the course of history would have been entirely different.

## **BOURGEOIS PARTIES SETTLE WITH IMPERIALISTS**

Telengana showed the direction the mass movement could have

taken if it had not been checked. The completion of the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution had come onto the political agenda with the agrarian revolution as its crux. But though the 'workers and peasants' alliance was being forged and the Communist Party was at the head of some of these struggle it was not in a position to assume the leadership of the national movement, which still remained in the hands of bourgeoisie.

Afraid of this mass upsurge the bourgeoisie realised that if the struggle against imperialism developed into a general revolt the leadership of the mass movement would slip away from its hands. British imperialism also saw that it would no longer be possible to continue their rule. Under these circumstances the leaders of the National Congress and the Muslim League reached a settlement with the British imperialists.

With the outmoded agrarian relations not being radically changed and a path of capitalist development in compromise with imperialism and feudalism being pursued by the ruling Congress party, it was but natural that the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution remained incomplete.

Had the bourgeoisie not compromised at this stage, the situation would have gone out of its control. It would have lost its leadership and the working class would have been in a position to lead the movement and complete the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution. By now our country would have also taken the road to Socialism as has been done by China, Vietnam, North Korea and other Asian countries.

## **EXISTENCE OF CASTE AND COMMUNAL PROBLEM**

The existence of the communal and caste problems and threat of divisive forces with which we are faced today also originates from the policies pursued by the Congress party in the pre-independent and post-independent period-its policy of alliance with feudalism instead liquidating it and the weakness of the organised peasant movement in leading the agrarian revolution in alliance with the working class the position which it started acquiring during the post-war period but was not able to bring to a decisive turning point.

Historical experience shows that it is only in countries where feudal and semi feudal relations have been put an end to and the agrarian revolution has been led to successful completion that the problem of caste or communalism can be overcome. It is only in the countries where the national liberation struggle was led by bourgeoisie but was not led to its completion that this problem not only remains but gets aggravated to be used by the ruling classes to divert the discontent of the masses and to disrupt the unity of the democratic movement. Experience has also shown that in the areas where the peasant movement was strong in spite of efforts made by the British imperialists riots could not be organised and the unity forged during the struggle between the Hindu-Muslim peasants stood as the guarantee of communal peace. The Kisan Sabha never allowed any scope for communalism and casteism on its platform. It not only maintained its secular character but exposed the communal ideology and fought against this virus during the riots in Punjab, Bihar and Bengal. In pursuing this policy some of its leaders and cadre laid down their lives fighting against the dark forces of communalism.

Thus, though the leadership of the national liberation movement was in the hands of the bourgeoisie, alternative political forces represented by the trade unions and kisan and other militant organisations had started emerging as a powerful force at the end of the war to offer a real challenge to the bourgeoisie. This became clear with the results of the first general election in free India. Wherever there had been strong peasant organisations, the combination of Left and other Opposition forces won a magnificent victory, becoming the main opposition in Parliament, the recognised Opposition in four State Assemblies-West Bengal, Hyderabad, Madras and Travancore-Cochin. The struggle for an alternative leadership continues to this day.

## **CONGRESS AGRARIAN POLICIES**

In the post-independent period the bourgeoisie continued its alliance with the landlords and the balance sheet of bourgeois agrarian policy is explained in the Programme of the CPI(M), in para 34.

“In no field is the utter failure of the bourgeois-landlord government’s policies so nakedly revealed as in the case of the agrarian question. Nearly two decades of Congress rule has proved beyond any shadow of doubt that the aim and direction of its

agrarian policies is not to smash the feudal and semi-feudal fetters on our land relations, and thus liberate the peasantry from age-old bondage, but to transform the feudal landlords into capitalist landlords and develop a stratum of rich peasants. They want to depend upon the landlord and rich peasant section to produce the surplus of agricultural products to meet the requirements of capitalist development. They also want to make these sections the main political base of the ruling class in the countryside.”

Although these measures did not bring the desired result of making the tiller of the soil the owner of the land it made certain changes in the agrarian relations. Under the impact of the agrarian movement intermediary tenures like *zaminidaris*, *jagirs*, *imams*, etc., which prevailed over quite a large area of the country were abolished in the early 50s and more than 20 million tenants were brought into direct relation with the State. It was these occupancy tenants who directly benefited from the land reforms to become owners of the land they tilled. These rich and middle peasants were no longer interested in radical land reforms.

This has been shown by the subsequent developments also.

The overall result has been that even after four decades of independence the pro-landlord, anti-peasant policies of the Government have resulted in the further deepening of the agrarian crisis, which manifests itself in growing landlessness increase in disparities both inter-regional and inter-sectional in the same region, an extremely low level of consumption of food-grains despite increasing production and burgeoning stocks held by the Government growing poverty and unemployment despite all the poverty alleviation schemes and growing indebtedness which finds partial reflection in the growth of overdues in institutional credit supplied to the agricultural sector and so on.

In spite of two rounds of Land Ceiling legislations in the 1950s and 1970s only 7.2 million acres have been declared surplus out of which 5.6 million acres have been taken over and 4.4 million acres actually distributed. This is about seven per cent of the surplus estimated i.e., 63 million acres by the Mahalanobis Committee after the first round of ceiling laws were enacted and one fifth of the surplus estimated on the basis of data made available by the NSS 26<sup>th</sup> Round.

Even if we take into consideration the 1981 Agricultural Census land concentration continues. As compared to three per cent land holders holding 10 acres and above and operating a total of 26 per cent of the land in 1976-77 in 1981-82, 2.4 per cent of land holders held 22.8 per cent of the land. It is also estimated by the Planning Commission that even now if a 20-acre ceiling is imposed and all loopholes in ceiling laws plugged about 23 million acres of land can be made available for distribution. But the Seventh Plan makes no mention of amending the ceiling laws nor about breaking the land monopoly. And typically the Central Government took more than five years to give Presidential assent to the West Bengal Land Reforms Legislation, which seeks only to plug certain loopholes.

### **PEASANT MOVEMENT AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

In the first six years of the post independence period the peasant movement again had to face severe repression at the hands of the Government. Afraid of the tempo of the growing revolutionary movement, it unleashed repression making the functioning of various units impossible. The All India Kisan Sabha was not able to hold any session till April 1953. But in spite of this the Kisan Sabha was busy organising the resistance of the peasantry especially on the question of evictions, and militant fights were put up in many States. Subsequently various Congress Government were forced to take measures of land reforms such as ceiling legislations security of tenure and rent reduction, consolidation of holdings, etc., but all failed to fulfil the declared objectives. On the other hand the period witnessed a large-scale eviction offensive throwing millions of tenants into the ranks of agricultural workers.

In the late fifties the Kisan Sabha fought many struggles on the issues of land fair prices for peasants produce, debt relief, in defence of the rights of tribal people and on the issue of the burden of heavy taxation. The most important of these struggles was the heroic struggle of the Punjab peasantry against the imposition of the betterment levy tax in the beginning of 1959. This was the most important struggle fought under the flag of the Kisan Sabha after the epoch-making Telengana struggle. The peasants defied firings lathi-charges, beating and all types of repression. The all in peasant unity forged during the struggle was unparalleled, when peasant united irrespective of their political affiliations. The movement ultimately

forced the Government to withdraw the tax amounting to Rs. 136 crore.

The agrarian crisis further aggravated in the 60s. By the mid-1960 stagnation in agriculture and the consequent food crisis worsened. The bourgeois-landlord classes began losing their hold over the mass of the peasantry with the result that in the 1967 elections the Congress monopoly of power was broken in eight States with West Bengal and Kerala giving victory to the Left and democratic force among which the CPI(M) played an important role. Powerful peasant struggle took place in different States on different issues. In Kerala and West Bengal these struggles were most widespread and became intimately connected with political issues.

The United Front Government of West Bengal and Kerala made a big impact on the masses, not only in those States but also in the rest of the country. When the Central Government dismissed these governments hundreds of thousands of peasants actually joined the struggle for democracy in West Bengal combining this with the struggle for defending heir land and crops.

Mid-term elections gave a bigger victory to the United Front in West Bengal and the peasant movement attained wider sweep. Millions of peasants all over the State unleashed an unprecedented struggle with the backing of the United Front Government, for recovering benami land for possession and distribution of surplus lands, for loans in kind and for checking hoarding and black-marketing. In this period more than three lakh acres of land were located taken over and distributed among the landless through village level committees. Many peasants lost their lives in the battles fought on this issue, but it gave a big impetus to the kisan movement and the AIKS spread to all districts.

These struggles achieved important gains and helped in raising the political consciousness of the peasantry. It was because of this that the Kisan Sabha was able to face the semi-fascist terror of 1917 to 1977, fight back the repression and defend their interests though working in semi-legal conditions.

In Kerala, the peasants conducted a statewide movement for agrarian legislation and debt relief legislation for the rights on



Government lands against threat of central intervention. As a result of the campaign one lakhs pattas were distributed to erstwhile-unauthorised occupants of the land. The ceiling was revised downwards and made family-based many exemptions were withdrawn and hutment dwellers were given rights on land on which they lived. Tens of thousands of agricultural labourers conducted powerful and successful struggle for better wages and living conditions.

The discontent found powerful expression in other parts of Indian also. In Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Tripura, etc., widespread struggles took place for occupation of forest or government lands and against eviction from these lands. In Punjab and UP widespread agitations took place on the question of sugarcane prices. Struggle took place against increased taxation on the question of food and relief rent reduction and against unjust levies. Militant struggles of agricultural labourers took place in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

This period also witnessed two splits in the AIKS one from the Right and other from the Left. While they did a lot of harm to the Kisan Sabha, it not only survived these attacks but advanced further. At the same time it also failed to properly understand the changes in the agrarian structure and work out the appropriate tasks on that basis. By 1978-79 it was able to give a new orientation to its policy, which led to its big advance. Membership of the Kisan Sabha, which had never gone beyond ten lakhs till 1968-69 after 1978-79 jumped by millions and now stands at 84 lakhs.

## **PRESENT PHASE OF STRUGGLE**

In this connection the question may be asked why has the bourgeoisie not been able to implement radical land reforms when the latter would serve its objective interests? The breaking of the feudal and semi-feudal relations would naturally lead to the expansion of the internal market, which would be helpful for expanding industries. The answer lies in the fact that in spite of the objective interests of the bourgeoisie, the latter does not want the forces of agrarian revolution to be unleashed which, in unity with the working class would pose a threat to its class rule. It was from this angle that it forged an alliance with the landlords and now tries to solve its contradiction through pressure and bargaining. All conflicts

and contradictions, which arise between the landlords and the bourgeoisie whether on the question of remunerative prices for agricultural produce cheap agricultural inputs and machinery or on the question of taxation the push and pull between the two remains but the alliance continues.

It is in this context that the Kisan pursues its alternative line, the line of completing the agrarian revolution, in unity with the working class, and continues to lead the mass struggle of the peasantry in this direction. Since independence the situation has changed. Although land monopoly remains a lot of changes have taken place in the agrarian structure, which require a changed approach in building peasant unity and in leading the agrarian revolution to success.

Land to the tiller and total abolition of landlordism have been the basic slogans of the Kisan Sabha since its inception. What bearing do the changes in agrarian sector have on these basic slogans? Before examining these changes, let me state here at the outset that the seizure and distribution of the land of the landlords still remains the central slogan for the kisan sabha to propagate among the peasantry and other democratic classes. Without the victory of this slogan there cannot be any solution to rural poverty unemployment, a fast development of a balanced economy in the country and so on.

But the correlation of class forces, which existed at the time when the Kisan Sabha inscribed these basic aims in its programme are not the same as exist today. It is necessary for us to understand this change since it has great relevance to the chalking out of our immediate slogans and actions.

The land reforms which the Congress Government set about to introduce after independence were not directed to end landlordism and give land to the tiller though this was the pledge the Congress had made to the peasantry during the freedom struggle. These land reforms had only very limited objectives, the main one of which was to reform, not abolish the old type of feudal landlordism by converting the absentee feudal landlords into capitalist landlords personally supervising cultivation in large farms with farms servants and hired agricultural workers. This is the new type of landlord who combines in himself elements of both feudalism and capitalism.

Another objective was to create a stratum of rich peasants. These two sections were to constitute the political base of the ruling party in the rural areas. They were also to produce the surplus food grains necessary for the Government to feed the urban people as well as to produce the raw materials for industry. With thousands of crores of rupees from the public exchequer pumped into agriculture these sections have been helped to adopt modern methods of farming.

Here, we should warn against one tendency. Earlier there was a tendency to altogether ignore the penetration of capitalism into agriculture. Now a reverse tendency is raising its head, which considers that feudal landlordism, and other semi-feudal relations have almost totally been abolished. This is wrong. The extent of capitalism in agriculture varies from State to State and even from region to region inside a State. Here a concrete study of the situation in each area is necessary.

We have also to note the phenomenon of the monetisation of the entire agrarian economy. Today, it is not only those who have a surplus who are taking their produce to the market, even the poor peasant immediately after the harvest for various reasons, sells his produce in the market and later buys even his food grains requirement from the market. It is only if this phenomenon is properly understood can we mount a struggle against the big traders and monopolists.

Even after the abolition of statutory landlordism like zamindari, jagirdari, etc. concentration of land in the hands of big landlords has not been appreciably reduced. Even today 2.5 per cent of top landlords possess 22.8 per cent of the land. The real concentration would be even more if benami transactions are included.

Congress land reforms have also resulted in the eviction of millions of tenants who have either joined the ranks of landless agricultural labourers or become tenants-at-will without any rights or protection. Only a section of the earlier tenants could buy a portion of the land on which they were working either by paying compensation in instalments or outright purchase at lower than market rates.

So, after the Congress land reforms the situation we find in the rural area is that three per cent of big owners have in their possession

about one third of the cultivated land.

Another ten per cent consists of rich peasants owning roughly five to ten acres of wet, or ten to twenty acres of dry land, who contribute manual labour and employ a considerable number of farm servants and agricultural workers.

Another 15 per cent consists of middle peasants owning two to five acres of wet, or ten to twelve acres of dry land. They and their families work on the land but also hire labour in busy seasons.

Twenty per cent of the rural households are poor peasants possessing one or two acres of wet, or two to five acres of dry land. Apart from working on their own land, they have to frequently hire themselves out to earn a living.

The last 50 per cent are those who own no land at all, earn their livelihood mainly by hiring themselves out as wage workers or are engaged in handicrafts, villages' services, etc.

Of course, it has to be borne in mind that this categorisation will vary from State to State and region to region.

What has to be noted is that unlike in the pre-Independence days, 25 per cent of peasants, rich and middle peasants are not moved any longer by the slogan of seizure of landlords' land and its distribution. At the other end of the scale the 70 per cent of landless and poor peasants are not conscious and organised enough to go into action today for the seizure of landlords' lands; even when they are moved into action, it is only for Government waste land, cultivable forest land etc. Regarding even surplus land above the ceiling which the landlords are keeping illegally, the struggle as in Kerala or recently in Andhra Pradesh, could not advance beyond the stage of locating such surplus land and exposing the Government's claims. Only under the United Front Government in West Bengal in 1969, could some of the surplus land be occupied. This we will have to take into consideration when we work out our immediate tasks.

But what we have to note is that the Congress Party, which ruled the

country for thirty-five years, while failing to end landlordism, land concentration and growing landlessness has successfully disrupted the pre-independence peasant unity. It is true that unity cantered around the rich and middle peasants, which today we are striving to build peasant unity cantering around the agricultural workers and poor peasants. The ruling class party, whether Congress or Janata, also used its control peasantry and the disruption of their unity. The two-year of the cooperatives rural banks etc., to perpetuate the division in the peasantry and the disruption of their unity. The two years of the Janata Party government showed that its policies in regard to land reforms were no different from those of the Congress. In fact, some of the Janata State Governments were proposing to reverse even the Congress legislation to favour the landlords.

Taking note of these structural changes and their multifarious consequences we have to come to the conclusions that the slogan of complete abolition of landlordism and distribution of land of the landless and land-poor continues to be the central slogan of the agrarian revolution a slogan which we have to continue to propagate. But it is a slogan on which we cannot go into action today in most parts of the country.

While continuing to propagate this as the central slogans, while continuing struggles for surplus land, benami lands, waste land etc. the kisan sabha will have to take up for immediate action such issues as the question of wages of agricultural workers, house sites, rent-reduction, 75 per cent of the produce to the sharecroppers evictions, abolition or scaling down of rural indebtedness, remunerative price for agricultural produce, cheap credit, reduction of burdens and heavy levies like water charges, electricity rates, etc., landlord-goonda attacks with the connivance or direct help from the police the social oppression of harijans, corruption in administration etc.,. These are issues which affect all sections of the peasantry-poor, middle, rich, and they can all be drawn into the movement on them. All these currents have to be brought together to build the maximum unity of the peasantry cantering around the agricultural workers and poor peasants to isolate the small stratum of landlords.

All this will, course depend on how successfully we organise the agricultural workers and poor peasants and bring them into action not only on their own specific demands but also on the general demands of the peasantry as a whole, and how far we are able to draw other sections of the peasantry into movements on issues

affecting them, and on the general demands of the peasantry. There is no doubt that the middle and rich peasants can be drawn into movement on such issues. It is our task to see that while other sections of the peasantry support the agricultural workers in their struggles, the latter in turn extend support to movements on the demands of the peasantry, thus paving the way for building peasant unity.

Our earlier analyses of the agrarian policies of the Congress Governments have shown them to be anti-peasants, serving the interests of the landlords and the bourgeoisie. As compared to that the Left Front Government of West Bengal and Tripura, and the Left Democratic government of Kerala (for a brief period) with the limit power they enjoy under the constitution, backed by the organised peasant movement, have tried to alleviate the conditions of the peasantry. In West Bengal, land has been distributed to 12 lakh families 13 lakh sharecroppers have been registered and more than two lakh of them receive credit from banks in a year, more than two lakhs have been given rights over homesteads, minimum wages for agricultural workers are regularly revised. Small farmers have been exempted from land revenue and debt relief has been given.

In Tripura more than one-lakh beneficiaries have been given land, debt relief has been given to poor peasants and artisans, while minimum wages have been fixed and sharecroppers recorded. In Kerala under the Left Democratic Front Government holdings under four acres were exempted from plantation tax, rent arrears for holdings up to 2.5 acres cancelled and subsidies given on inputs and exemptions on gifted land taken away.

This would not have been possible without the strength of the peasant organisation because without the active intervention of the Kisan Sabha, the bureaucracy would never have allowed the implementation of measures, which would have remained on paper as pious declarations. It is because of these alternative policies that the Kisan Sabha has grown so strong in West Bengal with almost 33 per cent of the adult peasant population including agricultural workers joining the organisation.

In other states also the kisan sabha has grown through struggles. Kisan Sabha units in different States have taken up different issues depending on the concrete situation in each state. In Bihar the

question of eviction of sharecroppers has remained very acute and struggle fought over it; in some, states against rise in taxation and on remunerative prices in most of the states. The first half of 80s witnessed a tremendous upsurge among the peasantry where even the Congress base was drawn into struggles. This shows the tremendous possibilities for building the peasants movement.

## **GLORIOUS HISTORY OF 50 YEARS**

The Kisan Sabha has grown into a powerful organisation with 84 lakh members today and if we include agricultural workers the membership surpasses 95 lakh. The 50 years' record of the All India Kisan Sabha is a record of glorious history. It played an important role in arousing the peasantry in the movement for national freedom. The All India Kisan Sabha was able to unite various sections of the toiling peasantry in the struggle against feudalism, big traders and monopolists. In its long history of 50 years it has had to face severe repression. Even after independence the bourgeois-landlord Government launched severe repression against it but the movement not only survived, it grew in influence and strength. It has emerged as a premier organisation of the peasantry.

But it should not be forgotten that the peasants organised in the AIKS and other peasant organisations under their influence are only a very small percentage of the peasant population in the country. Vast areas in our country especially in the Hindi-speaking region are untouched by the activities of the organised kisan movement. It is imperative that this grave weakness is overcome as quickly as possible.

The Golden Jubilee Year of the AIKS should become the starting point of the biggest activity to expand the Kisan Sabha to all the areas, to spread the message of the agrarian revolution in every part of the country. The Kisan Sabha's aim should be to see that there is no revenue circle in the country without an AIKS unit. Seventy per cent of our population lives in the rural areas and is engaged in agriculture handicrafts and other rural trades. Without organising the bulk of them neither their genuine interests can be defended nor can there be any successful agrarian revolution. The guarantee of the success is a powerful Kisan Sabha as the mass organisation of the peasantry championing also the cause of agricultural workers and forging unity with them and building the unity of the peasantry with the working class. Let the Golden Jubilee Year see the beginning of the efforts to fulfil this historic task.

The Golden Jubilee of the AIKS comes at a time when the national situation is bleak and the international situation is menacing because of the imperialist threat of nuclear war. Only by strengthening the organisation manifold as speedily as possible can the AIKS mobilise the peasantry to intervene in the national situation and strengthen the struggle for peace against the imperialist warmongers.