

Chapter VI

THE ALL-INDIA KISAN SABHA

IT was the All-India Conference of those who were then interested in the kisan movement, held at Lucknow in 1936, that laid the basis for the unification of the various Provincial Peasants' Associations into an All-India Kisan Sabha, of which a Provisional Committee was formed. This was followed by more intense organisational activity in the Provinces which culminated in the holding of the first All-India Kisan Sabha session at Faizpur in 1937. This Faizpur session resulted in the formation of a regular all-India organisation with a Constitution, and with the leading organs of the Sabha formed on the basis of provisions laid down in the Constitution. Annual sessions of the Sabha were held in 1938, 1939 and 1940 at Comilla, Gaya and Palasa.

All these activities were carried on on the basis of a United Front between the Communists, the Congress Socialists and other radicals including Congressmen. In the course of these activities, not only did Kisan Sabha organisations develop, but some heroic struggles were also waged. These were struggles which had to be carried on against the stiff opposition voiced by the all-India, Provincial, District and local Congress leaderships (except in certain areas where radical Congressmen were in a majority). These struggles at the same time had to meet the repression launched by the Congress

Governments after the formation of Congress Ministries in 1937. Finally, these were struggles for demands which had the sympathy of the mass of Congressmen and hence forced the Congress Governments to bring in legislation conceding the demands of the peasantry: the U.P. Tenancy Bill, the Prakasam Report in Madras, the appointment of the Tenancy Committee in Malabar, the appointment by the League Government in Bengal of the Floud Commission which recommended the abolition of the Permanent Settlement, etc., are indications to show that the slogans and demands of the peasant organisations had such strong backing of the entire democratic movement that Provincial Governments—whether of the Congress or the League—could not deny their correctness.

The outbreak of the war in 1939, however, put new difficulties in the way of the peasant movement. The first effect of the outbreak of the war was the promulgation by the Government of India of new Ordinances and Acts which curbed the rights of the workers, peasants and other sections of the common people to carry on their organisational activity and to launch struggles for the realisation of their demands. Hundreds of active workers of the Kisan Sabha were arrested all over the country while many of them escaped arrest only because they went underground. Lathi-charges and other forms of repression were resorted to on a large scale. Hence, though for the first few months of the war, Kisan Sabha organisations functioned in a restricted way, and though the annual session of the Sabha was held in March 1940 at Palasa, the functioning of the Sabha virtually came to a standstill for the major part of 1940 and 1941. It was only by 1942 that the activities of the Sabha began to be revived and the annual session was held at Bihta in May, 1942. (Between the Palasa and Bihta sessions, the meeting of the All-India Kisan Committee was held at Pakala in 1941, but a good number of the members of

the Committee could not attend it, since they were either in jail or underground.)

The outbreak of the war, however, created other difficulties for the Kisan Sabha, difficulties arising out of political differences among the active organisers of the Sabha. It will be recalled that the Sabha was formed and functioned during the pre-war years on the basis of a United Front between the Communists, the Congress Socialists and other radicals. This United Front was possible in those years because all these groups recognised (a) the necessity for the kisans to have their own organisations independent of the Congress—organisations in which all kisans could work regardless of whether they owed allegiance to the Congress or not; (b) that these independent organisations of the kisans should work in close cooperation with the Congress, since the elimination of imperialism is the common objective of the Congress and the Kisan Sabha. It was not difficult in those years to combine these two basic policies and thus to function the Sabha on the basis of such a United Front.

This favourable situation, however, ceased to exist after the outbreak of the war. For, the Communists, the Congress Socialists, the newly-formed Forward Bloc, all had policies different from one another, as well as different from that of the Congress, on such questions as the character of the war, its international implications, its implications for the national democratic movement in India, etc. Each of them therefore had different conceptions as to how the independent class organisations of the kisans should behave in the period of the war. Conflict between these different conceptions made it extremely difficult for them to continue their United Front, particularly after the outbreak of the Soviet German War and the decision of the Congress to launch the final "Do or Die" struggle in August, 1942.

The first direct result of these political differences among the various groups which had originally joined in the formation and functioning of the Kisan Sabha was that a fair number of Congressmen and Congress Socialists left the Sabha in 1942 when it refused to line up with the Congress in its "Do or Die" struggle. The Sabha took the stand that, while the demand voiced by the Congress for "Independence, here and now" was entirely correct, the launching of a struggle of such a character was detrimental to the sacred cause for which the Sabha had fought for years. This attitude of the Sabha was considered by the Congress Socialists, and by a large number of Congressmen who had been working in the Sabha, as "betrayal of the national cause". It should, however, be noted that such non-Communist leading Congressmen who had taken the lead in the organisation of the Kisan Sabha as the late Sahajanand Saraswati and Indulal Yagnik remained in the Sabha since they agreed with its stand. They remained in the Sabha and functioned as its leading office-bearers (Swamiji being the General Secretary of the Sabha in 1943-44 and the President of the Sabha in 1944-45), for the whole period of 1942-44.

The defection of the Congress Socialists and a good number of Congressmen did, of course, prevent such an expansion of the Sabha as had become possible in those years of national upsurge. Tens of thousands of peasants who were then being drawn into the national democratic movement in the wake of the "Do or Die" struggle, were being rallied not in their class organisation, the Kisan Sabha, but against it; they were not being rallied against the national bourgeoisie, which was even then preparing for the betrayal of the cause of the peasantry, but behind it. Hostility to the Communist Party, hostility to the Soviet Union, hostility to the independent class organisation of the peasants—these were being

made the ideological basis on which the peasants were being rallied behind the national bourgeoisie. This, therefore, was a period in which what Sardar Patel and Nehru had been attempting to do since the later 'twenties—organisation of the peasantry within the framework of the Congress—was being realised in practice.

Furthermore, this was a period in which tens of thousands of Muslim peasants were being rallied by the landlord-bourgeois leadership of the Muslim League, behind its reactionary, disruptive slogan of "Two Nations".

Here therefore was a situation in which the two biggest political parties in India—parties which represented the landlord-bourgeois interests but which still had a great hold on the masses of the people—were doing their best to see that the peasantry were not allowed to form their own united, independent, class organisations. It was also a situation in which other radical groups like the Congress Socialists, Forward Bloc, etc., as well as other parties of communal reaction like the Scheduled Castes' Federation, Hindu Mahasabha, the Akalis, the Self-Respecters, etc., were doing their best to divide and disrupt the unity of the peasantry.

It was these disruptive forces that the Kisan Sabha had to contend against in the later years of the Second World War. It is therefore not surprising that the Sabha could not draw into its fold the millions of newly-awakened peasant masses and thus further strengthen the Sabha organisation. What is really surprising (surprising only for those who have no faith in the peasant masses and their capacity to overcome all the difficulties in their way and to develop their own organisations) is that the Sabha could actually develop even in those difficult days. The annual sessions of the Sabha held in 1943, 1944 and 1945 at Bhakna, Bezwada and Netrakona, were indications that the Sabha had become far more of

a real mass organisation than in the days of the Gaya, Comilla and Palasa sessions of the pre-war years. That the membership of the Sabha reached the 8-lakh target precisely in the years in which it had to contend against the propaganda of the Congress, the League, the Congress Socialist, Forward Bloc and others shows the immense strength of the independent organisation of the Sabha.

It was this inherent strength of the Sabha that enabled it to come to the forefront of the post-war revolutionary peasants' struggles—struggles like the Tebhaga struggle in Bengal, and those in Telangana, Andhra, Malabar, Tanjore District in Tamil Nad, the Warli area in Maharashtra, Patiala State, Punjab and Eastern U.P. In this new phase of peasants' struggles, there was a certain amount of relaxation in the hostility of the Congress, the Congress Socialist and other groups towards peasants' struggles. Though their prejudices against the Sabha or its Communist leadership had not been overcome, they all saw that it was the units of the Sabha and their Communist leadership that gave effective leadership to the new peasant upheaval that was overtaking the whole country. Hence, though they continued to attack the Sabha and its Communist leadership for their "betrayal of the national cause" in 1942, they began to develop an attitude of sympathetic understanding for the battles which the Sabha was waging against landlordism, against the princes and against other oppressors of the people.

This attitude of sympathetic understanding itself gave place to hostility after the new post-war upsurge and the imperialist game designed to meet that upsurge culminated in the 1947 Transfer of Power. While the struggles which the Kisan Sabha was waging in the 1946-47 period were looked upon as factors helping the national bourgeoisie in its struggle against imperialism and thus helping the national cause, the struggles after

the Transfer of Power were regarded as putting difficulties in the way of the newly-born independent State of India. These struggles therefore had to meet the intense opposition of the Congress, the Congress Socialist (now Socialist) and other groups—all of which denounced these struggles as "subversive" and "anti-national". This hostility took the character not only of a political opposition and propaganda offensive, but of a physical, police offensive. Once again, as in 1940-42, the Sabha had to work under conditions of illegality. While the 1947 Annual Session of the Sabha (that at Sikandarrao held in May 1947) had to meet at a time when the units of the Sabha in Andhra, Tamil Nad, Malabar, Cochin and Travancore were working under conditions of virtual illegality, no session at all could be held in 1948, 1949, 1950 and 1951—years in which almost the entire membership of the Central Kisan Council was either in jail or underground. Though conditions changed in the latter half of 1951 and in the beginning of 1952, the Sabha could not hold its Annual Session till 1953 because it required some time to restore its organisation.

This offensive against the Sabha, however, did not weaken it as its enemies had hoped. On the other hand, the Sabha was strengthened to a far greater degree in this period of repression than at any time in its history. This increased political influence of the Sabha was reflected in the results of the General Elections of 1951-52, in which the Kisan Sabha leader, Ravi Narayana Reddy, of Telangana polled the highest number of votes recorded in any Parliamentary Constituency in the whole country—more votes than even Prime Minister Nehru.

This, however, does not mean that there is a corresponding increase in the organisational strength of the Sabha. As a matter of fact, if one is to judge the strength of an organisation in terms of members enrolled, of the local and other units of the organisation which

are regularly functioning and other criteria of the strength of an organisation, then it will be clear that the All-India Kisan Sabha today is not stronger than it was before the new post-war upsurge took place. Membership of the Sabha stands today at about the same level as it stood at the time of the Netrakona session in 1945. As for the regular functioning of the Provincial, District and other units of the Sabha, it is perhaps less today than it was during the war years.

But far more important than this lag between the organisational strength of the Sabha and its political influence among the mass of peasantry is the fact that even from the political point of view, the Sabha has today to contend against very strong forces of reaction.

The Congress itself is even today acting as the biggest single reactionary force in the country, the biggest single force preventing the emergence of a unified peasant organisation. Clever and cunning as it is, its leadership is combining several tactics at the same time:

Firstly, it launches a *police offensive* against the vanguard of the organised peasant movement, arresting and detaining, beating up and shooting, the activists and organisers of the Kisan Sabha at all levels and on all those occasions on which the Sabha stands at the head of any serious struggle for land, for rent reduction, for tax reduction, etc.

Secondly, it does not confine itself to this police offensive against the vanguard. Together with this, it resorts to *the tactics of dividing and disrupting* the mass of the peasantry. To this end, it introduced new legislation abolishing the Zamindari, Jagirdari and other forms of Statutory Landlordism, putting restrictions on evictions, fixing rates of fair rent, etc. While this legislation created the impression among the mass of peasantry that their demands are being conceded by the Congress Government, the Congress Government takes

particular care to see that the legislation confers privileges mainly on a narrow upper layer of the peasantry; as for the large mass of peasantry, particularly of the poor tenant cultivators and share-croppers, they have to undergo all the sufferings, as we have seen, arising from the fact that all the Congress legislations allow landlords to evict their tenants and share-croppers on the ground of "resumption for self-cultivation".

Thirdly, the Congress leadership is resorting to *another variety of the same tactics—the Bhoodan movement*. This is sought to be used on the one hand to create the illusion that the land problem is being solved with the help and cooperation of the landlords themselves, while on the other hand, this very same slogan of Bhoodan is used to discourage the peasants from making demands on the Congress Governments for legislation curbing the rights of the landlords. The notorious slogan of Vinoba Bhave—the slogan of solution for the land problem through *Janashakthi*, as opposed to its solution through legislation—helps the landlords and Congress Government by dissuading the peasants from even a constitutional agitation for legislative reform.

It is, however, not only the Congress leadership which prevents the emergence of a unified peasant organisation. Equally disruptive is the role played by the PSP leadership.

It will be recalled that, when the All-India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936 and for nearly four years thereafter, the leaders of the then Congress Socialist Party were working in the All-India Kisan Sabha. They were then vociferous in defending the right of the working class and peasantry to form their own independent organisations. But they, together with such leaders of the Congress as Pandit Nehru, were insistent that these independent organisations should work under the leadership of the Congress on political questions. This funda-

mental stand of organising the peasantry under the leadership of the bourgeoisie led them, in the years of war, to a policy of disrupting the unity of the independent peasant organisation, the All-India Kisan Sabha. They sought to split the AIKS in 1942 on the ground that the AIKS could not see completely eye to eye with the Congress in its policy of struggle.

This policy of splitting the AIKS during the war was, for them, the starting point of splitting the whole working-class and peasant movement and led them to the formation of the Hind Mazdur Sabha in opposition to the All-India Trade Union Congress, and of the Kisan Panchayat in opposition to the Kisan Sabha. Furthermore, they unleashed an unbridled campaign of slander against the Kisan Sabha and against the glorious struggles which the mass of peasantry waged under its leadership in various provinces. In Telangana, Andhra, Malabar and other provinces, they went to the extent of organising their 'volunteers' against the peasants fighting for land, against evictions and for other demands.

They talk in demagogic terms and claim that their programme of land reform is far more radical than that of the Kisan Sabha. Claiming as they do that theirs is a 'programme of Socialism', they are 'opposed' not only to landlordism but rich peasants as well. These demagogic claims, however, have no relation to their practice, which is one of collaboration with all enemies of peasants' struggles, including landlords. It is remarkable how the very people who claim to be 'opposed' to landlords and rich peasants come out as the champions and organisers of such a movement as Bhoodan in which are united the leaders of the PSP and Congress as well as such big landlords as the Raja of Ramgarh.

During the last few months, the PSP has started some local struggles of the peasantry, such as the Pardi land satyagraha in Gujarat, and the recent anti-canal-

rates struggle in UP. The recently published letters of the General Secretary of the PSP to his rank and file colleagues give them the line of taking every mass issue and fighting for it. PSP units in several areas have, in accordance with this line, started struggles on burning mass problems. This, however, is so done as not to strengthen but to weaken the struggles of the peasantry. For, the overriding consideration with which these struggles are organised is to prevent the emergence of united organisations of the peasantry under the united leadership of all those parties and elements which stand by the interests of peasants. Firm rejection of all proposals for the formation of United Committees of Struggle, not to speak of a united Kisan Sabha, is the fundamental aim with which these struggles are launched.

It is, however, not only the Congress leadership and the PSP that work towards the prevention of the emergence of a unified peasant organisation. Their activities are supplemented by the disruptive tactics of the parties and organisations of communal reaction. The Jan Sangh, the Hindu Mahasabha, the R.S.S., etc., are seeking to divert the attention of the peasantry from questions of land and of struggle against landlordism to such unreal and false issues as "Ban on Cow Slaughter". The Akalis, the Dravida Kazhagam, the Scheduled Castes' Federation and such other disruptive parties and organisations are also doing their utmost to see that the mass of peasantry who are now being awakened into political consciousness are turned from anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles to mutual struggles among peasants on the basis of caste, religion or nationality.

It would be wrong for the Communist Party and other elements interested in the development of a unified, independent, class organisation of the peasantry to ignore the tremendous harmful influence exerted by the disruptive activities of these parties and organisations.

Particularly has the Communist Party, as the vanguard of the working class in the country, to come out as the bold and uncompromising fighter against these disruptive ideologies and as the unifier of the peasantry on the basis of class struggle. It has mercilessly to expose the disruptive game of the Congress, of the parties of communal reaction, of the PSP and of any other party or group which seeks to divert the attention of the mass of peasantry from the real issues of anti-landlord, anti-moneylender, anti-imperialist struggles, to such false issues as Bhoodan, "Ban on Cow Slaughter", etc.

The basis for such a unification of the peasantry already exists; that basis lies in the fact that the living and working conditions of the peasantry—whether they owe allegiance to one or other organisation of the ruling classes, whether they cling to one or other ruling class ideology—are daily deteriorating. Whether a peasant owes allegiance to the Congress, the Jan Sangh, the PSP or the Communist Party, whether he believes in Gandhism, in Democratic Socialism or in Communism, he is under constant attack from the ruling classes by way of eviction offensives, increased tax burdens and fall in the prices of agricultural products. Whether a peasant is prepared to come organisationally into the Kisan Sabha or not, he is in need of some concrete action in order that his grievances with regard to all these problems are redressed. It is because of this that unity in action is developing on several concrete issues in several States and areas. It is this that is the basis of the call for unity in action which the All-India Kisan Sabha gave in its *Policy Statement* adopted at Cannanore.