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**STRUGGLE OF
THE SURMA VALLEY
PEASANTRY**

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ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA

FOREWORD

THIS IS THE FIFTH IN THE SERIES OF PAMPHLETS being published to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of the All India Kisan Sabha. The central function of the celebration is being held in Patna from May 17 to 19, 1986.

This tells the story of the Surma valley peasant movement. Surma Valley Kisan Sabha was one of the first units of the All India Kisan Sabha formed in 1936, simultaneously with the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha at Lucknow. The Surma Valley consisted of Bengali-speaking districts of Cachar and Sylhet which found part of the Assam province but was given the status of provincial Kisan Sabha by the All India Kisan Sabha. This peasant movement had become a very powerful movement mainly fighting against feudal oppression and for tenancy rights. The landlords and police used elephants to destroy the houses of the tenants and to evict them. The Kisan Sabha workers had to face untold repression. The late Irawat Singh—popular leader of Manipuri peasants—had also participated in strengthening this movement.

After Independence Sylhet district went to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and Cachar remained in India. The Kisan Sabha in Brahmaputra Valley was formed much later in 1943 and functioned separately till Surma Valley Kisan Sabha merged with it in 1952. No separate unit of Surma Valley Kisan Sabha exists today, yet the impact of the movement is even today felt on both sides of the border.

The story of this heroic struggle is written by three leaders, namely Biresh Misra, Pranesh Biswas and Achintya Bhattacharya, who were among the founders of the Surma Valley peasant movement and continue to serve the cause of All India Kisan Sabha. This will no doubt be educative for all those interested in the liberation of the peasantry from the exploitative system.

KISAN STRUGGLE IN THE SURMA VALLEY

Biresb Misra

A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE INAUGURAL SESSION OF the All India Kisan Sabha in Lucknow in April 1936, the first session of the Surma Valley Provincial Kisan Conference was held in the village Beheli in the Sunamganj sub-division of the district of Sylhet. Comrade Bankim Mukherjee, the reputed Kisan Sabha leader of Bengal, presided over the conference.

The two districts of Surma Valley—Sylhet and Cachar—had been part of Bengal geographically, politically, economically and linguistically. In 1872, these two districts had been cut off from Bengal and tagged to the newly-formed Assam State by the British rulers for serving their imperialist interests. But this arbitrary transfer to Assam could not snap the bond of affinity that the people of Surma Valley had with the rest of Bengal. Particularly the similarity of land-relations and the struggles of the Bengal peasantry arising out of them, had their repercussions in Surma Valley also.

So, when the All India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936, the constitution of the AIKS provided the status of a separate provincial unit for Surma Valley, though from the administrative point of view it was a part of the state of Assam.

The main organisers of the Beheli conference were the Congress Socialist group of left workers in Sylhet Congress and the members of the Communist group of youths from Sylhet district. The C.P. group was formed in Calcutta by the end of 1935. Late Suresh Chandra Deb, originally a Gandhite Congress leader of Karimganj, and Biresb Misra, among others, were

the C.S.P. members in Surma Valley, and the newly-formed C.P. group was represented by Comrades Lala Saradindu Dey, Chittaranjan Das, Digen Das Gupta and Jiten Bhattacharjee who took active part in organising the Behali Kisan Sabha conference. It was Comrade Saradindu Dey who took a prominent part in organising this first conference at Beheli and he was elected the first secretary of the Surma Valley provincial unit of the K.S.

I feel it my duty to make a special mention of Lala Saradindu Dey here. A life-long revolutionary and valiant fighter and leader of innumerable Kisan struggles in Surma Valley, Lala Saradindu is now 84 years of age, living in Agartala in a sympathiser's family. He is ailing seriously and is not in a position to move out. It appears the most of his co-fighters who are still surviving, have almost forgotten him.

We have a long list of selfless Kisan Sabha workers since its inception, but many more have been lost in oblivion. However, when a full history of the K.S. organisation and glorious struggles waged under the mighty banner of All India K.S. will be written, the names of these selfless workers and martyrs are sure to be remembered and recorded.

BHANUBEEL KISAN STRUGGLE

We assembled in the Beheli conference with our rich experience of the heroic struggle of the Bhanubeel peasants who were mostly Manipuris and of a militant nature. They were the tenants of Pritthimpasa Zamindars, one of the very big landlords in the district of Sylhet. It is situated in the South Sylhet sub-division of district. The landlords of this estate were very oppressive also.

It has already been noted that the land system in Sylhet district was also under permanent settlement like other districts of Bengal, introduced by the British rulers. Cachar district, however, was kept out of the permanent settlement system and 'ryotwari' system was introduced there.

In zamindari areas the tenants of a zamindar or a 'mirasdar' (small landlord) had no occupancy rights over the land they lived on or cultivated. They could be evicted at the sweet will of landlord. The tenants had no right to build a pacca house or dig a

tank on the land they occupied, nor they were entitled to cut a tree from the occupied land. The tenants were not allowed to wear sandals or shoes, nor they could use an umbrella while going to their landlords' house.

Apart from the usual rent in cash or kind, the landlords extracted 'Abwab' of 'Nazarana' during different festivals (like Durga Pujas, etc.) and on the occasion of different ceremonies (such as marriage, etc.) in landlord's family. Such extortions, though not legally sanctioned, had become customary rights with the landlords. Such were the forms of social oppressions and economic extortions by the landlords which had been becoming more and more unbearable for the tenants.

In Bengal, agitation and struggles of the tenants over the tenancy rights and against social oppressions and illegal exploitation had already been going on in full swing. In 1931, Indian National Congress, in its Karachi Session, had passed a resolution on agrarian policy of the National Congress for the first time.

All these developments had their impact on the Surma Valley peasants as well as on the middle class Congress workers.

Under these circumstances, the Bhanubeei tenants, under the leadership of Shri Baikuntha Sharma, an aged and respected priest of the Manipuri community, raised their demand for tenancy rights and against the social oppression and economic extortions by the landlord. The landlords of "Ali Amjad Estate" (the sons of the late Syad Ali Amjad Khan) were naturally enraged and refused to concede any of the demands of the tenants. The push and pull between the landlords and the Manipuri tenants went on during the entire period of 1931. The tenants approached the Sylhet district Congress leadership for help. Though the district Congress leadership, at that time, was dominated by the landlord elements like Brojendra Narayan Chaudhary, a big zamindar of Pailgao, the left elements like Shri Abala Kanta Gupta (Secy. of district Congress committee) Suresh Ch. Deb, and some other members of the district committee with left orientation, had also considerable influence in the committee. So, the request and demand of the Bhanubeei tenants had been referred to the president of the South Sylhet

sub-divisional committee, Shri Purnendu Kishore Sengupta, a Gandhite Congress leader, who had also organised a constructive centre (Vidyasram) on Gandhian line near Kulara junction of the A.B. Rly in South-Sylhet sub-division. Vidyasram had a band of trained and selfless Congress workers. A good number of them had joined the All India Kisan Sabha when it was organised in Surma Valley.

Shri Sengupta, after enquiry on the spot, reported in favour of the tenants, and himself, with his Vidyasram workers, stood in support of the Bhanubeel tenants.

In the meantime the C.D. movement of 1932 was started and on the 26th of January, 1932, almost all the Sylhet district Congress leaders got arrested after a severe lathi charge on the Independence Day procession led by them in Sylhet town. In 4 other sub-divisions in the district of Sylhet and also at Silchar (Cachar), almost all the leading Congress leaders on sub-divisional level also got arrested on the same day.

The vacuum thus created in the district Congress was filled up by the comparatively younger and newer elements who were generally left-minded.

In South-Sylhet sub-division Shri Sengupta was somehow spared from getting arrested, but most of his followers (Vidyasram workers) connected with the Bhanubeel peasant movement, were arrested and jailed.

By the decision of the second rank leaders and workers who were not arrested up till then, the responsibility of the district Congress centre was entrusted to a team of Congress workers, most of whom were left-minded.

Purnendu Sengupta, Nirad Gupta (a Gandhite and sincere Congress worker), Kripesh Dutta (a life long revolutionary and one of the most sincere freedom-fighters in the district of Sylhet), Biren Das (a sincere and intellectual Congress worker of Akhalia, near Sylhet town), Biresh Misra, Hemange Biswas, (then a prominent student leader), and some more representatives from each sub-division constituted the new district leadership. Most of them were left-minded Congress workers and some were connected with the terrorist movement of the time.

Shri Biresh Misra, Nirad Gupta, Kripesh Dutta, and Biren

Das were entrusted with the responsibility of running the district centre and guiding and coordinating the C.D. movement throughout the district and also maintaining the link with the upper-level Congress committees.

The new district leadership gave utmost importance to the Bhanubeel peasant struggle. They advised Shri Sengupta to go underground and guide the Bhanubeel struggle which he did, up to the time of his arrest by the middle of 1932.

The presence of Congress workers by the side of the struggling peasants of Bhanubeel enraged the landlords, and the Government came down with heavy hands to suppress this uprising of the peasants, as they could see the real danger inherent in this struggle. Eviction order was given, and a number of elephants with armed soldiers were despatched to Bhanubeel to evict the tenants by demolishing their houses. The peasantry could not be cowed down inspite of such colossal repression.

The district Congress centre started sending batches of workers from the district headquarter. Seven revolutionary workers, all from Sibpur Engineering School in Calcutta, who came to help the C.D. movement in Sylhet, were despatched to Bhanubeel for building up a resistance movement by the peasants. They took up the job in right earnest. When the elephants were despatched to demolish the houses, the Manipuri peasants would start 'Kirtan' with 'Khel' and 'Kartal' drums and other musical instruments, thus scaring the elephants. The Government arrested Baikuntha Sarma and other local militant workers, resorted to lathicharges on the masses of peasantry rallied for resisting the evictions, and about a score of Congress volunteers, including the Vidyasram workers, the followers of Shri Sengupta, were arrested. But police could not spot out the Sibpur Engineering student workers who mixed up with the local masses of the peasantry, took photoes of eviction operations (with elephants), and kept up the morale of the struggling peasants. Demolished houses were constantly improvised and none of the peasant families left the village. The courageous young daughter of Shri Baikuntha Sarma, Smt. Leela Sarma, stood before the struggling kisans after the arrest of her father, which created a great enthusiasm in the minds of the Manipuri peasants and helped, to a great extent, in keeping up the morale of struggling

peasants of Bhanubeel.

This struggle of the Bhanubeel peasants got wide publicity not only inside the district but it also in Bengal and other parts of India.

Help and relief for the Bhanubeel movement came from outside the district through Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC), and these were disbursed through the Sylhet District Committee Centre to the struggling areas.

When the 1932 C.D. Movement began to subside, the District Congress leadership invited Shri Sengupta, who had gone underground, to come over to Sylhet to decide the future course of action regarding Bhanubeel movement. The eviction-team had been already in the possession of the District Congress centre in Sylhet.

Purnendu Babu started with all other papers and reports, but as he moved without proper precaution in spite of the prior instruction from the District Centre, he got arrested at Kulura Junction Station with all the papers and reports he was carrying with him.

The District Centre was perturbed but did not lose heart and took the decision to contact Shri K.C. Neogi, the leader of the Bengal Congress group in Central Legislative Assembly, to focus the Bhanubeel struggle in Central legislature, and through him arrangement was made to contact Shri V.K. Krishna Menon in England. The photoes of ruthless evictions and elaborate reports of atrocious repression by British rulers on the Bhanubeel peasantry reached Shri Krishna Menon's hand in England. Shri Menon took up the matter with Miss Wilkinsen, the Labour Party M.P. Shri Menon came over to India with Miss Wilkinson a few months after and also reached Bhanubeel village riding on an elephant. After going back to England, Miss Wilkinson raised the matter in the British Parliament which helped in restraining the repressive moves of the British rulers in India. This boosted the morale of the Bhanubeel peasants to a high pitch. Though no settlement could be made with regard to Bhanubeel peasants' demand during that period, the landlords also could not make further attempts for eviction and driving out the peasants from their homes. The peasants had resorted to no-rent actions against the landlords. The tenants did not

pay the rent until a compromise was reached after the formation of the Congress coalition ministry in Assam in 1938, and some of their vital demands were conceded to.

In the meantime, almost all the left workers and leaders connected with the Bhanubeel struggle, participated in the Beheli conference and decided to take up the tenancy issue and the question of "Nankar" right throughout the valley as the major campaign and build up Kisan Sabha on a strong and wide basis.

After the formation of the Surma Valley Provincial Kisan Sabha in 1936, the entire Bhanubeel peasantry, with their undisputed leader Shri Baikuntha Sarma, joined the Kisan Sabha. A strong K.S. unit was formed at Bhanubeel which functioned till the partition of India, keeping the Kisan Sabha flag high in Bhanubeel and surrounding villages.

STRUGGLE FOR THE TENANCY RIGHTS

The demands of the tenants regarding their tenancy rights were formulated in the Beheli conference, more or less, on the following lines :—

1. The tenants who have been in occupation of landlords' land for 12 years (or more), will have the occupancy rights which means that they can't be evicted at the sweet-will of the landlords.
2. Tenants having occupancy rights shall be entitled to dig tanks and build pacca houses on their occupied land.
3. All illegal extortions by the landlords shall have to be stopped.
4. Nankar System (semi-serf system) which includes free labour in landlords' houses and on their lands, should be terminated and for that provisions would be made in the tenancy legislation, giving them the occupancy right to their homestead land and also on a portion of the land that they have been cultivating for their landlords.

They should be exempted from all sorts of free labour that they have to render to their landlords' house and landlords' *khas* land.

5. Tenants settled on the Tea Gardens' surplus land in Cachar and Sylhet districts should also enjoy the occupancy right

on their settled land, like the tenants settled on zamindari lands.

6. All oppressions perpetrated on the tenant shall have to be stopped and all social indignities to be removed.

It was also decided that these demands should not only be popularised by launching a Valley-wide campaign but also be focussed in the Assam Legislative Council through the existing MLCs sympathetic to these demands.

The mass campaign for popularising the above demands was taken up seriously not only by the K.S. leaders of Surma Valley. All K.S. workers participated in it. On the Legislative front, though the scope was very limited during that period, as Assam Council was dominated by the landlord elements and the British planters, one of the Assam Valley MLCs, Shri Rohini Kr. Chaudhary and a Member from Cachar, Shri Sanat Kr. Das, though himself a landlord, could be prevailed upon to raise some of the demands such as the occupancy right of the tenants and demands relating to 'Nankars'. Hundreds of meetings and *baithaks* were held throughout the district of Sylhet and processions with flags and posters in all the zamindari areas were organised. Great enthusiasm prevailed among the peasant masses.

But the landlords were not sitting idle. In isolated areas K.S. workers were being attacked by the goonda elements engaged by the landlords. The procession in Lauta-Bhahadurpur area in Karimganj sub-division, which was led by K.S. leaders like Comrade Saradindu Dey, Shri Suresh Ch. Deb and other prominent leaders of Sylhet and Karimganj, was attacked and many of the processionists got injured. The zamindars of the area employed their loyal *nankars*, armed with lathis, to attack this procession.

This incident sharply revealed the weak spot in our movement. We had been putting more stress on the demands of the general tenants and a bit lesser stress on the demands of the *nankars*. We corrected our approach in the campaign. All star-agitators were thrown in the field and a whirlwind campaign on *nankar*-demands was launched from Bhatipara Zamindari in the west to Badarpur (Mahakal Zamindari) in the east, and from Banghi Kunda in the north to Prithimpasa in the south of the

district of Sylhet. The K.S. branch units were organised almost in all zamindari areas having large contingents of 'nankars' in them. This campaign had its desired effects. The 'nankars', throughout the district, were on the verge of an uprising. They began to refuse to perform the humiliating jobs in landlords' families, so far done by them. It became impossible for the landlords to engage their 'nankars' against the K.S. movements or in suppressing their own tenants as before. It was thus that the oppressive hand of the landlords was broken.

It should not be forgotten that the 'nankar' movement was a part and parcel of the tenancy movement in general that was initiated by the Kisan Sabha. The success of both the movements was closely interlinked, though the 'nankar' struggle had its distinctive features. But I refrain from taking up here the details of the 'nankar' movement in Sylhet, as a volume can to be written on it.

It suffices to mention here, so far as the 'nankar' struggle is concerned, that the Congress coalition ministry in Assam was forced to pass the *Sylhet Tenancy Act* (1939), incorporating almost all the major demands of tenants. But due to the opposition put up by the landlord elements in the coalition-ministry itself, the demands of the 'nankars' had to be put off. But the fire of the 'nankar' struggle could not be extinguished. It continued till the partition of India under the Kisan Sabha flag. After the partition, when the major part of Sylhet district had been transferred to East Pakistan, 'nankar' agitation still continued and the East Pakistan Government had to set-up a commission for the solution of the 'nankar' problem. When the commission came to Sylhet for enquiry and for acquainting themselves about the problem and its solution, the nankars approached the writer of this note to take him to some of the centres of enquiry. The evidences taken by the commission were guided by him and he also represented their case before the commission. Ultimately, the commission reported in favour of the "nankar" demands in all of its essential aspects, and the East Pakistan Government accepted the commission's report for implementation.

1937 ELECTIONS UNDER NEW REFORM

Within a year of the Beheli conference, the general election of

1937, under Montagu—Chelmsford Reform, was declared. The K.S. decided to put up a candidate of its own with Congress-ticket from Sunamganj sub-division—the stronghold of the Kisan Sabha. As the District Congress Committee was then dominated by the left workers, our nominee—Shri Karuna Sindhu Roy of Beheli—was ultimately accepted as the Congress nominee from Sunamganj. The whole of the sub-division comprised the constituency. It was a very large constituency—so far mostly dominated by the big landlords. The landlords set up Shri Nagendra Chaudhary, the zamindar of the Jalsuka estate in Sunamganj sub-division. He was a big landlord and he had considerable influence in the sub-division also, in whose support all the big landlords combined to defeat the K.S. nominee. Election in Sunamganj sub-divisional constituency became a trial of strength between the landlords and the newly born Kisan Sabha and its movement. In this trial of strength the Kisan movement came out victorious with flying colours. Shri Karuna Sindhu Roy was a patriot who courted imprisonments repeatedly. After the formation of the Kisan Sabha his loyalty to the Sabha was unquestionable. He ultimately took the membership of the CPI, illegal at that time. He was the lone CPI member in the Assam Legislature during that period.

SECOND PHASE OF THE TENANCY MOVEMENT

After the election, the second Kisan Sabha conference of the Surma Valley provincial unit was held at Beanibazar (1937). Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed presided over the session. The main decision taken in this session of the conference was to intensify the tenancy movement including the rights and demands of the nankars. The battle was to be carried on in the legislative front also, utilising the newly elected member representing the Sabha and also harnessing the support of all the left Congress legislators who were elected in the last election. For giving the campaign of the Kisan Sabha a concrete shape, it was decided that a Tenancy Bill has to be drafted and placed before the Assam Assembly in the name of Shri Karuna Sindhu Roy and carry on an intensive campaign all throughout the Valley on the basis of the Bill. Comrade Probodha Nanda Kar, a lawyer of the Sylhet Bar, who had joined the Kisan Sabha and ultimately came to

the Communist Party, was entrusted to draft the Bill, basing it on Kisan Sabha demands. Comrade Kar drafted the Bill, aided by the Kisan Sabha leaders, efficiently and very ably. Comrade Roy presented the Bill in the Assam Legislative Assembly.

The campaign started right after the Beanibazar conference and engulfed the entire tenant and Nankar population of the District of Sylhet.

SHILLONG MARCH OF SURMA VALLEY PEASANTS

On the crest of this kisan awakening and enthusiasm, a big march in Shillong was planned by the provincial K.S. About a thousand kisans and nankars marched to Shillong on foot, scaling the hills, which was a very difficult journey. The Autumn Session (1938) of the Assam Assembly was going on. In Shillong it was the first political procession with flags, festoons and posters. The crisis in the Sadulla Ministry was already intensifying due to the changed political situation, as a last straw on the camel's back. Shri Sadulla at first hesitated to give permission to the procession and the subsequent meeting, but ultimately, under the pressure of the Congress opposition party which had become very strong after 1937 election, and also from a number of his own supporters from Surma Valley, he had to yield. The Kisan March was an unprecedented political demonstration in Shillong which brought the entire Shillong people by the side of the long route through which it marched. A memorandum was presented to Sadulla enumerating the burning kisan demands—the Tenancy Bill and the nankar rights. The meeting was, after much hesitation, allowed to be held in front of the main Police Station. A huge meeting was held on the thana ground attended by several thousand people apart from the marching kisans, which was addressed by the important kisan leaders from Surma Valley and some Congress MLAs—including, of course, Shri Karuna Sindhu Roy—all of whom sharply criticised the anti-peasant and pro-landlord policy of the Sadulla Ministry and demanded the resignation of Sir Sadulla.

A crisis had already been brewing in Sadulla Cabinet. This Kisan March and the meeting only intensified the crisis to its last limit. Sir Sadulla resigned the next day, and the formation of a Congress coalition ministry came on the agenda.

*THE COALITION MINISTRY AND
THE TENANCY LEGISLATION*

In the formation of the Congress coalition ministry in Assam under the leadership of Shri Gopinath Bardoloi, the left Congress leaders also had a hand. Apart from the choice of taking Ministers from Surma Valley, they also advocated the inclusion of Shri Fakaruddin Ali Ahmed in the ministry. He was a young Barrister and a nationalist Muslim leader who all along refused to join the Muslim League and was elected as an independent candidate. He was prevailed upon to join the ministry. The Surma Valley left-Congress workers wanted that the portfolio of Land Revenue should be allotted to Fakaruddin Saheb. Shri Arun Kr. Chanda—then President of the Cachar Congress and Deputy Leader of the coalition party—and Shri Biresh Misra pulled their weight in favour of Fakaruddin Saheb and his portfolio, and it was ultimately accepted by the Congress High Command.

After the formation of the coalition ministry the Kisan Sabha agitation and nankar struggle acquired new strength and sweep.

The new Revenue Minister could be persuaded to undertake a tour in Surma Valley for addressing meetings on the issue of tenancy and nankar demands. A number of meetings in all the important K.S. bases and in all the Surma Valley towns were organised by the K.S. Thousands of people attended all these meetings addressed by the Revenue Minister in support of the kisan demands. The enthusiasm of the kisans attained a new height and the landlords became panicky.

The Revenue Minister, after finishing his tour of Surma Valley, suggested a joint meeting of the landlords' representatives of Sylhet district and the representatives of the Kisan Sabha.

The meeting was held in the Sarda Memorial Hall in Sylhet town. All the important personages from the landlords' side and a large number of K.S. leaders and workers from all over Sylhet and Cachar districts attended the meeting, the Revenue Minister himself presiding. It was a unique meeting where the viewpoints of both the sides were sharply put forward and recorded. It was "class struggle in a closed-door Hall" as

was the caption of report published in "Naya Duniya", the left journal published from Sylhet. While the zamindars conceded, in principle, the enacting of tenancy legislation, they differed on the details of the Bill incorporating the K.S. demands. Naturally, no agreement could be expected from such a meeting. Such a meeting could not produce any tangible results.

The Assam Cabinet, however, decided to bring the Sylhet Tenancy Bill on behalf of the Government itself, and Shri Karuna Sindhu Roy was requested to withdraw his private bill which he did, following the decision of the Kisan Sabha.

The Government Bill incorporated the essential demands of the tenants including the tenancy right in zamindari areas. But under pressure from tea planters whose strong representatives were also in the Cabinet—the tenancy right in Tea Garden lands was not included in the Government Bill. So also, under the pressure of the landlords who had their strong support in the Congress party itself, the major demands of the 'nankars' were also discarded. The main demands of Kisan Sabha's battle for the inclusion of these two essential demand continued in the legislature as well as in the field—among the masses. The Sylhet Tenancy Bill, however, was passed with slight amendments here and there—which, of course, was a big victory of the tenants and the Kisan Sabha.

The victory of the "nankars", after partition in East Pakistan, has already been mentioned.

In Brahmaputra Valley, the Kisan Sabha was organised after the formation of the Communist Party unit in 1943. Surma Valley unit of the Kisan Sabha maintained its separate identity as a Provincial unit up to the time of partition of India. Assam Provincial Kisan Sabha was formed after 1943, by amalgamating the truncated part of Surma Valley as a result of the partition and newly formed Kisan Sabha units in Bramputra Valley under the Banner of the All India Kisan Sabha.

Assam Valley peasants have a record of historical struggles and revolts since long before the formation of the Kisan Sabha and also under the mighty banner of the All India Kisan Sabha. The writing of a complete history of all these glorious struggles and movements has to be undertaken by the existing leadership of the All India Kisan Sabha in right earnest. □

PEASANT STRUGGLES AND GROWTH OF THE KISAN SABHA IN ASSAM

P.C. Biswas

THOUGH IT TOOK TEN YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH of the All India Kisan Sabha at Lucknow in 1936, for the formation of the Assam Provincial Kisan Sabha (comprising the Assam Valley districts; the Surma Valley Provincial Kisan Sabha having been established in the year 1936 itself), there were many examples of *glorious militant struggles carried on by the peasants of Assam throughout the nineteenth century. However, these struggles were not properly organised and generally took the form of spontaneous outbursts in an elemental way of their discontent against the periodic increase of the revenue (in ryotwari areas) and increased rent and loss of occupancy rights of the tenants in the permanently-settled district of Goalpara.* Whereas the revenues payable by the zamindars were permanently fixed by the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwallis in 1793, there were no Land Tenancy Acts till 1929 to regulate the rights of the tenants and the determination of the rent, and only some sections of the Bengal Rent Law, extending the rights of the occupancy of the tenants, were made applicable to the Goalpara district. In the ryotwari areas also, there was no specific tenancy legislation (till 1935) and the Land Revenue Regulation as adopted in 1886, guided the settlement of land on temporary (for five or ten years) basis with scope for reassessment of the land revenue during every resettlement. The Government-tenant relationship was supposed to be guided by contract, local customs (continuing from the Ahom Rule) and the principles of natural justice. But actually it was a travesty of justice for the tenants, most of

whom were deprived of their occupancy rights, as had been enjoyed by them during the Ahom rule, and they were subjected to arbitrary enhancement of revenue to fill the coffers of the imperialist rulers. On the other hand, with a view to promoting the colonial interests of the industrial bourgeoisie of England, vast areas of land were settled revenue-free or with nominal rate for tea plantation under the Waste Land Grant Rule 1838, Old Assam Rules 1854, Fee Simple Rules 1862/1874 and New Lease Rules 1876.

EARLY PEASANT STRUGGLES

As the Goalpara zamindars were middlemen between the State and the tenants, with many other intermediaries in between them, and zamindars being assured of their permanently fixed revenue, they tried to extract as much as possible from the tenants as rent and other kinds of legal extortions, making the peasants most exasperated. During the pre-British period, the tenants used to pay rent not in cash but in kind and by labour (according to Pyke system). Later on, rent only on the Shali land (winter crop land) was introduced. Dispute arose between the Bijni Raja (the biggest zamindar of the district) and his tenants of the Khutaghat and Habraghat Parganas, the tenants holding that the rent was fixed on the basis of the productive capacity of the whole land (including non-cultivated, dry land and homestead land). The peasant struggle continued for thirty long years (1823-1853). After some hesitations the Government sided with the zamindars and, after survey, land was classified on the basis of quality and each class of land was differently assessed to revenue, and ultimately the total rent collected increased three-fold (from Rs. 35,000 collected in 1853 it increased to Rs.121,000 in 1875) and the tenants could no longer come in direct confrontation with Government, and their movement collapsed. However, their suppressed discontent increased further. There was tenant revolt in Ghurla Pargana under the Gau ripur Raja against increase of rent (1854-1875). The Garo tribal tenants, under the Bijni Raj, also rose in revolt against grabbing of their tribal community land and encroaching on the traditional rights of the Garo Laskara (headman). Ultimately the Government separated the Garo Hills from Gaolpara and made a separate

district, and took the responsibility of collecting rent from the Garo tenants, giving 75 per cent of the collection to the Raja.

In the ryotwari areas also, there were many peasant revolts directly against the Government itself. In Phulaguri, a tribal (Lalung) dominated area of the Nowgong district, the ryots having failed to represent their grievances against the imposition of revenue on their homesteads, and *baris* (gardens) and threatened taxation of betelnut and *Pan* leaves, before the Deputy Commissioner peacefully, held several Rij Mels (people's general assemblage) and rose (with lathis) in armed conflicts with the Government armed forces, and killed one British officer (Lt. Singer) by lathi blow when he tried himself to snatch a lathi from the hands of a tenant. Many died in subsequent police firing, their strength being reinforced from Darrang. In several places of Kamrup and Darrang districts, the ryots opposed the enhancement of revenue during the resettlement operations of 1892. The tenants had to already mortgage their land to the trader-moneylender (generally outsiders) to pay their revenue, and this time their revenue was increased by 70 per cent to 80 per cent, in some cases by 100 per cent. The tenants refused to pay this enhanced rate and the Government could not collect the revenue in Patidarang, Nalbari, Barama (tribal concentration), Bajali, Upper Barbhag, Sarukhetri, etc. At the pitch of the discontent, the tenants attacked the Rangia Bazar in December 1893 and looted the shops and came into clash with the police.

PATHARUGHAT REVOLT

The tenants of Darrang used to pay a tax of Rs. 3 per plough till 1841. The Government, after classification of land, imposed separate rent on each kind of land which increased the burden on the ryots. The total revenue collected from Darrang tenants in 1832-33 was Rs. 41,506, increased to Rs. 135,454 in 1842-43, and further increased to Rs. 744,689 in 1862-63. By the further enhancement of revenue during the resettlement of 1892, the ryots assembled at Patharughat (both Hindus and Muslims) and clashed with the Government armed forces resulting in death of as many as 140 tenants. The Kisan Sabha could draw great

inspiration and valuable lessons by studying the history of their heroic peasant struggles, even though there were ultimately suppressed by much superior Government forces.

NEXT PHASE OF PEASANTS STRUGGLE

Though the Assam Provincial Congress Committee was formed in 1921, yet the resurgent people's movement in Assam (the ryots' struggles were supported by the newly educated middle-class people of the town also) got in touch with the broader national movement through sending delegates to the different sessions of the Indian National Congress (beginning from the 1886 Calcutta session) on behalf of the Upper Assam Association, Tezpur Ryot Sabha, etc. which sponsored the peasants movement in a less militant way. The zamindar of Bagribari (Harendra Naranan Singha) in Goalpara district attended the 1888 Allahabad session of the Congress. In the later period (1945-47) it was against the zamindar of this Bagribari Estate that the tribal tenants carried their long-drawn struggle to preserve their rights on forest. However, the fact remains that Assam Association and various ryot sabhas played a significant role in rousing the consciousness of the people, including the peasants, against the exploitation and oppressive methods of the British rulers and with the birth of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee; many of the Association leaders joined the Congress and the Assam Association virtually ceased to exist afterwards.

CONGRESS AND THE PEASANTS MOVEMENT

During 1905-1921, anti-partition and Non-Cooperation movement, there was no separate peasants' movement as such, as there was some economic growth due to the extension of cultivated land and due to the moderate increase of revenue during the 1905 resettlement by the Government (learning as they did from the reaction during the earlier assessment in 1892). It is, however, known that the tribal forest villagers of Kachugaon (in Goalpara district) stopped giving *begar* (free labour to the forest department) during the Non-Cooperation movement.

In 1925 the Government proposed to increase the land

revenue on the basis of fixing the same at 20 per cent of the value of the gross produce, and a bill (Assam Settlement Bill 1925) was moved in the Council, but in face of stiff opposition it could not be passed through. Again, the same was reintroduced in 1930. The peasants were already hard hit by the world-wide economic depression of 1929 and the prices of agricultural produce crashed. Even though Gandhiji was not in a mood to start any mass movement, the people in Assam, including peasants, held a series of Ryot Conferences demanding remission of land revenue, and the Governor himself had to come out with the proposal that the revenue might be reduced by three annas a rupee. *The different local Ryot Sabhas were consolidated into All Assam Ryot Sabha in 1933 and its first session was held at Tilikiam (near Jhrhat).* In the Goalpara district Nikhil Goalpara Krishak Sanmilian was formed in 1933, mainly for ventilating the grievances of the tenants of Mechpara Estate and the Congress leaders Omeo Kumar Das, Hemchandra Barua, G.N. Bordoloi, Fakhruddin Ahmed presided over the annual sessions of the same, the last one (fifth) being presided by Swami Sahajananda Saraswati which was held at Saikoch in 1940. Some Communist workers, including Jeladindu Sarkar of Chapar (exerted from Bengal) and one Communist leader from Rangpur, attended the same. But it is wrong to say (as is being said by some) that this conference was held under the leadership of the Communist Party, when there were no organised party committees yet formed in Assam Valley. Besides, there was no membership enlisted in this Sanmilian and no affiliation was sought or granted by the AIKS. No delegate attended any session of the AIKS from the Krishak Sanmilian and no Kisan Committee was formed. The Second World War having already started, the Congress workers also did not try to activate this Sanmilian and there was no committee of the CPI yet formed in the district to take up the responsibility of activating the Sanmilian or form a Kisan Sabha branch till 1943.

There was a Halua Sangha (tillers union) formed at Golaghat under the initiative of some left-minded Congressmen. Under the leadership of Jadu Saikia, its name was changed to Krishak Sabha but, in its meeting, call to support the Congress was always given. Even after the formation of the Congress.

Socialist Party in a conference held at Missamara (near Goalghar), presided by Somnath Lahiri and attended by Amiya Das Gupta and Biswanath Mukherjee (when a separate Communist group was also formed at the time), there was no preparation for establishing a Kisan Sabha independent of the Congress and affiliated with the AIKS. *There was no representative attending any session of the AIKS till 1945 Netrokotta session, where five delegates attended, being elected as such in the Balijans Kisan conference organised under the initiative of Pranesh Biswas.* However, Jagannath Bhattacharyya of Sibsagar, while studying at Benaras, came into contact there with the Congress Socialist and Communist leaders and he attended the first session of the AIKS held at Lucknow, but not as a delegate or representative of Kisan Sabha which was yet to be born in Assam, and there is no record of any branch of AIKS having been formed by him after the Lucknow session. *So whatever peasant movement was there in Assam Valley in the thirties, it was primarily under the umbrella of the Congress, with opportunity open to non-Congressmen, also including the Jotedars (in Goalpara) and other big ryots and middle-class people (in other districts) joining these movements. Naturally, the problems of the poor and landless peasants, Adi-Kandua (sharecroppers) and agricultural labourers did not find any place in the discussions of the Ryot Sabhas or Sanmilans. The Congress workers themselves could not think raising the demands of the lower sections of the peasantry in face of opposition of the Congress organisation. These Ryot Sabhas ceased functioning after 1940.*

It was under the leadership of the Communist League formed at Gauhati by Soumendranath Tagore, in 1938, that the Assam Krishak Banua (peasants and labour union) was formed in 1940, independent of and in opposition to the Congress. Kedar Nath Goswami, a disillusioned Congressman of Dibrugarh, became its president. This organisation carried on peasants movement in some parts of Kamrup, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh. Besides, Abdul Hamid Khan (popularly known as Bhesanir Moulana) organised the Muslim peasants of Goalpara under Gauripur Raj and organised the Goalpara District Praja Sanmilan at Ghagmari (opposite to Dhubri town) in 1940; as an M.L.A. he voiced the grievances of the tenants on the floor of the Assembly and raised

the demand for the amendment of the Goalpara Tenancy Act 1929. He became close to Pranesh Biswas and attended the Kisan Sabha meetings in the subsequent period but he did not agree to enlist himself as a member of the Kisan Sabha. During the forties he became the unprecedented leader of the immigrant Muslims (who came to Assam in increasing numbers since 1905 onwards without any opposition and with direct encouragement of the zamindars of Goalpara) and instigated them to occupy Khuda's land (God's land) in the grazing reserves. So his peasant movement developed a communal colour and provoked antagonism from non-Muslim Assamese and tribal peasants.

NEW PHASE OF KISAN MOVEMENT

Though the Communist workers, individually or in groups, had been working amongst the peasants since 1938 in different places of Assam Valley, it was only after the formation of the Assam Valley Committee (soon formed into Assam Provincial Organising Committee) in 1943, that preparations started for organising local Kisan Sabhas as branches of the AIKS, which prepared the ground for holding the first session of the Assam Provincial Kisan Conference in 1946 at Thekeragaon (in Nowgong district). Pranesh Biswas, as the organiser of the Party deputed to Goalpara district, led the demonstration of the peasants for securing paddy seeds at Dhubri in the year 1942 and, being successful, the peasants were inspired in holding a kisan conference at Haorarp (ten miles from Dhubri) in 1943 which was presided by Abdulla Rasul. Hesaruddin Molla and Md. Sabu took the initiative in this regard. This could be said to be the first Kisan Conference under the Communist leadership. Resolutions against price rise, black marketing and hoarding, for agricultural loan and distribution of paddy seeds, besides oppression of the zamindars, jotedars and the moneylenders, were adopted in the Conference. Next, Goalpara Mahakuma Kisan Conference was held at Balijana in late 1944 with the active help of the Congress M.L.A. Jogendra Nath, in spite of opposition of another Congress M.L.A. Khagendra Nath to work unitedly with the Communists even though he was supposed to be a supporter of the CSP. This Conference was held under the Red Flag with the slogan for abolition of the zamindari system (which slogan was not raised

earlier by the Nikhil Goalpara Krishak Sanmilan). Pranesh Biswas led a delegation of five elected delegates to the Netrokona session of the AIKS in 1945 (5-9 April). With the active support of J.N. Nath and other Congress workers, including Rudreswar Nath, Biren Nath, Bhaben Nath, besides Moni Bhowmik and Shiv Ch. Marak, several other meetings were held in different parts of Goalpara against exploitation of the zamindars of Bijni and Mechapra.

After the Netrokona Conference, Mankachar Thana Kisan Conference was held at Puskarinipar in 1945 under the presidency of Prof. Hemanta Kumar Ganguly, with Pranesh Biswas and Nandeswar Talukdar as the main speakers. The Hajong peasants of the area were already influenced by the Tebhaga movement in Haluaghat-Nalitabari area (in Mymensingh district). From this conference, demand for Tebhaga (one-third share of produce instead of half share) for the landowners was raised. The owners, having failed to collect half share, tried to harass the peasants by involving them in police cases, organised a counter-conference with Deven Singha as the leader of the owners, who brought Sarat Ch. Singha, the Congress leader of Dhubri (now president of the Congress(S) in Assam) to address the conference. But their plan was frustrated when the Hajong peasants led a demonstration with a band, etc. to the meeting place, and they could not hold their counter-meeting. *Adhikar movement was thus first started in Goalpara district and later on spread to Bilasipara Phutkibari, Tulshibil, Basugaon North Salmara, Abhoyapuri and at Patiladaha.*

In the later part of 1945, I was met by Rabin Basumatari of Kokrajhar, a leading young tribal social worker, and requested by him to come to organise the tribal peasants of the area in the Kisan Sabha. A Reception Committee was formed to hold a regional Kisan Sabha conference (*Gaurang-Tarang Kisan Conference*) with Mahendra Brahma as Chairman and Rabin Basumatari as the secretary. The conference was held under the presidency of Mansoor Habib, and Biswanath Mukherjee and Moulana Bhasani were the main speakers. Besides the economic problems of the tribal peasants, the conference supported the promotion of tribal language and culture and preservation of their identity. The Kisan Sabha and Communist workers

took initiative in reorganising the Tribal Sangha. So long it was limited to socio-cultural activities only, now it was activated to take up economic issues. *This conference influenced the tenants of Banglabari, Bijni Duara Tea Estates to hold another conference at Magurmari against the Tea Garden manager for demanding rent in paddy instead of cash, as was existing under the Bijni Raj, and against preventing people from passing in front of the manager's bungalow with umbrella and shoes and other forms of harassment.* Bishnu Bora presided over this conference. Just after the conference a big demonstration was led with band party and Red Flags; shouting slogans against the manager's oppression, it paraded in front of the manager's bungalow and, after that, there was no restriction in passing on the road in front of the manager's bungalow. Squads of the Kisan Sabha volunteers toured over the neighbouring villages and *hats* for stopping of the sale of essential goods at high prices and preventing blackmarketing, etc. After the Magurmari conference, large number of delegates and volunteers went to attend the first Assam Provincial Kisan Conference at Thekeragaon in 1946. There was stiff opposition from the Congress and even the Reception Committee Chairman (A mikir Tribal) was persuaded by them to withdraw. The Goalpara volunteers contributed much towards the success of the conference in the way of going out in the neighbouring *hats*, collecting subscriptions and vegetables, and making propaganda for the conference. *But due to the virtual encirclement of the conference place, no people except the delegates and volunteers could enter.* This conference was presided by Biswanath Mukherjee. It was in this Nowgong district that the peasants rose in armed revolts against the Government for increasing burden of taxation and, here now, the Congress tried to foil the first Kisan conference under Communist leadership. Yet the conference could be successfully held and the first Kisan Sabha committee was formed as a provincial body of the AIKS, with Kanak Nath as President and Pranesh Biswas as Secretary. *The biggest peasants struggle that took place under the Kisan Sabha was in Parbatjowar Pargana in 1946-47, where the tenants of the Bagribari zamindar (mostly tribal) used to earn their livelihood by cutting, processing and selling sal trees under*

the traditional Dafadari-Kuthari system (a group of ten wood-cutters under a non-working leader) paying to the zamindar only six anna share a rupee of the sale price. The zamindar wanted to throw open the forest coupes for sale by auction which would bring in outside contractors ousting the local tribals. The Pargana Kisan Sabha was formed with Deven Ch. Brahma (son of the tribal social reformer Kalicharan Brahma) of Kajigaon as President and Sainen Brahma as Secretary. *The second Provincial Kisan conference, along with the Parbatjowar Kisan conference was held at Tipkai in 1947 with about ten thousand peasants.* Biswanath Mukherjee presided and Biresh Misra, Bishnu Bora, besides Pranesh Biswas, Nandeswar Talukdar, were the main speakers. Sometime after the conference *a huge demonstration was led to Bagribari which surrounded the Raj bari with the tenants. Ultimately the zamindar was compelled to come to a compromise through the mediation of the Congress leader Sarat Chandra Singha who accompanied Pranesh Biswas on an elephant sent by the zamindar.*

For conducting the Adhiar movement a separate district conference was held at Patiladaha in 1948. Adhiar committee was formed with Ramesh Nath as President and Pranesh Biswas as Secretary. The Adhiar Protection and Regulation Act passed in the meantime was translated in Assamese on behalf of the Kisan Sabha and distributed the same. However, the landowners were confusing the people, saying that it was not the Government Act but the Communist Act which cannot be implemented. So Pranesh Biswas approached Sarat Ch. Singha, at the time President of the District Congress, and later on Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, President of APCC, and requested them also for agreeing to hold joint meetings for popularising the Adhiar Act and safeguarding their interests. Though they did not agree to joint meetings, agreed to publish leaflets on behalf of the Congress, supporting this Act as the Act passed by the Government and to be implemented by all. As a matter of fact Sri Sarat Ch. Singha actively helped in the matter of protecting the Adhiars' interests against forceful and illegal eviction of the Adhiars, while some other Congress leaders opposed it. For his sponsoring the interests of the Adhiars, the landowners were bent upon defeating him in the next Assembly election in his

own constituency. The Adhiars of Bilasipara, Fakiragram, Patiladaha, North Salmara, etc. were involved in criminal cases and legal proceedings before the Adhiar Board, and then in appeal to A.D.M. and High Court also. The Adhiars could not carry on these legal proceedings by paying lawyers' fees and Pranesh Biswas who, though a law graduate was a whole-timer party worker since 1940, had to register himself in the Dhubri Bar for defending the Adhiars cases free of cost, and in most of the cases he won in face of contest by senior lawyers engaged by the landowners. But ultimately it was realised that without strong organisation of the Adhiars themselves, supported by other sections of the peasants, their interests could be hardly ensured. The problem became acute when questions were raised by some Communist leaders working amongst the peasants in other districts that stress on protection of the Adhiars' interest would weaken the peasant unity. On the other hand, Adhiars themselves bravely faced the landowners' armed attacks on them. Two examples: While Kamal Nath of Fakiragram was ploughing his *adhi* land, Surendra Narayan Dev, his zamindar, fired upon him with his gun which fortunately escaped, and instantaneously Kamal jumped upon the Karta (as he was called), broke his gun, pressed and laid him down prostrate on the field, and then surrendered to the police with the broken gun. Suren Karta was convicted to six year imprisonment for attempted murder (later on released on appeal to High Court). In Patiladaha the landowners' musclemen Gobra Goonda, while confronting some Adhiars, himself fell down dead. Many of the Kisan Sabha and Adhiar workers were arrested in connection with cases and they lingered in jail. But after this incident, owners' attack on the Adhiars became less strident.

The peasants of *Beltala Mouja* (in Kamrup district) where the present capital of Assam is situated, after attending the meeting addressed by Gopinath Bordoloi just after independence, simply and honestly believed his words and thought that no longer they would be exploited by the big landowners (both Bengalis and Assamese) in the way of realising paddy rent (like Adhiars) from them in place of earlier cash rent as was taken by the Beltala Rani. They stopped paying paddy to the

non-resident landowners of Gauhati. *Initially, their movement was led by a local tribal social worker (a teacher, named Deven Khaklari of Fatasil) and later on by the RCPI. Pranesh Biswas, having been deputed by the Party to study their problem and try to organise them into Kisan Sabha, learned how their movement originated and developed, and organised the Kisan Sabha there. By their bitter experiences, the peasants realised that Bordoloi's Government was for the landowners and not for them, as the police was sent by his Government to help the owners to take truck loads of paddy forcefully grapped from the fields, and the peasants obstructing the trucks were being lathi-charged and arrested. Pranesh Biswas, along with Kanak Nath, organised the Prethola Kisan struggles.*

The peasants of Bittalia Mouja contributed a great deal in ensuring the victory of the Communist candidate Gami Shankar Bhattacharya (who also worked underground in this area) in the next Assembly election against Congress. □

FORMATIVE YEARS OF KISAN SABHA IN ASSAM

Achintya Bhattacharyya

PRE-PARTITION ASSAM HAD TWO PROVINCIAL KISAN Sabhas formed on the linguistic basis, obviously following the practice prevalent in the Congress in those days. Two Bengali speaking districts formed Surma Valley (S.V.) Provincial Kisan Sabha, which came into existence in 1936, in the very year of the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha. The rest of Assam Provincial Kisan Sabha came into existence formally ten years afterwards in 1946, though Sabha's activities started earlier in 1943 in the same areas.

I joined Surma Valley organisation of the Kisan Sabha in 1938-39, in a period when tenants and sharecroppers in our districts, roused by the propaganda carried out by the leftist Congressites who dominated the District Congress Committee at that time, began to stir and raise their voice against oppressive "mirasdari" system prevalent in the roytwari areas. The first Cachar District Kisan Sabha conference was held at Silchar in 1940, Comrade Abdul Momin, a leader of Bengal Kisan movement presiding.

Earlier, in 1936, first S.V. Kisan Sabha Conference was held at Behati, Sylhet district. Com. Bankim Mukherjee presided over the Conference. This district was under Permanent Settlement with its usual features—the powerful zamindars, which dominated the entire countryside. The very first conference aroused the peasants of the Sunamganj sub-division (or Tehsil) and was followed immediately afterwards by two big struggles carried out under the Kisan Sabha's red flag. Tenants under

Bhatipara zamindar, a big landlord, started a big movement in 1937 to fight back the forcible evictions which the landlords carried out at will, in a most destructive manner, after using elephants to demolish the homes and hearths of the victims. It caused great anger among peasants, and after the semi-serf-service tenure tenants (nankars) of the landlords joined this anti-eviction struggle in great number with their own demands of abolition of nankar system, the struggle developed a great sweep. These 'nankars' were bound to give free service to the landlords with the entire family members against a tiny plot of agricultural land or often a homestead land of very small size. They were not allowed to send their children to schools, even to give them decent names. They had no means to protect the honour of their wives and daughters. Beastly torture was common for any violation of traditional rules of slavery and serfdom which the "nankar" system really was.

The landlord was a Muslim and also his nankars. But without caring for this, the Muslim nankars began to fight shoulder to shoulder with Hindu tenants. This brought new strength to the movement. The landlords and the Government became furious and, apart from arrests and merciless beatings, 800 criminal cases were launched by the landlords and bureaucrats against the struggling peasants.

The struggle was suppressed, but tenants all over the area became firmer in their opposition to zamindari oppression and extractions.

This struggle gave rise to a widespread movement in the entire zamindari settled areas of Assam for a Tenancy Act to safeguard security of tenure and ensure fair rent. Karuna Sindhu Roy, son of a high official of Bihar Government, gave up the opportunity of a career that his family's position could make available, went back to his village to live and work among the people. The national movement inspired him and he became a defender of the rights of the peasants and a great friend of the peasantry. In 1937, already a Communist, he got elected to Assam Legislative Assembly on Congress ticket. In the same year, he sought to introduce a private members bill for Tenancy Act for zamindari tenants. The Governor banned its admission. But this started the battle. Kisan Sabha declared a Protest

Day in December which was responded to by thousands. The mass campaign for tenancy reform ended with a Kisan March to Shillong in September 1938. Over 300 kisans walked 85 miles over hilly roads and demonstrated, under Kisan Sabha's flag, before the Legislative Assembly, for the first time in the history of this set up. This created a stir and a number of Congress leaders of Assam's zamindari areas and leaders like Maulana Bhasani, who latter became famous in Bangladesh as a progressive leader, joined the movement for tenancy rights.

These mass movements hastened the fall of Sri Sadulla's Ministry and the emergence of first-ever Congress Ministry in Assam in 1938.

Same year, the second S.V. Provincial Conference was held at Bianibazr. Com. Muzaffar Ahmed presided over the session. It ended with a big rally of 10,000 peasants which was a big thing in those days.

In the meantime, delegates from S.V. Kisan Sabha participated for the first time in the Committee session of the All India Kisan Sabha over which Sahajanand presided.

Then war broke out, and with it came heavy repression on the leftist and Communist leaders. But the Kisan Sabha's organisation continued to grow. Three more conferences followed upto 1946, which were attended variously by Comrades Abdullah Rasul, Moni Singh, Aftab Ali, Abul Hyat and Somnath Lahiri.

In the post-war period of anti-imperialist mass upsurge, the most oppressed section of the peasants in eastern areas of S.V., struck a severe blow at the semi-serf nankar system. It was a big organised movement under the Sabha's leadership. The peasants in general, hateful of zamindars, supported the struggle generally, and its dimension continued to expand. It started in 1946 and continued into the post-partition period. The Congress Government, which came back to power in 1946, let loose severe repression in collusion with the landlords. Then came partition. Sylhet district became a part of East Pakistan. But nankars continued to fight under red flag; the only change was the replacement of brutal repression of the Congress Government by that of the Muslim League Government.

Failing to suppress the movement, the League Government:

worked out some sort of compromise and nankars won some of their demands. But the main organiser of this struggle was kept in jail for twelve years at a stretch by the League Government.

While the service-tenure tenant slaves—the nankars—had been fighting their battles in Sylhet, the Tebhaga struggle broke out in neighbouring Bengal. While many million sharecroppers participated, thousands got arrested and 39 fighters gave their lives. With the Tebhaga movement, downtrodden peasant of Bengal emerged in the political arena as a formidable force. Its influence spread far and wide and inspired kisans everywhere.

In 1946, the Tebhaga struggle broke out in the Silchar subdivision of the S.V. district of Cachar. Since 1944, the Kisan Sabha work developed its mass base by opposing war-time attacks on the people, famine-like conditions, high prices and blackmarket. Its mass influence grew as Com. Irawat Singh, legendary builder of freedom struggle as well as Communist movement in the far off hilly state of Manipur, took up kisan work in Cachar. He was sentenced to 3 years' jail in 1940 and was sent to Sylhet Jail, where he met many Communists. He became a Communist in jail and, as he was not allowed to enter Manipur after release, he remained at Silchar and did a lot of work to strengthen the Kisan Sabha.

In 1946, a big district Kisan conference was held in Katakhal village of Silchar. Com. Irawat presided. The same year he contested the election to Legislative Assembly on Communist Party ticket and got defeated, polling 11000 against 17000 votes won by the Congress. Peasants supported his candidature and defied the tidal wave that swept the Congress to power.

This heroic leader of kisans went back to Manipur after the 2nd Congress of the Communist Party. He was sought to be arrested by the successors of the British rulers. He, already past fifty, went underground, carried on with revolutionary work from neighbouring Burma and died in the jungles of Burma 3 years afterwards, still hunted by Manipur Government.

Tebhaga struggle began in Cachar in 1946 and at once became a popular issue among tens of thousands of share-

croppers, poor peasants and agriculture workers. While the Congress Government did everything possible to suppress the struggle by brutal repression, the peasants also scaled new heights of mass struggle, showing heroism and discipline.

At Athartilla, the main centre of the struggle, a district leader, Com. Sitaram initiated the movement in his father's land. The father was the sarpanch as well as a small "mirasdar" (landlord). The father lodged a complaint to police against the son who went underground. This inspired the sharecroppers who fought the police repression with great courage. Com. Medher Nath, a leading member of K.S., died in jail custody as a result of the beating by police. Com. Thetri Rebidas, a women agricultural worker, handed over her infant child to someone and fought the policemen who had been assaulting the sharecroppers. Women workers joined the fight and the police had to retreat for the time being. Tethri, Lalmani, Latika, Bauri, Imechou, Chaubi and others—the names of women leaders of Tebhaga—became known throughout the district. Imachou Devi, a Manipuri women agricultural worker, was later killed by the Assam Rifle, when she was defending sharecroppers' paddy in 1949. In the same action in 1949, four others—Gonshari, Gowra, Jaychendre, all Manipuri youths and Kisan Sabha cadres and Sanatan Bauri, an ex-tea labourer—were killed by the police to enable the landlords to snatch away the sharecroppers' paddy.

This struggle, followed by the Kisan struggle in Branamputra Valley district of Assam, with the slogan "Give life but won't give paddy", in 1948-50, forced the Congress Government to enact the first Sharecroppers Act in India in 1948.

Here ends the story of the Surma Valley Provincial Kisan Sabha, major part of which became part of Eastern Pakistan in 1947, after a referendum held in July 1947. I, along with another comrade, was sent to the predominantly Muslim areas of Sunamganj to campaign against partition before the referendum. These were the areas where, only a decade ago, Hindu and Muslim kisans fought together against landlord oppression. What the partition meant for people and what would be its outcome I saw with my own eyes on the day of referendum, as Hindus and Muslims stood divided into two opposing lines before the voting booth, with opposing slogans in an atmosphere

surcharged with tension and anger. The Muslim landlords had succeeded in mobilising the Muslim peasants behind them totally, in the name of Pakistan. But they alone were not to be blamed ; Congress leaders were equally, if not more, responsible for the partition of the country, break up of nationalities and the great communal division which has been plaguing India ever since.

After the period of turmoil between 1948 and 1951 was over, the Patna Session of the CKC took notice of the end of Surma Valley Provincial Kisan Sabha. The Cachar district and a part of Karimganj, which remained in India as per Radcliffe Award, were merged into Assam State Kisan Sabha in 1952.

In the other valley the Assam Provincial Kisan Sabha was formed in its first State Conference held at Thekaraogaon in 1946. Congressmen of the locality opposed the move with all their might, prevented collection and picketed approach roads on the Conference day successfully. Despite these efforts, a band of early organisers of the Sabha succeeded in holding the Conference, defying the boycott and ban imposed by congressmen.

Even earlier, Sabha's work started in western district of Goalpara in 1943. Sahajanand attended a conference here in February 1940 at Salkocho, which was organised by local Congress leaders who had been fighting against the landlord oppression in those days. It had nothing to do with All India Kisan Sabha, but the conference and Sahajanandji's presence had its influence on subsequent development of kisan struggle. In 1944, a district kisan conference was organised by Communist workers, at Balijana which decided to affiliate the same to AIKS. A delegation elected by the conference attended Netrakona Session of the Sabha.

Kisan Sabha led a big struggle in this district in its years of formation. It led a big movement of tribal peasants who had been doing timber felling in private forests of landlords. Landlords wanted to auction the forests to contractors, endangering the only means of livelihood of hundreds of peasants. While the movement was on, a youth delegation from USSR happened to pass through the area. The struggling kisans stopped the train, greeted the delegates and presented axes to all of them. The movement forced the landlords to abandon the move.

I have come to the end of this note on the struggles and organisation of the Kisan Sabha in pre-1950 Assam. In those years the Sabha fought many struggles in defence of the most oppressed sections of the peasantry, the sharecroppers, the nankars (the semi-serfs), the woodcutters and tenants of zamindars in general. Along with this, it had fought for the rights of the ethnic minorities and the tribals, raising the slogan of equality and recognition of the languages and cultures. This endeared the Sabha to the tribals and the ethnic minorities. There had been big failures too. The Sabha did not organise sustained mass work on the many-sided needs of the peasant masses, and thus failed to build a big and active Kisan Sabha.

In conclusion, let us pay our homage to the memory of All India Kisan Sabha workers and supporters who had fallen martyrs in these struggles. To this roll of honour we add the names of those Kisan Sabha comrades who have given their lives in recent years to uphold the cause of unity of India and her toiling people in the struggle against the divisive forces. □

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TO commemorate the Golden Jubilee Year of the All India Kisan Sabha, the Central Kisan Council has planned to bring out a series of pamphlets which will highlight the various important movements conducted in various states under the banner of the Kisan Sabha—movements which assumed national significance. This will help the Kisan cadre to understand the important role which the AIKS has played in awakening the Indian peasantry.

The following pamphlets have hitherto been published :

1. *Revolt of the Warlis*, by Godavari Parulekar, Vice-President, AIKS ;
2. *Tebhaga Struggle of Bengal*, by Abdullah Rasul, Vice-President, AIKS ;
3. *Kerala : Punnappa-Vayalar & Other Struggles*, by V.S. Achyuthanandan, member, CPI(M) Polit Bureau, and T.K. Ramakrishnan, President, Kerala State unit of the AIKS ;
4. *Anti-Betterment Levy Struggle of Punjab*, by Harkishan Singh Surjeet, member, CPI(M) Polit Bureau ;
5. *Struggle of the Surma Valley Peasantry*, by Biresh Misra, Pranesh Biswas, and Achintya Bhattacharya.

The other pamphlets will be :

—on the historic Telangana armed struggle, written by M. Basavapunnaiah, one of the leaders of that struggle and a member of the Central Kisan Council of the AIKS and of the CPI(M) Polit Bureau ;

—on what the AIKS stands for, by Harkishan Singh Surjeet.

We are making efforts to get pamphlets written on other movements as well.

These pamphlets are expected to be out by the Golden Jubilee Session of the AIKS, and will be low-priced.

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