

1936-86

Golden Jubilee Series No. 8

WHAT THE AIKS STANDS FOR

HARKISHAN SINGH SURJEET

May 1986

Price : Rs. 3.00

ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA

WHAT THE AIKS STANDS FOR

Harkishan Singh Surjeet

TODAY ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA IS A LARGE ORGANISATION with lakhs of members, and with units in every state of the country. Not a day passes without some struggle or movement being conducted somewhere in India. Even the enemies of Kisan Sabha cannot ignore us any more. In many areas of the country Kisan Sabha symbolises the aspirations and hopes of the multitude of poor and the collective will of the united peasantry. Our organisation is growing everywhere, and more and more peasants are joining it and taking part in its activities and struggles.

Yet, fifty years ago, when it was founded in a Conference in Lucknow, 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. Those battles which were lost also left their imprint on the organisation. A great deal of blood had been shed, and many martyrs gave their lives fighting for the democratic rights of the peasants. Many comrades gave the best part of their youth in the underground or prison. The history of the past fifty years has also been a long history of severe repression against the organisation and its workers. None of the sacrifices has 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 memberships and an elaborate network of units reaching up to the village level, is a product of history, and had been founded to play a distinct role in the history of the country.

STRUGGLES IN THE BEGINNING OF THE BRITISH RULE

There is also a beginning to the beginning. Though A.I.K.S. was formally established on April 13, 1936, like all large and important organisations, it was not built in a day. To understand its formation we should go further back to the period immediately following the imposition of the British colonial rule in 1757. Many of the peasant struggles fought in those days were spontaneous in character, lacked proper direction, and in many cases, were badly organised. In several instances these movements were under religious or personalised influences and were based on local and immediate issues. But no matter how these movements originated, once started these got transformed soon into battles against landlordism and British imperial authority. Whether you talk of the *sanyasi-fakir* rebellion and Chuar rebellion of eastern India during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, or the revolts of the santhals and indigo-cultivators in the 1850s, or the Deccan and Pabna riots of the 1870s, or the Wahabi-Farazi and Mopla rebellions, this was the common experience. Those participating in the struggles fought bravely and, in many cases, won important demands. However, the initiative unleashed by these movements could not be capitalised on for developing bigger and more intensive struggles, as their organisation was loose.

IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The tempo of political activities increased in the early part of the present century—with the 1905-1911 movement against partition of Bengal, and the trade union struggles in Bombay, Calcutta and other places, and the movements conducted in Punjab against colonisation act. The revolutionaries who took to the path of armed struggle against imperialism, also helped radicalise the politics of those days. But the biggest impact was made by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, which inspired the toiling masses, including the peasantry and their leaders. The post-war years witnessed widespread unrest against the British Raj, wherein the peasantry also played its role. Whether it was the non-cooperation movement led by Gandhi or the armed resistance as in the case of Chauri Chaura, the peasantry did not remain a silent spectator, and participated in a big way.

in those anti-imperialist struggles, in many cases as a part of the national movement under the leadership of the Congress.

The worldwide economic depression in the capitalist countries which took place in the thirties, also made its impact on the peasantry in India. The price of raw jute fell, the unemployment of the agricultural labourers mounted, and the tenants (both the fixed-rent payers and the sharecroppers) for the first time became exposed to the threat of eviction. Land sales by the poor peasants became a regular feature of life in the countryside. As the attack of the peasantry intensified impoverishment and insecurity multiplied. This was also the period of growing disillusionment with non-violent civil disobedience movements being fought under the banner of the Congress.

It was against this background that Kisan Sabha organisations sprang up in different parts of the country. The main objective of these organisations was to save the peasantry from evictions, rent-enhancement, forced labour and other forms of exploitation, and to see that they were accorded a proper legal status.

The experience of these state level organisations demonstrated to them the need for an all-India organisation of the peasants with a broader policy perspective and programme. It was realised that, fighting in isolation, the peasants in India would never be able to stand up to the attack unleashed by the colonial regime and their feudal associates.

In its formation the left-wing Congressmen played an important role. The compromising role of the National Congress leadership towards the landlords disillusioned most of the kisan leaders like Swami Sahajananda, who began to realise the necessity of setting up an independent kisan organisation. In 1934, the Congress Socialist Party was formed which, while showing inclinations towards scientific socialism, decided to operate within the Congress. They came 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 a radical restructuring of the rural society. Communists were already trying to develop class organisations. It was the left-Congressmen, Congress Socialists and Communists who took initiative in organising the All India Kishan Sabha. The

fact that the first session was held in Lucknow was not accidental. This coincided with the holding of the session of the Indian National Congress at Lucknow. The idea was to project the kisan movement as a part of the national movement, though maintaining its separate existence as a class organisation.

BROAD-BASED ORGANISATION

The following list of the names of some of the participants to the first AIKS session is revealing: E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Dinkar Mehta, Kamal Sarkar, Sohan Singh Josh, Lal Bahadur Shastri, K.D. Malviya, Mohanlal Gautam, B. Sampooranand, Jayprakash 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 or state-level personalities in the subsequent years. It also suggests how broad-based Kisan Sabha had been 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 AIKS was preceded by a meeting in Meerut in January 1936, where the necessary preparations were made, and a clear decision was taken to launch the organisation with a broad-based programme and membership, to link it closely with 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 the hindsight, one is struck by the simplicity and directness with which the very first session set out its tasks in the main resolution. It said:

“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 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 achievement of

ultimate economic and political power for the producing masses through its active participation in the national struggle for winning complete independence.”

It then indicated the zamindari system “supported by the British Government in India” as “inequitable, unjust, burdensome, and oppressive to the kisans”, and declared that “all such systems 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 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 to the village level panchayats. The AIKS also demanded minimum wages for the agricultural labourers and a central legislation legalising and regulating their unionisation.

Any one reading those resolutions would immediately notice that many of the issues raised by the conferences of AIKS in the early days have remained unresolved till today.

A PART OF THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The Bombay session of CKC, held in August 1936, further elaborated many of the points raised in the founding session of AIKS. It categorically stated that, since the kisans constitute more than four-fifth 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, 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. 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 fetters imposed by British imperialism and its allies, the landlords."

FUNDAMENTAL & MINIMUM DEMANDS

The Bombay session made 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 rent and revenue arrears; exemption of un-economic holdings from land revenue; reduction of rent, revenue and water rates by half; immediate grant of right of 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; five year moratorium on debts; freedom from arrest and imprisonment for the debtors and also immunity from attachment for the small holdings; licensing for money-lenders; arrangement of credit from state, cooperative and land mortgage banks over a long period of 40 years at 5 per cent interest; lowering the freight on agricultural goods; introduction of one-paisa post cards; 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 AIKS in its campaigns, which catered to the needs and aspirations of various sections of the peasantry.

From its very beginning AIKS was alert and reacted to major national and international events. While striving for the

country's independence, 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 the resolution of Bombay CKC meeting in 1936 again, it stated that the kisans “must fight for national, socio-economic independence. India, a dependency 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 free India that AIKS held. It was never solely concerned with narrow peasant issues, and defined the interests of the peasantry in broad terms.

FOR WORKER—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, 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, it was stated in the Presidential Address that “it is the sacred duty of every one 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 ground that the red flag symbolised “international solidarity and 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 the Republican side in the Spanish civil war. When the second world war began, it doggedly opposed the war efforts, championed the cause of world peace, and later, when the fascist forces of Hitler attacked USSR, it firmly came out with the slogan of defeating the fascist hordes to save the humanity from fascist enslavement, and mobilised popular opinion against fascism. On national issues too, AIKS conferences not only passed resolutions against colonial rulers but

fought for determined struggle against British rule and state-organised oppression. In fact, many of the leaders of AIKS were themselves stalwarts in the national movement and had spent many years in British prison.

IN THE THICK OF ODDS

The formation of AIKS was greeted with hostility from many sides. Both the Hindu and Muslim vested interests joined hands against 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 a report in 1937 : "the Communist leaders are developing a stranglehold 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 with the Indian National Congress, and strongly opposed the separate existence of a kisan organisation. AIKS was criticised on the ground that its campaigns 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 the 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 AIKS had to grow fighting against such heavy odds. But it grew, nevertheless. The very formation of the organisation 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 the 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 AIKS in 1939 reported that "the past year has witnessed a phenomenal awakening and growth of organised strength of the kisan in India".

GLORIOUS RECORD OF STRUGGLES

From 1936 to 1945 many struggles were fought. The biggest was the Bakasht movement in Monghyr, where the peasants fought against eviction from land under their occupation. In Bengal the peasants fought against high irrigation water rates. In Surma valley, Assam, the fight was against eviction and forced labour, and in Punjab also against evictions and settlement operations. Similar struggles took place in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Andhra and Malabar also. All these struggles also influenced the membership of AIKS, which increased to five lakhs in 1938.

During the early years of the second world war, AIKS leadership was subjected to unprecedented police repression, and open functioning became extremely difficult. Its offices in Bengal and many other states were raided and put under lock, and its main functionaries were forced to go underground. AIKS gave a call for struggle against the British rulers and their Indian lackeys, and launched a no-rent, no-tax movement. However, with the attack on the Soviet Union by the German fascists in June 1941, it raised the slogan of defeating fascism to save the 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 the defence of the Socialist state and defeat of fascism.

While the tasks of fighting fascism was given the priority it deserved, AIKS, in its session in 1941, 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 prosecution of war". When on August 9, 1942, Gandhi and other leaders of the Congress were arrested, which led to violent protest in many parts of the country, AIKS expressed its full support for the Congress demand for transfer of power, demanded the release of Gandhi and other national leaders, and condemned the "indiscriminate firings and repression that have been let loose by the government on the people".

A major event of 'the war years, prompted by the policies pursued by the government, was the famine of 1943, which took a heavy toll of 35 lakhs, mostly in Bengal. The warnings issued by AIKS on the eve of the famine, in 1942, "that the situation in rural areas has become alarmingly grave", and its proposals for cheap grain shops, price control and food councils at various levels with popular representatives, were not heeded. After the famine broke out, AIKS took an active part in organising relief, and issued an appeal to the peasants saying that it was "their patriotic duty to come forward and do their utmost to relieve their misery". A major effort of the organisation was to prevent the transfer of land from the poor and their relegation to the state of landlessness,

By the time of the AIKS session at Netrakona in 1945, the membership had reached eight lakhs, compared to 2.76 lakhs in 1942 ; membership having registered a sharp fall between 1939 and 1942 due to police repression.

ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

The two years between the end of the second world war and the independence of the country were marked by waves of peasant struggles, some of the mightiest ever fought in the country. These struggles on land were taking place alongside major struggles in the towns and industrial settlements, the hallmark being the movement in support of the INA prisoners, and of the mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy which shook the British colonial rule. The struggles of the Indochinese people against French colonialism and of the Chinese people for liberation, as well as the liberation movements in other countries, acted as source of inspiration for the people of our country engaged in the final assault against British imperialism.

In most cases the struggle was mainly against forced labour, eviction and rent-enhancement, and in some cases also on the issue of canal water rates. In Bihar the Bakhsht movement of the late thirties was renewed and spread to many new areas. In Punjab the fight was for rent reduction and against remodelling of moghas and increase in water rates; mogha being the channel outlets for irrigation. In Pepsu it was for conferring ownership rights to occupancy tenants and abolition of Ala Milkiat. In Kerala the tenants fought for a proper share of the crop against the *Jenmi*. In Andhra the fight was against eviction from *lanka* land. In Utter Pradesh the movement fought the attempted eviction of *bataidars* from *sir* land. In Alleppey, Kerala, the movement against the tyranny of landlords led to massive police repression killing about hundred activists in Punnapra-Vayalar. The Warlis, tribals of Thane district in Maharashtra, fought against forced labour and illegal exactions of the landlords, under the leadership of AIKS, and within a year achieved complete abolition of forced labour and wage increase.

The Tebhaga movement was focussed on one of the major demands of the sharecroppers—that they should be given two-thirds of the crop, that the landlord should not make undue deductions from the produce before sharing, and that the sharing should be done in the barn of the sharecropper, and not in the courtyard of the landlord. The movement, fought in 1946-47, instructed the sharecroppers to take the crop to their own barns, and to fight the landlords' musclemen when they came to seize the same. The demands articulated by the movement obtained support from the report of the Floud Commission of 1940, which criticised the share going to the landlord as rent being too high, and commented that this system "overrides the principle that the tiller of the soil should have security and protection from rack-renting".

One major aspect of the movement was that it was being fought at a time when the life in Calcutta and elsewhere was being torn by communal strife leading to the death of thousands. In Tebhaga, both Hindu and Muslim sharecroppers fought shoulder to shoulder, irrespective of whether the landlord was a Hindu or a Muslim. Another interesting aspect was the

participation of other sections, particularly of the agricultural labourers and poor peasants, in the movement. Though their own sectional interests were not affected, they could perceive that the scope of the movement went beyond the immediate demands of the sharecroppers. Thirdly, as the movement progressed, the slogans became broader and more militant; "he who tills the land owns the land" became the battle cry.

In the course of the movement a great deal of heroism was revealed, and women also took part in large numbers. More than seventy activists were killed and many more were severely hurt or imprisoned; but the police repression and the terror let loose by the landlord failed to check mass enthusiasm for this movement. In order to neutralise the movement the League Ministry of the time introduced a legislation on sharecroppers, but this was dropped in the midstream. The 1950 Bargadar Act was the major outcome of this struggle, which made evictions difficult, arranged for conciliation boards to settle disputes between sharecroppers and landlords, and increased the share of the sharecropper to two-thirds, provided he contributed the inputs and implements. The second round of the struggle took place after the independence of the country, in 1948-49, which also led to seventy deaths.

Another big movement took place in Tripura, where the Upajati Ganamukti Parishad, associated with AIKS, mobilised the tribal peasants against land alienation and encroachments on the rights of the *jhumias* (the shifting cultivators). Thanks to this movement, Tripura stands today as a strong outpost of the Left movement of the country, uniting both tribal and non-tribal peasants.

To crown all these struggles was the epic struggle of the peasants of Telangana, which has no parallel in the contemporary history of the country. The movement began in 1946, under the leadership of Andhra Mahasabha, an affiliate of AIKS, and continued up to 1951. The immediate issue was the oppression of the landlords, and the deployment of armed thugs to intimidate the tenants. But, later on, the main demands became the abolition of forced labour (*vetti*), the stoppage of illegal exactions, and the ending of the rule of Nizam over Hyderabad, a princely state whereof Telangana formed a part.

What began in a small number of villages spread to more than a few hundred villages within a few weeks. The Sangham not only guided them in battles but also helped in resolving disputes in their lives and boosting their cultural activities.

The struggle reached a peak immediately after the independence of India. The demand was now for the integration of Hyderabad with the rest of India and for ending the feudal aristocratic rule of Nizam. The agrarian programme of Andhra Mahasabha included a call against *vetti*, payment of rent and delivery of grains to landlord, for seizure of land illegally taken over by the landlords, for seizure of grain hoards and distributing those to the needy, and burning of the records of the landlords and moneylenders. Eventually, a call was given for the seizure of waste land of both the government and the landlords, and the imposition of a ceiling of 10 acres of wet land and 100 acres of dry land on the landlords.

In the course of the movement, guerilla squads were formed from the village to the district levels, who met the terror unleashed by Razakars, and in many instances scared away the landlords from the area. At the peak of the struggle about 3000 villages, with roughly 30 lakhs of people and an area of 16,000 square miles, were liberated and brought under the administration of *gram raj*. In these areas a guerilla squad of 2,000 and a people's militia of 10,000 guarded the villages, and about 10 lakh acres of land were redistributed among the landless. Usurious interests were slashed, forced labour was banned and a minimum wage was fixed among the reforms introduced by the peasant revolutionaries.

However, the political situation took a new turn after September 13, 1948, when the Indian army moved in and incorporated Hyderabad into India, thereby ending Nizam's rule. There are reasons to believe that the Indian authorities were alarmed by the prospect of the defeat of Nizam's army at the hands of the revolutionaries, and its implications for the politics of India. The armed action by the Indian government was contrived as much to drive away the Nizam as to suppress the people's resistance against feudal land relations. Therefore, the revolutionaries now became the target of a vast army of 50,000 men, who resorted to systematic combing, torture, and

uprooting of the villages to snap contact with the revolutionaries.

This unequal armed combat could not continue for long. It was estimated later that the Indian government had deployed more armed personnel and resources in Telangana than in Kashmir. The movement was withdrawn on October 21, 1951, by when 4000 activists had lost their lives, 10,000 were jailed for periods between three and four years, and 50,000 were detained in police and army camps, beaten up and terrorised.

Although the movement had to be withdrawn, there could be no question about the impact it made on popular thinking and government policy. In the 1952 Elections, the Peoples' Democratic Front (with the Communists as the major component) won 23 out of 29 seats fought in the three districts of Nalgonda, Warangal and Khammam, where the Telangana struggle was concentrated.

SETBACK DUE TO COMMUNALISM

A major issue facing the movement after the second world war was the communal conflict between the Hindus and Muslims. This undermined the unity of the peasants and class-based consciousness, and brought about communal alignments of Hindu landlords and peasants on one side, and Muslim landlords and peasants on the other side. Not only that the landlords deliberately provoked such conflicts, the British government too actively encouraged the communal elements of both communities in accordance with their policy of 'divide and rule'. For both, the objective was to sabotage the kisan and workers' movement, to weaken the national movement for the country's independence, and to perpetuate the colonial rule. The worst affected areas were Calcutta, Noakhali in eastern Bengal, and Bihar. At the time of the partition of the country, more than a few lakhs were killed in Punjab alone.

The riots were a great setback for the work of the Kisan Sabha. Not only that the annual conference of 1946 had to be postponed, and the normal organisational work was in total disarray, these conflicts poisoned the minds of a very large proportion of the peasants. However, one redeeming feature of the period was that in the areas where the kisan movement was

strong, such riots could be prevented through the joint action of the kisans of both the communities. In Hasnabad, West Bengal, 3000 Hindu riot victims of an adjoining area were given shelter by the Muslim peasants who provided them with food, shelter and medical aid.

Taking the country as a whole, during the first six years after the independence of the country, the Kisan Sabha activists were subjected to severe governmental repression. As a consequence, no session of AIKS could be held between 1947 and 1953. Many of the leaders of the movement were in jail or in the underground, and normal functioning of the organisation was severely disrupted.

GAINS OF THE STRUGGLE

It is therefore surprising that those supporting the AIKS struggles and forming the core of its leadership fared so well in the 1952 elections. It was not only in Telangana, but also in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala, where big movements took place, the Communists and other left wing parties performed very well. The Communist Party, which was in the underground for most of this period, emerged as the main opposition party in the Parliament, and in four state assemblies.

One outcome of these mighty peasant struggles was the bhoodan movement of Acharya Vinoba Bhave, supported by the Indian government of the time. Shorn of its spiritual pronouncements, this movement stood diametrically opposed to the interests of the peasantry, and was sponsored to blunt the edge of the militant peasant struggles of the period. Its ostensible purpose was to guide the peasantry towards agrarian change by way of a 'non-violent path' as opposed to the path of 'violent armed revolution' preached by the heroes of Telangana. Rather than taking over the land of the landlord, this movement preached persuasion, and expected the landlords to undergo a 'change of heart' and make free donation of their land for distribution among the landless. This way, it was claimed, a radical redistribution of land could be achieved peacefully, in the 'traditional Indian style'. The movement claimed a large number of converts and a substantial amount of land 'gifted' this way. It turned out latter to be a big hoax.

Most of the land so 'donated' did not at all belong to the 'donors', and were actually ceiling-surplus lands subjected to take-over by the government, or were lands of very low quality where cultivation could not be undertaken.

The other major impact of the struggles was the introduction of a series of land reform legislations by various state governments. In fact, the Faizpur resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1938 committed itself to land reform, and the Congress Agrarian Reform Committee of 1948 declared itself "in favour of the elimination of all intermediaries between the state and the tiller." The report sought the restriction of non-cultivating landownership to widows, minors and disabled, and permitted resumption of land for self-cultivation only to those who physically participated in agriculture. The committee laid special emphasis on the immediate prevention of all evictions, and the participation of 'non-officials' in local land tribunals. It opposed capitalist development and favoured state farms and collective farms.

This was sheer rhetoric. The reality was something different. In the years following this report, virtually nothing was done, until the peasant struggles, particularly Telangana struggle, created sufficient fear in their hearts to introduce some laws. These legislations paid no more than lip service to many of the recommendations of the 1948 report, but in actual practice the governments at the central and state levels worked in close alliance with the vested interests whom they were expected to replace through land reforms. For zamindari abolition, the landlords were paid a hefty compensation of Rs.600 crore for their land, with which some of them were expected to transform themselves into dynamic industrialists. In the reforms, the ceilings were fixed on 'individual basis' which made it possible for the joint families to conceal their landholdings by way of intra-family fictitious transfers. The provision of resumption of land for self-cultivation opened the floodgate for eviction, while a long list of exemptions and malafide transfers of land made the ceiling laws largely inoperative in many instances. Orchards, plantations and religious trusts, as well as economically efficient enterprises were usually exempted from the operation of land ceiling, which meant that very little of ceiling-

surplus land was available for distribution among the landless. The ceilings were fixed at level which were too high in relation to the average size of landholdings in the country.

Both the legislations and the mode of their implementation revealed the class character of the post-independence Indian regime: an alliance of the big bourgeoisie operating at the national level with the elements operating at the state and lower levels and a stratum of rich peasants which was created to widen its overall base. The landlords used their economic, social and political power to maintain control over the poor masses, and to mobilise votes for the ruling party. Given this fact any programme of land reform cannot be seriously implemented without undermining this alliance and thereby destroying the political base of the ruling party in the countryside.

This is not to say that the land reform legislations brought about no change in the agrarian structure. The abolition of zamindari and the imposition of ceilings marked the end of old-style large scale absentee landlordism. Its place has been taken over by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants who, using land as their base, have branched out and diversified their activities. They control the village-level cooperatives, rural industries, commercial activities, school committees, festivals, etc., and use their access to administration to obtain loans and various benefits from government subsidies, concessions and special schemes. This class has played an important role in the adoption of the so called green revolution technology, which has widened inequality in income and land distribution in the countryside.

CANNANORE STATEMENT

We have already noted that between 1947 and 1953 the organisational activities of AIKS were badly disrupted due to state repression, and no session of AIKS could be held during this period. The Cannanore session of April 1953, after a gap of six years, issued a new statement of policy "for a broader, stronger all India Kisan Sabha". Having discussed the agrarian revolution in post-independence period, the statement criticised the government for pursuing policies "which injure the interests of the kisans", and exposed the myths of land reform, planning

and non-aligned independent economic development. It concluded that "the abolition of landlordism and free distribution of land among landless and poor peasants has therefore acquired vital national importance. It is only by carrying out such a fundamental transformation in land relations that real basis for planned increase of production for prosperity can be laid. The purchasing power of the people cannot be increased, and the ever expanding internal markets—the basis for any real plan—cannot be established so long as the major part of what the peasant produces is squeezed out of him by way of landlord's rent, usurer's interest and government taxes." It also added that the abolition of landlordism without compensation would release a significant amount of financial resources which were hitherto paid to these parasitic classes as compensation or rent, which could in turn be used for productive investment in agriculture and industry.

The policy statement also gave a call for "identifying AIKS with all sections of the population, including workers, salaried employees, traders and industrialists", that is those who were "genuinely interested in the development of our industries, agriculture and trade". But this role of uniting people could not be properly discharged as long as the AIKS organisation itself was weak. The statement noted that there were "still large areas which (had) not yet been covered by the organisation. It appealed to other peasant organisations to forge 'unity in action' with AIKS, and to wage joint struggles against eviction, tax burden, etc. Peasant unity became the key slogan. The policy statement also asked for a separate organisation of the agricultural labourers, wherever needed.

MOGA SESSION

But the organisational issues were more thoroughly handled in the Moga session in 1954. It noted that "the biggest opportunity to unite all sections of the rural toilers against landlordism has arisen and it is the task of the kisan movement to take advantage of this opportunity and unite all these sections in the struggle for land". Issues of eviction, rent, waste land etc., could therefore be combined to give a call for ending landlordism. This session noted that every political party was now

being forced to give attention to the issue of land, including a section of Congressmen, but in the final analysis these bourgeois parties were only paying lip service to the cause of tenants and often pursued tactics which were harmful to the peasant movement.

The Moga session noted that whenever a call was given to the peasants to fight, they responded. In many instances such fights led to ordinances against eviction and other measures. But in several places there were signs of "hesitation to lead the kisans into struggles", often on the ground that "repression would follow and the organisation would be destroyed". The need of the hour was to provide bold leadership to the great mass of toilers who were prepared to join such struggles. The latter should be supplemented by legislative work and intervention by AIKS units in settlement records and similar activities.

The Moga session also noted that the membership of eight lakhs was small for a country of India's size, and that the organisation was "lagging far behind the immense opportunities that (had) arisen for broadening and strengthening the movement". Even where struggles were conducted, the task of building the organisation was often neglected, and the wider issues involving other sections were ignored. The 'primary units', the 'blood cells' of the organisation, were not being given the attention they deserved. The vital task of building a separate organisation of the agricultural labourers was often neglected.

In particular, the Moga session highlighted the need for democratic functioning within AIKS, and for taking up "every issue that concerns rural life", including schools, libraries, cooperatives and panchayats, so that AIKS could emerge as the "real leader of the rural population". Emphasis was also placed on the recruitment of poor peasants and to improve the functioning of the CKC.

The Dahanu session of the following year again returned to the theme of organisation, and mentioned that primary units "for all practical purposes do not exist", and those which function tend to become bureaucratic in their dealings with peasants and maintained no living contact with the masses. The 'leader-follower' pattern discouraged mass participation in the

day-to-day functioning. Such a style of functioning reduced "the units to merely committees of political workers". Such scathing self-critical analysis was indeed needed.

POST-INDEPENDENCE ATTACKS ON PEASANTRY

This organisational weakness was all the more glaring because the peasantry during this period came under a violent attack from the rural vested interests. Eviction was the central issue facing the peasants which, paradoxically, was a consequence of whatever little land reform was legislated to protect the tenants from eviction, rack-renting and various other abuses. Evictions were pre-emptive actions on the part of the landlords to ensure that the tenants were denied such legal rights. In most cases the landlords denied the oral tenancy agreements which existed between them and the tenants, or took the plea of 'self-cultivation' to remove the tenant. Where the laws provided security of tenure for a fixed time period, the tenancies were not renewed at the end of such period. Even the 'protected tenants' were not immune from eviction as it was found from the official records that many of them "voluntarily surrendered" their rights. What counted in the end was the muscle power of the landlord, as opposed to the weak economic and social position of the tenant. In some states the tenants were given the right to purchase the land they tilled; but this was no more than an eyewash and actually worked against the tenant. The price fixed for such land was too high and could not be paid within the stipulated time period; as a consequence, the tenants not only failed to become owners of the land but also lost their rights on the land as tenants.

The period of the fifties, therefore, witnessed a massive swelling of the ranks of the landless who had to sell their labour for livelihood, thanks to large scale eviction which took place. In this situation, the central task of AIKS was defensive one, of protecting the tenants from eviction. In the Moga session which met against this background of lakhs of evictions, "stick to the land" became the slogan given to the peasants, and AIKS demanded immediate enactment of ordinances to prevent eviction. In many areas, particularly West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Travancore-Cochin and some parts of Uttar

Pradesh, the movement became particularly successful, and in several states such ordinances banning eviction could be passed. But in large areas of the country where the kisan movement was weak or absent, evictions continued unabated.

Another issue taken up by the Kisan Sabha in the fifties was the question of ceiling and its implementation. The Amritsar session of AIKS in 1956 demanded that ceiling should be based on families and not individuals, and should apply only to land under personal cultivation; while the tenants should be made owners of non-resumable land under their possession. AIKS demanded that exemptions should be withdrawn excepting those for tea, coffee and rubber plantations, and transfers made since 1951 should be revoked as malafide. It demanded the participation of village level panchyats in land reform administration.

In several states of India—particularly, Andhra, Kerala, UP and Punjab—demand for wasteland distribution among the landless became a major issue. In many cases, where such land had already been occupied by the landless and attempts were being made to dislodge them through police action or by transferring the land to others by way of auction, the movement became a part of the anti-eviction struggle. In case of the tribals, restrictions imposed on their customary rights to land use in forest or hilly tracts, e.g. in Tripura, also became an issue for peasant action.

The issue of price also emerged as one of the major issues during this period. A series of agitations took place in a number of states—on tapioca in case of Kerala, jute in case of West Bengal, tobacco in case of Andhra and sugarcane in cases of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—demanding the fixation of a floor price for such crops which would cover cultivation expenses and the subsistence needs of farmers, at which the government should be prepared to buy those crops. In case of food crops the prices should take into account the interests of both consumers and producers, at the cost of the profiteers. The Moga session of AIKS blamed the “the monopoly grip of the British imperialists on our economy” for the low, fluctuating prices of commercial crops and recommended exploration of the markets of Socialist countries for selling such crops. To-

wards the end of the fifties, concern was expressed with another kind of price issue ; the inflationary increase in the prices of essential commodities, including food, which eroded the purchasing power of the masses.

The movement demanding regular supply of food at cheap prices spread to a number of states, where a wide spectrum of the population—from the urban workers and middle class to the rural artisans, labourers and poor 'distress-seller' peasants—were brought together. The movement reached its peak in West Bengal in 1959 where more than eighty people, including many peasant women, were killed by police lathicharge and firing.

Issues of prices and high taxes were linked to the pattern of economic development being pursued by the Indian government. AIKS took the view that the government, being unable to solve the basic problems of the country, was passing on the burden of economic crisis to the shoulder of the peasantry and other toiling masses, in the form of high taxes, and deficit financing. Several sessions of AIKS focussed attention on various aspects of planning and their implications for the peasantry.

The Dahanu session of 1955 focussed on the question of rural indebtedness. By then the report of the Reserve Bank of India's All India Rural Credit Survey had been published, which had estimated a total rural debt of Rs. 750 crores, a colossal sum even by today's standards. The session gave a call for fighting against the exploitation of moneylenders.

The most important mass movement of the period was the anti-betterment levy movement in Punjab, in 1959. The movement took place in opposition to the imposition of betterment levy on all cultivable land in the entire command area of the Bhakra-Nangal project. AIKS argued that the peasants were already paying a high amount of taxes, and this additional taxation would make their investment on land non-viable. An important feature of the movement was its broad based character : the Communists, Akalis and a large number of Congressmen joined hands, and within six weeks more than 19000 courted arrest. The state government resorted to indiscriminate lathicharges and firing, which killed eleven activists including three women. Those taking part in the movement showed a great

deal of courage, particularly women who organised their own *jathas* which moved from village to village. By the time the movement was withdrawn the levy imposed was slashed to about one-fourth of the original figure; and, in 1967, after the defeat of the Congress party in the elections the new government of Punjab totally withdrew the levy.

A major event of the fifties was the election of a Communist government in Kerala in 1957, which stayed in office for about two years till June 1959, when it was dismissed by the Nehru government by using constitutional powers. Almost immediately after its installation the Namboodiripad government passed an ordinance banning eviction of tenants, which showed that this government was qualitatively different from others. In the comprehensive bill on agrarian reform it drafted, ceilings were determined with the family as the unit, exemptions were denied to orchards, plantations, sugarcane farmers and cattle breeding farms, and provision was made for protecting the rights of the hutment dwellers. A novel aspect of the bill was the provision for the local level leaders in the administration of land reform measures. It was expected that the bill would help to mobilise about five lakh acres of ceiling-surplus land for distribution among the landless, a large amount considering the small size of the state. In other words, for the first time a land reform bill was drafted which genuinely reflected the interests of the peasants and incorporated the major recommendations of AIKS.

Inevitably, this bill provoked bitter hostility from the vested interests who used communal slogans to divide the rural masses. A 'liberation movement' was launched with the leaders of Christian church, Muslim and Hindu priests and community organisation of the Nairs in the forefront, supported by the Congress party. When this movement failed to dislodge the government, the emergency powers of the central government were invoked.

In an election with communal overtones, the Congress party was returned to power in 1960, but the new government soon collapsed. During the brief period it was in the office, it tried to undo the Agrarian Reform Bill by introducing pro-landlord amendments. The bill was made into a law again after the return of the Namboodiripad government in 1967.

IDEOLOGICAL-ORGANISATIONAL CRISIS

One of the major explanations for the low-key performance of AIKS during the second half of the fifties and first half of the sixties was the severe crisis the AIKS organisation was passing through during this period. The crisis had its beginning several years back in the ideological dispute within the leadership over the strategy and tactics for India's agrarian revolution and the assessment of the government policies, especially those in relation to land reforms and the development of agriculture. One of the two sides in the dispute shunned militant peasant struggles, developed illusions about the government that it was going to abolish landlordism and complete agrarian revolution, and adopted a compromising role. Such an attitude was in direct contrast with the need of the time. In 1957, this section of the leadership forced a change in the party flag, replacing the hammer and sickle by sickle alone, on the ground that it would attract a large number of converts from the Congress party. Not only that such hopes did not materialise, such change demoralised those who saw peasant struggles as part of a broader struggle in alliance with the working class for bringing about a radical restructuring of the society. This ultimately led to split in AIKS in 1966. It was not until 1969, at Borsul session, that the old hammer and sickle returned to the AIKS flag.

Although some desparate and adhoc struggles were going on in various parts of the country, the organisation was drained of its militancy by the reformist stance taken by a section of the leadership. They took the view that the Congress government was genuinely interested in land reform, and was committed to an anti-feudal, anti-imperialist programme; and if the reform was not working according to the schedule, this was because of the sabotage by the bureaucrats and the landlord elements within the Congress party, who should be isolated. They even went to the extent of saying that the basic land reforms had already been completed, and therefore, the slogan demanding the redistribution of land had lost vitality.

This understanding on both of these two issues—on land reform and the role of the agricultural labourers—was reinforced by the broader understanding of the prospects for capitalist development in India. They seemed to take the view that

fulledged capitalist development was feasible, that the ruling party was committed to this, and that the fight against feudal interests was almost over. They debated amongst themselves whether the Indian capitalism in agriculture was taking the 'American path' of development from below or the 'German-Junker' path of development from the top.

Those opposing the reformist position took the view that the Indian capitalists are incapable of achieving full scale capitalist development, since their narrow class outlook and survival needs are forcing them to seek compromises with the feudal and semi-feudal elements. It is this alliance with the rural vested interests which explains the wide divergence between the reality of alliance, forbids the capitalists from crossing the line, and antagonising their rural allies.

They did not deny that capitalism was penetrating into rural life and causing increasing differentiation of the peasantry, but here the objective of capitalist penetration was not to unleash productive forces, but to modify and adopt the earlier forms of crude feudal exploitation, and to superimpose on them the capitalist relations. The Congress agrarian reform had created a new type of landlordism which combined in itself both capitalist and feudal features. These complexities and mix-ups would have to be studied closely to evolve a proper approach towards all-in present unity.

Those opposing reforms found many similarities between India in the late fifties and early sixties and Russia in the first decade of the century, which was intensively studied by Lenin himself. Lenin pointed out that while between two major antagonisms, that between the rural employers and the workers was developing and becoming more acute over the time, the one between the landlords and the peasantry as a whole was more vital and of greater practical significance in the prevailing conditions.

The split took place when the reformists withdrew from the organisation and formed their own separate AIKS in the mid-sixties. This, though apparently weakening the organisation, actually paved the way for its rejuvenation and the launching of militant peasant actions. This marked a turning point in the history of the peasant movement in the country, as the path of

reformism, inaction and non-class opportunist alliance was decisively beaten and the door was opened for fresh initiatives. The organisation grew from strength to strength in the two decades which followed the split.

We have already mentioned that the organisation was paralysed and weak during most of the period between 1954 and 1964. This was partly because of vacillations and disunity within the leadership and partly because of the state repression which followed the India-China war. However, this was also a period when the rural economy was passing through a phase of severe agrarian crisis. Harvest failure, combined with bad food management and inept administration of food procurement and supply machinery, led to famine situations in a large part of the country, particularly in Bihar. This increased the dependence of the country on the United States for food imports under PL 480 programme. In 1966 more than 14 per cent of the food requirement was met from this source. This dependence had several important policy implications, as it made the Indian Government vulnerable to US pressure. Rupee was devalued in 1966, and trade with Cuba and Vietnam was discontinued under much pressure. The report published by the Reserve Bank of India based on All India Rural Credit and Investment Survey indicated the colossal indebtedness of a large section of the peasantry, while the two reports on agricultural labourers confirmed the extent of landlessness, joblessness and homelessness amongst them in addition to low wages and insecurity from which they suffered.

This crisis was one of the major causes of the defeat of the Congress party in eight states in the 1967 general elections. In two states—in West Bengal and Kerala—United Front governments with CPI(M) and other left wing parties as major constituents came to office. In the other states where Congress had been defeated, the United Front governments which came into office were loose coalitions of several parties and lacked cohesion and direction.

EXPERIENCE OF WEST BENGAL

In West Bengal the Chief Minister in the government was a dissident Congressman, Ajoy Mukherjee, and his party was the

second largest in the Front, after CPI(M). Jyoti Basu was the Deputy Chief Minister. Though all the parties in the Front pledged to carry out land reforms, there were significant differences in the approach between the left wing parties led by CPI(M) and the parties like Bangla Congress on the issue of land. This difference was revealed when the Land Revenue Minister of the government, Hare Krishna Konar, attempted a rigorous implementation of the provisions of the existing land reform legislations, which were passed by the previous regime but were not implemented. One of the first steps the government took was to ensure that police was not deployed on the side of the landed interests in their conflict with the sharecroppers or agricultural labourers; but this was unacceptable to the Bangla Congress. Eventually the Chief Minister decided to defect from the United Front and form another government with Congress support; but when this conspiracy became public knowledge he withdrew in the face of public outcry. Then, another defector, Dr. Prafulla Ghosh, was motivated by the Congress to bring down the government. Thus ended the first United Front government within nine months; but the government of the defectors failed to survive, and in the elections held in 1969, the United Front swept back to power with a huge majority.

The main thrust of the struggle during thirteen-month rule of the second United Front, again headed by Ajoy Mukherjee and again with Jyoti Basu as Deputy Chief Minister, was the recovery of *benami* land, that is ceiling-surplus land illegally held by the landlords. In this movement the Kisan Sabha mobilised the peasantry, especially the agricultural workers and poor peasants, and more than 300000 acres of such lands were traced, taken over and distributed among the landless through village level committees set up for this purpose. This task was accomplished in the face of stiff opposition from the rural vested interests, who deployed goondas with guns, sticks and knives. Many peasants lost their lives in the battles fought on this issue, but in the end the morale of the peasants was greatly boosted. The fact that the state government was on their side, and refused to deploy police against them, actually encouraged them in many movements. The organisation of AIKS spread to

all the districts and to many new talukas and villages.

Alarmed by the growing peasant militancy, the Chief Minister himself organised a satyagraha against his own government and ultimately resigned, handing over the government to the central government in Delhi. In the next elections, in 1971, CPI(M) emerged as the largest party and, along with its allies, missed the absolute majority by a narrow margin; but the new Congress-supported government collapsed within three months. By then a reign of terror had been unleashed, and a large number of CPI(M) and AIKS functionaries had been driven to the underground. It was in this political background that, in 1972, mid-term elections were heavily rigged to create a huge majority for the Congress party. Genuine voters were turned away from the polling booths at the gun point, and ballot boxes were stuffed with papers stamped by Congress thugs; even Jyoti Basu was 'defeated' by 90000 votes from his assembly constituency.

Between 1971 and 1977, 1200 left wing activists, including those belonging to AIKS, were murdered; 20000 were forced to leave their homes; and many more were subjected to police warrants for their arrest. During this period of semi-fascist terror, taking advantage of favourable political conditions, the vested interests resorted to large scale eviction, and intimidation of the peasants. What is remarkable is that in the face of this onslaught, the peasants fought back valiantly, and most of them managed to retain the land they had come to possess during 1969-70 campaign of land recovery and redistribution. Another aspect of this struggle was the shelter given by the peasants to the working class leaders from the towns who were hounded out by the police and the armed gangs of the factory owners. This demonstration of worker-peasant unity made a significant impact on the morale of the working class.

KERALA

Unlike the United Front government of West Bengal, the Namboodiripad government of Kerala lasted for about two years. In case of the latter too, the main explanation for its eventual collapse was the hostility it provoked by its determination to carry out agrarian reform. During this period 100000

pattas were distributed to unauthorised occupants of land. The ceiling was revised downwards and made family based, many of the exemptions were withdrawn, and hutment-dwellers were given rights on the land on which they lived.

With the support of the United Front government, a movement of agricultural labourers was organised on the issue of wages. In some areas, e.g. in Kuttanad, it took the form of a mass upsurge, and formed the basis for the growth of the Agricultural Workers Union. As in the case of West Behgal, popular participation was sought and secured for implementing land reform and for articulating the demands of the peasantry. Such legislations were therefore not viewed as bureaucratic decisions imposed from the top, but as activities in which both the government and the people at large were partners.

After the fall of the Namboodirpad government and the formation of the Congress-supported Achutha Menon government, the main campaign of AIKS was for the implementation of land reforms. Large number of statewide *jathas* were organised and lakhs of hutment dwellers came forward, fencing off 100 cents of the homestead land as their own in accordance with the legislation. In case of about one lakh of them the landlords conceded their rights. This was a great victory, as it came in the face of severe police repression: within one year 32 were killed and 50000 were arrested. In addition, sharecroppers took paddy to their own barns for threshing and fought off eviction. In this way, despite vacillations and hostility on the part of the Menon government, the land reform legislation passed during the Namboodirpad government got largely implemented.

LEFT-ADVENTURIST CHALLENGE

If the main ideological challenge confronting the kisan movement in the fifties and the early sixties was of the right-reformist variety, in the late sixties and the early seventies the left adventurist and sectarian trend became the main deviation. While the former almost totally ignored the necessity of completing agrarian revolution and claimed that anti-feudal struggle was almost over, the latter took the contrasting view that usury, bonded labour, and semi-feudal forms of exploitation dominated the agrarian scene, and gave the slogan of completion

of agrarian revolution as a part of people's democratic revolution as immediate tasks, through unleashing of guerilla warfare and formation of liberated areas.

The naxalities believed that the people of India were ready for a revolution for bringing about a Socialist transformation ; and that the peasantry would play the pivotal role in such revolution. Following Lin Biao, they claimed that revolution would first spread to the countryside like "prairie fire", and then, having established themselves in the countryside, the revolutionaries would surround the towns and cities and would strangle those centres of political power. In their thinking, working class had no role to play. They also believed that there was no need for united fronts and mass movements, or even for elaborate organisation and systematic propaganda since such methods of struggle would be time consuming. Instead, they evolved a short-cut, by way of 'annihilation of the class enemies'. They believed that killing of a few 'hated oppressors' in the villages would, by demonstrating the superiority of 'red terror' over 'white terror', help the poor majority to overcome fear and inertia and bring them to the fold of the peasant militants fighting for the seizure of power. In this way they overestimated the revolutionary mood of the people in the country as a whole, underestimated the role of the working class in the revolution and overlooked the need for mass activities. Their method was those of terrorists, despite their Marxist pretensions. Through their actions, particularly indiscriminate annihilation of rich peasants, 'agents of rich peasants' and policemen, they alienated a large section of public opinion. In its last phases, the movement degenerated into a collection of armed groups with no clear sense of purpose, which anti-socials and police informers infiltrated.

This movement greatly harmed the peasant organisation by spreading confusion and creating terror. Their call for seizure of political power was premature, while their terroristic view stood opposed to the mass based political struggles of the peasantry. Using left wing phrases, they are actually helping the right wing forces by undermining AIKS and other democratic and progressive forces. In areas where the Kisan Sabha was weak or non-existent, this ideology could not be effectively

fought, and made some impact on the poor masses, particularly in the tribal areas.

'GREEN REVOLUTION' VS. LAND REFORMS

We have already noted that first half of the sixties also witnessed a severe agrarian crisis, following repeated harvest failures and the near-famine conditions in many parts of the country, particularly in Bihar. This was also the period of heavy dependence on US food imports, for which India has to pay a heavy price in terms of forced changes in many aspects of its domestic and foreign policies. Several studies undertaken during this period on the world food situation indicated that the supply-demand conditions in the world food market were decidedly turning against India. Unless urgent remedial measures were adopted, the government visualised a severe food crisis in the years to come.

It was in this situation that the technology of 'green revolution' based on imported high yielding seed varieties, was introduced. From the point of view of the government this was an acceptable alternative to land reform. In fact, as the green revolution technology spread, a campaign was launched to the effect that land reform was no longer necessary, since this technology would take care of the problem of food. Some even argued that, against the background of the 'success' of this new technology, any talk of land reform was positively harmful for the rural economy.

The technology of 'green revolution', which involves the use of modern inputs like fertilisers, pesticides, controlled water through tubewells and tractors and other agricultural machineries, along with high-yielding seed varieties, were introduced in the mid-sixties, and by the seventies it came to play an important role in Indian agriculture. There can be no doubt that this technology has succeeded in expanding agricultural production, in particular wheat and rice production, especially in Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh. At the same time, one can identify some of the serious problems which have risen from this technology.

Because of its concentration in areas which are favourably endowed with irrigation facilities, road network and banking

and cooperative development, this technology has given rise to serious regional imbalances. Large scale migration of landless labourers from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh towards Punjab, is one major consequence of such regional imbalance. Given its heavy dependence on controlled water, this technology is unsuitable to vast tracts of the country where water supply is inadequate, which implies that over time inter-regional inequality is likely to grow.

More serious is the inequality between farmers. In almost all cases the richer farmers have been the first to adopt this technology and benefit from it. Given their access to administration and banks, they have been able to mobilise credit and inputs at cheaper prices and make the most of the opportunities offered by it. On the other hand, the poor farmers with inadequate resources, knowledge and access to banks and administration have either shied away from this technology, or where participating in it, have not been able to take full advantage of the production possibilities. Furthermore, this technology has created new types of dependence of the poor farmer on the rich—for the use of tractor, irrigation pump and other machineries, for high yielding seed varieties and for knowledge required to use these inputs fruitfully. Inequality has grown, and the differentiation among the peasants has become more acute. A consequence of the introduction of this technology has been growing landlessness, as the richer peasants are buying up land, from the less privileged, who are leasing out or selling off land and then either engaging in other activities or working as agricultural labourers.

It is being claimed that this technology has helped the country to achieve self-sufficiency in food production. While there is no doubt that food production has increased, and has by now reached a level of around 150 million tons a year, certain points need underscoring. Firstly, this increase in production is confined to some areas and the effects of green revolution have failed to spread to the country as a whole. Secondly, even after achieving this 'self-sufficiency', more than one-third of the population continues, to suffer from under-nutrition, because they lack purchasing power to buy food. Thirdly, despite this increase India only partly uses the

productive capacity of India's soil: China with a smaller cultivated land area, produces more than double this amount, and there are other countries where productivity of land is four to five times higher.

Against the criticism voiced by a large number of scholars who warned against growing inequality following the introduction of this new technology, was the standard reply that this was a temporary phase, and in the long run such development would 'percolate' to the poor. Realising that this assertion was not convincing any one, the government set up two agencies—Small Farmers' Development Agency (SFDA), and Marginal Farmers' and Agricultural Labourers' Development Agency (MFALDA) whose task was to alleviate the conditions of the poor. But in both cases, as confirmed by numerous researches and evaluations, the beneficiaries tend to be non-poor as the official records are manipulated in their favour by the rural officials. Besides, these agencies do no more than provide subsidy—25 per cent for small farmer, 33 per cent for the marginal farmer and 50 per cent for the tribal farmer—while the credit part is given by the banks which also manage the implementation. In other words, the management is largely vested in hands which are known for their prejudices against the poor farmers. As long as the village society remains stratified, and the richer section continues to dominate the village life, there can be no question of such subsidies and reliefs reaching the rural poor on a scale which would bring about a significant change in their lives.

While the green revolution was limited to certain areas, in major part of the country, agriculture was stagnating and this led to widespread social tensions within the country. A report of the Home Ministry, which was published in 1969, took serious note of the mounting social unrest, and strongly suggested urgent remedial measures, failing which it predicted a large scale break down of the existing social order. The causes of social tensions mentioned were semi-feudal land relations.

Faced with this alarming prospect for the ruling class, the government was forced to reconsider the question of land reform.

The Mahalanobis Committee appointed by the government to look into this, came up with the figure of 60 million acres

of additional ceiling-hyphen surplus land, which would be available for distribution if the ceiling was fixed at 20' acre level. There is no doubt that the distribution of land that amount could have made some impact on the problem of landlessness and poverty, at any rate in some parts of the country. But this was not to be. The government soon revised the estimate to 40 million acres. But then another two years were wasted, giving the landowners ample time to hide their land by way of a variety of malafide transfers. By the time the 1971-72 land reform legislations took effect, the damage had been done. Despite the change-over from 'individual base' to 'family base' and to a ceiling which was no more than three times the average size of holdings, most of the surplus land estimated by Mahalanobis had disappeared. Furthermore, many loopholes remained unplugged even in the new legislations of the seventies, e.g. exemptions given to religious trusts, orchards, etc. The upshot of all that was that, taking the two rounds of land reform legislations in the fifties and seventies together, only 7.2 million acres were declared surplus, of which only 4.4 million acres were actually distributed—that is, less than one per cent of the cultivated land area of the country.

GOVT. RHETORICS

Alongwith the introduction of new ceiling legislations the slogan of *garibi hatao* was introduced (during the 1971 election campaign), and, at the time of the Emergency during 1975-77, the Government of India came out with a 20-Point Programme. The objective of all these was to show that the government was concerned with the plight of the poor, and was determined to do something in order to banish poverty. This propaganda made a significant impact, particularly among the scheduled castes and tribes and other sections of the downtrodden masses, who came to believe that the government led by Mrs. Gandhi indeed was concerned with their well being.

As pointed out in the report of the Varanasi session of AIKS in 1979, the years in the seventies until 1977 were not only characterised by torture and repression, but also by "false propaganda and populist rhetoric in order to create a favourable image of the government both inside and outside the country."

The Varanasi report showed, by analysing the major points of the 20 point programme, that bonded labour system was far from abolished by law and very few of them were 'rehabilitated', while the land reform measures covered less than one percent of land. As admitted by the Sixth Plan document, "the land reform measures had no visible impact on the distribution of rural property". Between 1960 and 1976, the number of those below 'poverty line' had increased from 220 million to 325 million while the real wage had declined.

The victory of the Janata Party during the 1977 election was greeted by unprecedented mass enthusiasm and expectations. But such expectations were soon belied by the experience of two and half years under the Janata government. In class terms this government was no different from the predecessor regime, and in fact in some instances, e.g., in Orissa, it tried to undo some of the positive aspects of the existing land reform legislations. Besides policies on taxes, deficit financing, imports and exports were not changed; and the agricultural prices actually suffered a relative decline during this period despite their pro-rural pronouncements. Their callous handling of the incidents of attacks on the poor and socially disadvantaged groups showed their lack of sympathy, and their basic policies were in no way different from those of the Congress. Janata party rule, in the beginning, contributed in demolishing the framework of authoritarianism and restoration of democratic rights, and objectively helped in creating a situation for growth of peasant movement.

MERE PALLIATIVES

However, it was during the Janata period that some of the major rural development programmes of today were initiated. The food-for-work programme, initiated in 1977-78, and having some success in creating employment for the agricultural labourers was discontinued after 1979-80 by the Indira Gandhi government for no obvious reason and, later on, renamed as NREP with reduced allocations. The other major programme, Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), is still in operation. More recently, a certain amount of fund has been allocated under Rural Labour Employment Guarantee

Scheme (RLEGS), for supporting public works type of activities. The general experience has been that the benefits of the schemes tend to go to non-poor sections by the courtesy of the rural administration, while the public works programmes provide only some relief but fail to create a basis for continued employment.

AIKS takes the view that these programmes are no more than palliatives, which make little impact on the basic problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality. In fact these programmes are closely integrated with the class-based agrarian policies of the government, by making inequality less unacceptable. Despite this, AIKS asks its units to take part in these programmes, to obtain whatever help is possible for the poor, and also to expose the hollowness of such programmes which neglect the more fundamental issues relating to land.

The hollowness of the government programmes is further demonstrated by its attitude towards the 30 million tons reserve foodstock which it is holding at present. Rather than distributing a good part of this among the landless as food wage for public works type of activities, and thereby helping to reduce poverty, under employment and undernutrition, this food stock is being allowed to rot and be eaten away by rats in the godowns. Only recently, part of it has been released to support public works programme under RLEGS.

The Midnapore session of AIKS critically examined these programmes and exposed their lies. The declared target of RLEGS was to provide at least one member from each landless family, employment for 100 days in a year—a target which was missed by miles at the end of the Sixth Plan. The projects were badly chosen and social assets were not created, while, as we have already pointed out, no permanent basis for employment was created. Similar criticisms were made about other targets under the 20 point programme.

A particular feature of the 'second coming' of Mrs. Gandhi was the inflationary impact of her policies. Through deficit financing, repeated increases in prices of dished and petrol and railway fares and additional taxes, her economic policies tended to pass the burden of the failure of her policies on the peasants and other poor sections of the population.

Under Rajiv Gandhi, though there has been no basic change

in policy, but more concessions have been given to the monopoly houses and flood gates have been opened for the multinationals to enter our economy in the name of advancing towards the 21st century. Slogans like 'garibi hatao' and 'land reform' have now been replaced by those emphasising on performance, efficiency, viability and technology. The policy measures adopted in the two budgets tends to help the monopolists and the richer sections, who have been pampered with tax concessions, exemptions, and a promise of no increase of income taxation for a five year period. Trade has been liberalised. At the same time prices of diesel, petrol and some other key commodities have been hiked in the name of mobilising resources for plan, thereby adding to the sufferings of the toiling masses.

SHINING CONTRASTS

In contrast with the performance of the government at Delhi, the left and democratic governments in West Bengal and Tripura (and Kerala for a brief period) have made the most of the limited constitutional powers they enjoy to alleviate the conditions of the peasantry. In West Bengal, land has been distributed to 12 lakh landless families, 13 lakh sharecroppers have been registered and more than two lakhs of them receive credit from banks in a year, more than two lakhs of the homesteads have been recorded in the name of the landless labourers, minimum wages for agricultural labourers have been regularly revised, while through public works programmes demand for labour has been sustained in order to help them get better market wages. Small farmers have benefitted from exemption from land revenue payments, while a generous distribution of mini-kits and publicly owned tubewells for use has made it possible for them to adopt new technologies. 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 have been recorded. In Kerala, under LDF, holdings under four acres had been exempted from plantation tax, rent arrears for holdings up to one hectare were cancelled, and subsidies were given on inputs. More recently, after a delay of more than five years a new bill passed by the West Bengal legislature has received Presidential assent; that too after forcing certain

amendments in favour of landlords. Even then by removing many of the exemptions on land, ceiling law would make for distribution among the landless. In Kerala too, exemption on gifted land was taken away by the LDF government.

All these measures have brought about a significant change in the attitude of the poor man in the villages in these three states. Gone are the days when they would cringe in presence of the 'big man', fold their hands, keep their distance and make all kinds of submission gestures. They know that the government is on their side in Tripura and West Bengal, and would protect their rights, they show confidence because they feel that they have contributed to the making of these governments. They are still poor and backward in terms of education, but have learnt to respect themselves. They were solidly rallied round the All India Kisan Sabha. This is a lasting gain for the peasant movement.

The experience of these two governments shows that the need for peasant organisation and struggle remains even when the state concerned is under a left wing government. This is because the bureaucracy which is charged with the responsibility of implementing the land reforms and other legislations is seldom sympathetic to the poor. Therefore, where the intended beneficiaries are not organised and vocal, even with the left front in government, benefits would not reach them. Where sharecroppers are prepared to fight off the goondas of the landlord by way of mass mobilisation, and the agricultural labourers are prepared to strike in support of their wage demands, the chances of their wresting the concessions and reliefs given by the state government would be higher.

CHANGED SITUATION

During these intervening years, the perspective of the peasant movement had also undergone a change. We have noted that since split in AIKS, the main preoccupation of the peasant movement was with the land issue. The operation of the green revolution technology highlighted the issue of land, since those with more land could more easily take advantage of the credit and other facilities and improve their conditions, while those at the other end were being pushed out of their land and relegated.

to the status of landless. Against the background of growing income and asset inequality, both based on unequal land ownership, the issue of land loomed larger and larger. This was also the period when left adventurism played an ideologically and organisationally disruptive role, and they too highlighted the issue of land. We have also noted that the most significant success of the peasant movement in West Bengal during the Second United Front government was the take-over of ceiling surplus *benami* land through a mass movement backed by the government; and those benefitting from this redistribution fought off the armed gangs of the landlords during the reign of terror in the seventies. In other states too, land issue was highlighted.

The issue of land continues to be the central one. Landlessness is growing and the peasantry is becoming pauperised and marginalised over time. By 1981 the number of agricultural labourers has increased to 55.4 million, while the number of holdings below one hectare has risen to 50.53 million. Proletarianisation and marginalisation of the peasantry are being matched by growing concentration of land ownership. These are frightful and colossal figures, and the trend is unmistakable. Kisan Sabha cannot afford to lose sight of the central issue of land.

Yet, one of the questions which the Varanasi session of AIKS addressed to itself, was why, despite the growing dissatisfaction of the rural masses and the spontaneous outburst of their anger from time to time, this discontent is not being mobilised and directed to proper channels? Why, despite the big advances made in some areas, a large area of the country continues to remain outside the pale of the influence of Kisan Sabha? Why is the growth of AIKS and of the peasant movement not commensurate with possibilities created by the deepening agrarian crisis and the disenchantment of the rural masses with the policies of the central government?

The answer the Varanasi session of 1979 came up with, was that the slogans formulated and the programmes undertaken did not always reflect the changes which the agrarian structure had undergone during this years. More specifically, it asked: Whether we have been adopting a sectarian attitude of repeating basic slogans which not only cannot be translated into action

immediately, but are not even fully understood and accepted by vast sections of the population in a particular area? Before formulating immediate slogans in keeping with our basic aims to advance the movement in a specific situation, whether the slogans we have been working out are such as to rally the vast mass of the peasantry and isolate the small landlord section. etc.

The Varanasi session made a clear distinction between basic 'propaganda' slogans and 'immediate' slogans. It said that seizure and distribution of land continues to be the basic slogans, and added, "without a victory of this slogan, there cannot be any solution to rural poverty, unemployment". But the correlation of class forces has changed since this basic slogan was inscribed in the programme of AIKS; and this change requires to be properly studied for formulating 'immediate' slogans.

In the pre-independence days the entire peasantry could be united against landlordism. But one of the consequences of the land reform legislations of the fifties and seventies has been that a section of the peasantry has lost interest in the fight against landlordism. Through these legislations a new type of landlordism has been created which combines in itself elements of both feudalism and capitalism, but in addition a new stratum of rich peasantry has been created which, along with landlords, form the main support base of the ruling party in the rural areas. They and the middle peasants who together constitute about 25 per cent of the rural population and who have greatly benefited from bank nationalisation and the higher technology, are no longer keen about land seizure and distribution. In other words, the government position with support to land reforms and technology have seriously disrupted peasant unity. At the other end are 70 per cent of the rural masses, "the landless and poor peasants, (who) are not conscious and organised enough to move into action for the seizure of landlords' land; even when they are moved into action, it is only for Government waste land, cultivable forest land etc." Only in West Bengal, backed by the United Front government in 1969, was it possible to go in for land seizure in a big way. All these would have to be taken into account while formulating slogans for immediate action.

The Varanasi report then concluded: "Taking note of these structural changes and their multifarious consequences, we have

to come to the conclusion that the slogan of complete abolition of landlordism and distribution of land to the landless and land-poor continues to be the central slogan of the agrarian revolution, a slogan on which we can not go into action to-day in most parts of the country."

For formulating slogans for immediate action, concrete economic and social trends require to be studied. In many parts of the country capitalism is making deep inroads into the rural economy. Most of the production is being undertaken for the market, more of the inputs are being purchased from the market, and land is becoming more easily saleable, while rural labour is migrating over long distances in search of jobs. All these indicate the direction in which the rural economy is moving. At the same time there are other areas where bonded labour system prevails and backwardness, usury and tyrannical rule of the landlords with hired armed thugs on their side, characterise the rural societies. Such differences between areas should also be noted in a vast country like ours.

The Varanasi session produced a list of such immediate issues—wages of agricultural labourers, house sites, rent reduction, 75% of the produce to the sharecropper, distribution of surplus land after plugging loopholes in land legislations, distribution of waste lands, scaling down or abolition of rural debts, remunerative prices of agricultural produce, cheap credit, reduction of tax burden, reduction of water and electricity rates, goonda attacks organised by landlords, social oppression of harijans, corruption in administration, etc. It then concluded that "these are issues which affect all sections of the peasantry—poor, middle and rich—and they can all be drawn into the movement on them. All these currents would have to be brought together to build the maximum (possible) unity of the peasantry."

Forging peasant unity was reaffirmed as a major task of AIKS. Naturally, the agricultural labourers and poor peasants, given their numerical weight in the population and the scale of oppression to which they are subjected, would constitute the major component of such unity, but efforts should be made to establish living links with other sections of the peasantry, middle and rich. This point was further emphasised in the Midnapore session. In a sense this emphasis on peasant unity was

nothing new, in fact from the very beginning AIKS had been striving to bring together and mobilise for action various components of the peasantry, and its membership was open to persons holding divergent views. The provision that no political resolution should be passed without a three-fourth majority in its favour was meant to maintain the broad-based character of the peasant organisation and its movements.

ISSUE OF REMUNERATIVE PRICES

Soon after Varanasi, the issue of agricultural prices came to the fore. This again was an issue on which AIKS had repeatedly passed resolutions in the past, or had launched campaigns. But by the early eighties this issue emerged with new significance. By then, with the increasing adoption of HYV technology, a large number of farmers came to produce—both commercial crops and the traditional food crops—for the market, and for them the price at which the produce could be sold was not a matter of indifference. Not only that market-orientation took the place of subsistence farming, a large number of 'distress-selling' farmers, who had to dispose of a large part of their produce immediately after the harvest for meeting various cash demands, also became interested in the price which their marketed produce fetched. Further, with increasing purchase of fertiliser, pesticides and other inputs from the market and the growing use of irrigation water, the farmer was now aware of the need to obtain a price which would meet the costs of such inputs, water rates and electricity charges. With increase in oil prices in the world market and the repeated hikes in the prices of fertiliser, diesel and other inputs, the farmer was now demanding an increase in the prices of the agricultural products he was selling in order to compensate for this increase in cost of production. He was also now demanding a return over his investment supported by bank loans in many cases, which would be comparable with rate of return in non-agricultural activities, and which would also allow for offsetting the risks involved in agricultural production because of climatic fluctuations. Fair and remunerative prices were therefore necessary to allow for all those. The issues of 'fairness' also raised the issue of the relative prices of agricultural products.

the farmer sold and the industrial products he purchased. The farmer was now opposed to the 'terms of trade' moving against him.

The issue of prices of agricultural product thus emerged as a major one affecting a very large section of the peasantry; not only the richer section but also the middle and poor peasant. But in absence of strong leadership from AIKS, particularly in areas where its organisation is weak, the landlord elements came to assume the leadership of the movement and projected themselves as the champions of the interests of the peasantry as a whole. In the early eighties this movement took the form of an upsurge in some parts of the country, particularly in Maharashtra and Karnataka where, in addition to the landlords and rich peasants, a large section of the middle and poor peasants also participated. It was largely because of the moderate and active participation of AKIS that the landlord elements could be neutralised, and in March 1981 a massive rally of peasants from all over the country could be organised.

SULTANPUR RESOLUTION

The 12 point charter of demand, adopted by the Sultanpur session of AIKC in March, 1984, includes several points which reflect the issues raised by this movement, which is a continuing one for the Indian peasantry :

—Remunerative prices to be ensured to the agricultural producers. Adequate purchases be made by the agencies as soon as harvest begins to arrive in the market, to protect the peasants from distress sale.

—The prices of agricultural inputs should be brought down by reducing the excise duties on them and by restricting high profits. Reduce electricity charges, irrigation rates, and other taxes heavily to give relief, especially to the lower sections of the peasantry.

—Ensure cheap credit and supply of farm inputs to the peasantry with a view to give relief to the poorer sections. Steps should be taken to bring down the rates of interest payable by the agriculturists to rural credit agencies, by cutting down overhead expenses, reducing the number of intermediate agencies, and by improving the efficiency

of functioning. No penal interest should be charged from agriculturist defaulters when the default in payment is due to damages to crops as a result of crop-failures or natural calamities. The practice of showing a low value of land as compared to prevailing market prices during attachment or mortgage proceedings must end and nobody should be evicted from his land as a result of default in repaying agricultural loan.

It should be noted in relation to the above point, that while debt relief had always been an important demand of peasantry, in recent conferences availability of cheap credit facilities from the institutional sources for the poorer peasantry reflects the changes introduced in the rural economy by the new technology of agricultural production.

A complementary demand, alongside the demand for remunerative agricultural prices, is the demand related to the prices of essential commodities, which occupies the first position in the Sultanpur Charter of Demands :

—The Union Government should guarantee adequate supply of all essential commodities such as foodgrains, pulses, edible oils, salt, sugar, domestic coal, kerosene, common cloth, paper, life-saving drugs, matches etc. through a comprehensive network of public distribution system, to the urban and rural consumers, without discrimination, at subsidised and controlled rates, by drastically curbing down the profits of wholesalers and reducing substantially the excise duties imposed on these commodities. The movement of these commodities be given top priority by public transport like railways.

—This demand covers both the urban and the rural consumers, and seeks protection for both from the steep inflationary price increases caused by heavy dosage of deficit financing, indirect taxes on essential consumer items, and hikes in the prices of petrol and diesel and in railway fares. It brings the peasantry closer to the urban working class and the middle class, and also protects the non-peasant rural population from higher food prices, such as the artisans and salaried employees. Such system of public distribution of essential items would also protect the agricultural labourers and the distress-selling farmers who, in the latter part of the season are forced to buy back food from the market at higher prices, from the impact of higher prices.

In the Charter, the demand on land reform is presented as follows, as an immediate action slogan :

—Existing land reforms be speedily and effectively implemented after plugging loopholes on the lines of the West Bengal amendment legislation on land reform which has recently received Presidential assent. All types of tenants, including sharecroppers, be recorded within an year and evictions be banned. The onus to prove that one is not a tenant should lie on the landlord. All available waste lands, that can be used for cultivation with or without improvement, should be distributed free amongst landless agricultural workers within a specified time.

This Charter also highlighted the problems which arise from drought, floods and other natural calamities, which are periodic features of rural life. The rural poor are more vulnerable to such disasters as they have nothing to fall back upon, and are less able to raise credit or obtain support from the better off relatives. The Charter therefore states :

—Persons affected by natural calamities like floods and droughts be adequately compensated and a scheme of comprehensive crop insurance be introduced all over the country to protect the peasantry from the miseries due to crop failure, pests and hailstorm etc.

The impact of such disasters is often magnified because of the absence of 'early warning systems' or an elaborate and regular system of relief operations. As a consequence, in many cases such disasters lead to large scale migration towards the towns by the victims. That such town-ward movement can be avoided by an efficient relief system at the grass root level has been corroborated by the experience of West Bengal under the Left Front Government where, the panchayats were put in charge of such relief operations during the 1978 flood and the 1982 drought.

From the point of view of the AIKS organisation, there is the need for active participation in such relief operations. This not only helps to make such relief more efficient and thereby ameliorate the conditions of the victims, but also identifies AIKS with a large section of the peasantry. Actions such as this, as also participation in adult literacy campaign and the like, help

to project AIKS as the champion of the rural masses.

The point to make here is that the Kisan Sabha should be actively involved in all aspects of life in the rural areas. This also refers to many of the Government programmes like IRDP, NREP, RLEGS, ITDP, etc. which are no more than palliatives, and do not in any way help to bring about a fundamental change in rural life, and make virtually no dent on the problems of poverty, unemployment, landlessness and inequality. Yet, the intervention of AIKS in these activities would help to provide some relief to the poor, to avoid the subsidies and concessions meant for the poor and the disadvantaged being appropriated by the better off, and also to demonstrate the inadequacies and limitations of such programmes. Involvement of AIKS with the work of settlement would also serve the same purpose.

The Charter of Demands raises two major issues in relation to the agricultural labourers :

—Allocation for the NREP be increased to help the agricultural workers in getting employment and guaranteed minimum wages. Wage under NREP should nowhere be less than Rs. 8 per day and in no case be lower than the minimum wages fixed by law in the concerned state for agricultural workers.

—A central legislation be urgently enacted to ensure minimum wages and better working conditions for agricultural workers, and other necessary measures be initiated to improve the living conditions of rural poor.

Both of the two demands reflect the increasingly important role the issues relating to the agricultural labourers are going to play in the programme of AIKS in the coming years. We have already referred to the two agricultural labour enquiries of the fifties and of the two rural labour enquiries in the sixties and the seventies which drew attention to the growing problem of landlessness and joblessness facing this important component of the rural population, whose ranks are swelling every day due to evictions and pauperisation of the peasantry and the artisans. The growth in capitalist relations adds a new significance to this group, while in many areas they are subjected to semi-feudal forms of exploitation, such as bonded labour. During the Sixth Plan it was claimed that at least one person

from each landless family would be provided with 100 days of work in a year through NREP etc., but this target was missed by miles at the end of that Plan. In many states the agricultural labourers do not receive the minimum wage statutorily declared by the state government, and those wages are not periodically revised to take account of inflationary price rise. They also suffer from insecurity and are often forced to operate under the umbrella of their employers because their huts are built on land which belongs to the landlord who can evict them at his will. Only in West Bengal and Kerala provisions have been made to establish their rights on such land. Given the social and economic control exercised over them by their landlord-employer, they are often forced to make priority allocation of their labour to the landlord at low wages. Their right to collective bargain has been mostly disregarded, and those insisting on such rights or on those already legislated in their favour run the risk of being sent to prison on cooked up charges or being smashed by landlords' goondas. Landlords, in alliance with the local administration, often maintain a reign of terror in their areas to prevent the labourers from demanding what legally belongs to them.

A majority of these agricultural labourers being scheduled castes and tribes, their economic backwardness is in most cases coupled with social disadvantages. Atrocities committed against harijans have become a regular, shameful feature in rural life in several states of India. In 1980 alone, 16009 cases of such atrocities were reported, mostly in four states — Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. On many occasions the huts of the harijans have been put to fire, with the inmates locked in, or other methods of mass massacre have been adopted. In almost all cases such attacks have been made by the landlords' men in order to 'teach a lesson' to the harijans for showing the audacity of demanding their legal rights. In some cases, e.g., in Arwal (Bihar) where 40 people have been shot dead, the police forces have joined hand with the rural vested interests. Keeping all these in mind, the following point has been included in the Charter :

— Stringent measures be undertaken to put an end to the physical attacks on the scheduled castes and tribes, religious

minorities, women and other weaker sections of the society .

FIGHT DIVISIVE FORCES

One major issue facing the kisan movement today is the growing menace of communal and divisive forces, which are dividing the rural masses and misdirecting their anger and frustration with their living conditions in communal channels. The growth of these tendencies has a disrupting influence on the kisan organisation. The Midnapore session of AIKS noted their growth and commented that "these forces have been able to win considerable support among the people, including the peasant masses, specially where the left parties and the peasant movement is weak." Whether in Punjab or Assam or Tripura, the Kisan Sabha activists are fighting against these tendencies. In Punjab, against the background of violent secessionist activities, the AIKS comrades are preaching communal harmony. In Assam, a number of kisan comrades gave their lives in fighting separatist tendencies, proclaiming national unity and demanding protection of minorities. In Tripura, following the riots engineered by Congress, Amra Bengali and Upajati Juba Samity, the AIKS activists have worked patiently to restore communal harmony between the Bengalis and tribals. Here too, a number of AIKS activists have been murdered by TNV squads.

While AIKS and left wing parties have taken a principled stand on this issue, the ruling Congress party at the centre has repeatedly compromised with the divisive and communal forces for electoral gains. The electoral alliances with Upajati Juba Samiti in Tripura, Jharkhand in West Bengal, and Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and with all the casteist and communal forces in Kerala, are but a few examples of such electoral opportunism.

In many cases such divisive and communal forces have been backed by imperialist powers, which are interested in destabilising the Country in order to pressurise it.

The Midnapore session of AIKS took note of 832 deaths in communal conflicts between 1979 and 1981, and noted that in some places communal and casteist forces have penetrated into the police force and have used it for reaching their communal ends.

The Charter of Demands gives a call against such communal

and divisive forces :

—Defeat the game of communalist and divisive forces to disrupt the unity of the peasantry which is also threatening the unity of the country.

Two other demands relate to broader democratic issues. Point 12 demands that “NSA and ESMA be withdrawn”, these being draconian measures which threaten the democratic rights of the citizens and the working people. And, Point 11 refers to centre-state relations, saying that “centre-state relations be restructured by giving adequate powers to the states so that they can implement their programmes of social, economic and agricultural advancement”. Such restructuring is seen as a part of the democratisation process and to bring the administration closer to the grass roots. Besides, the unity of a multi-national country like ours can be strengthened only on the basis of a feeling of equality among the nationalities living here. Furthermore, the defeat of the Congress party in several states and the formation of non-Congress governments there, makes it necessary that these governments should not be subjected to discriminatory economic and political measures of the central government, and they should be provided with sufficient means and fiscal and constitutional power to carry out the programmes which they have pledged to their people. Nor should these governments be under constant threat of dismissal by the central government.

The AIKS approach on this issue of devolution is consistent; it also stands for the devolution of power from the state governments to the panchayats. Both in West Bengal and Tripura the Left Front governments, with the support of the peasant movement, have devolved a great deal of economic and administrative power and financial resources to Panchayat institutions in order to enable the rural masses themselves, through their panchayat representatives, to participate in decision-making.

UPHOLD INTERNATIONALISM

In this Golden Jubilee Year, let us also recall the glorious anti-imperialist tradition of our organisation. There has never been a session of AIKS where our commitment to fight imperialism has not been expressed through resolutions and action pro-

protect the rights of the tribal peasants and in Surma Valley to resist eviction. All these struggles, the heroism sacrifices, and dedication of the people who took part in those, struggles, would be written in gold in the history of the peasant movement of our country. While celebrating the Golden Jubilee Year, we should look back and remember those struggles which have made what the AIKS today is. □