



A Kisan at the Crossroads of History, Politics and Law: Political Thought and Action of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati

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Introduction

Swami Sahajanand Saraswati (1889-1950) was the leader of the most successful organised peasant movement in colonial India, a leading figure of India's struggle for independence against British colonial rule, and an organic intellectual trained in India's *Shastric* traditions with a huge corpus of writings to his credit. From the age of eighteen when Swami Sahajanand Saraswati took the vows of *sanyas*¹, his only worldly need was just one meal in twenty-hours appropriate to a sanyasi (a Hindu monk). He had no personal, religious or even political stakes which made him unbending on matters of principle. He only had a mission in life: first sanyas and realisation of God which subsequently became one with his mission for the empowerment of the masses of peasants in the country. First, the tenants, then small and marginal landholders, and then the *khet mazdoor* (agricultural labour) or the actual tillers of the land. Though actual tillers could also be from the stock of tenants and subsistence and marginal landholders apart from the vast mass of landless labourers. It was a movement with a massive support irrespective of caste or community background and the



landed elites were cruelly oppressive of all tenants and peasants irrespective of their social background. An instance of the Bhumihar Brahmin *zamindar* (landlord) of Reora (place in Gaya district of the state of Bihar in India) comes to mind most of whose tenants were also Bhumihar Brahmins² and they had nothing to eat and even had to sell their daughters to repay his rent (Kuwajima 2017: 117).

All the records of the Kisan (Peasant) Movement show that it had massive social support.³ The political rise of the middle castes like the Yadavs, Kurmis, Koeris and those from the formerly untouchables like Dusads and others trace their trajectory to the peasant movement in the late nineteen twenties and the fiery nineteen-thirties. It was actually at the behest of *Yadav kisans* (Yadav peasants) in the region of Masaurhi, who were exploited by the local Brahmin *zamindar* (Bhumihar Brahmin) that Swamiji had set up the West Patna Kisan Sabha (West Patna Peasant Organisation/ Association) in 1927.⁴ Even the Muslim peasants of Bihar were overwhelmingly with him (Dhulipala 2015: 60f.). Swamiji reached the peak of his political career from 1936 when he was elected the President of the All India Kisan Sabha till the call for Quit India Movement in 1942 when he was at the centre of India's political leadership leading the freedom movement from British Rule.⁵ The abolition of the pernicious *zamindari* system propelled by the British and the resultant land reforms initiated immediately post-independence is a direct result of Swamiji's political activism. He was an undisputed leader of the *kisans* in the country who led the first organised peasant movement in India with the formation of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha in 1929 which then became a pan-India organisation by 1936 which included national leaders coming from different political persuasions and from different parts of the country.

Swamiji was from the stock of peasants, *kore kisans*, as a theorist he was *untouched* by colonial intellectual tradition (he had just four years of "regular" school education), spoke in the language of peasants, and articulated their demands and formulated their ideas and principles on their own terms and for their benefit (Kumar 2019: 293-310). The different legislations abolishing *zamindari* across the country starting with Bihar in 1950 (*The Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950*; Bihar Act XXX of 1950) were a direct result of the Kisan Sabha politics led by Sahajanand since the late 1920s (*ibid.*: 305, n. 27).⁶ The *Zamindari Abolition Act* was challenged by the Maharaja of Darbhanga in *Sir Kameshwar Singh v. State of Bihar* and he won both in the High Court and the Supreme Court of India (*ibid.*: 305;



cf. AIR 1951 Pat 91). The decision of the Supreme Court of India precipitated the Government of India watering down the "right to property" from a fundamental right to a legal right and putting all land reform and land ceiling laws in the ninth schedule of the Constitution of India through the first amendment to the Indian Constitution, thus taking these legislations out of the purview of judicial review (ibid.: 305; cf. Singh 2017: 302f.).

Swami Sahajanand Saraswati realised the true meaning of his ascetic name Sahajanand, of which Professor Hauser writes,

Sahajanand literally means one who is at ease in the complex path of existence and enjoys bliss effortlessly or in and through simple action. The swami perceived this idea not in some elaborate metaphysical sense, but in terms of the daily experience of living and surviving, especially, as he would make clear again and again in everything he said and wrote, in the lives of the peasants and rural poor of India.⁷

Only a portion of Swami Sahajanand's own writings have been available to the public for the last close to seventy years after his death. The *Swami Sahajanand Saraswati rachnavali* [Selected works of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati] are only his selected works in six volumes (Sharma 2003). His commentary on *Nyaya* and *Mimansa*, his *Karma kalap*, his diaries, his letters and correspondences, his regular writings in different journals across the country including *Janata*, *Hunkar* and others are yet unpublished. A few of his additional writings have been compiled and edited by Awadhesh Pradhan (Pradhan 2012).⁸ At the initiative of Kailash Chandra Jha, Swami Sahajanand Papers in five cartons (weighing around 200 kilograms) have been returned recently to India from the USA by Walter Hauser, Professor Emeritus, University of Virginia, USA which are yet to be classified and indexed and then published which would open a new world of understanding modern India.⁹ The Bihar State Archives has recently published eight volumes (around 5,000 pages) of archival records on Kisan Movement in Bihar conceptualised, edited and published by its efficient former Director, Dr. Vijoy Kumar which is yet to be used by researchers (Kumar 2015, 2017: vols. I-VIII). Additionally, Raghav Sharan Sharma edited *India's War of Independence through kisan documents* running into three volumes are yet to be explored by scholars (Sharma 2014: vols I-III).

Swamiji wrote almost entirely in Hindi apart from his Sanskrit works and few works and writings in English. There is still a dearth of academic writings in English which reduces his wider academic reception apart from no new work done on him in Hindi (save reprints) and lack of other Indian



language translations. Just a few of his writings have been translated by Walter Hauser (Hauser 2015, 2005a, 2005b) and a recent fresh and lucid translation of *Mera jeevan sangharsh* has been done by Ram Chandra Pradhan (Pradhan 2018). Apart from few short hagiographical biographies, reminiscences, brief life sketches of Swamiji there is no comprehensive/intellectual biography written.¹⁰ Therefore, there is a lot of scope for political scientists, historians and lawyers to work upon as there is no dearth of material available.

Beginning of social and political life

Background and early years

He was born Naurang Rai in a family of simple peasants or "kore kisans" as he himself referred (Pradhan 2018: 1-18). They were Jijhoutia Brahmin branch of Kanyakubja Brahmins from Bundelkhand who had settled in Deva near Ghazipur many generations ago and developed marital relations with the more numerous Bhumihar Brahmins and ended up being counted as one among them (Pradhan 2018: xvii - xiii; Hauser 2004: 155-91). He was a very bright student who finished his first six years of primary school in three by the year 1902 (ibid.). He did well in both middle school standing seventh in the whole United Provinces and then in the German Mission High School in Ghazipur (ibid.). He stood seventh again in the pre-matriculation scholarship examination when his modern formal education ended abruptly in 1907 when he took the vows of sanyas, or renunciation, 1907 at the age of eighteen (ibid.). His exceptional brilliance and photographic memory is reflected in his own autobiography, *Mera jeevan sangharsh*, and five other major works which he wrote from memory without having any reference material at his disposal in the Hazaribagh Central Jail in his years of incarceration from 1940 to 1942 and never had the opportunity to revise and cross-check the dates and details before their publication.

Sahajanand and social reform

He began his social and political life on the narrow platform of Bhumihar Brahmin Mahasabha along with the Indian National Congress. But there were many leaders from this period who were active in multiple organisations. Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya was active in the Brahman Mahasabha (Brahmin Association) and Hindu Mahasabha (Hindu Association) along with the Congress; Dr. Sachchidanand Sinha severed his active ties with the Congress but remained active in the Kayastha Mahasabha (Kayastha



Association) till the very end; Dr. Rajendra Prasad remained active in the Kayastha Mahasabha along with the Congress; Dr. Anugraha Narayan Sinha remained active in the Rajput Mahasabha along with the Congress and there were many Muslim members of the Congress who were also members of the Indian Muslim League. It was then considered to be a means to a social and political life of the country where each caste or sectarian organisation was meant to work for its upliftment leading to the upliftment of the country as a whole.

It was during this phase the Swami wrote the History of Brahmins titled *Brahmarshi vansha vistar*, which is wrongly assumed to be the history of just Bhumihar Brahmins who have named their different organisations as *Brahmarshis*. Perhaps the only academic history of any *varna* (Indian social order) is *Sudras in Ancient India* by the historian R. S. Sharma (Sharma 2016). There has been no comprehensive history of Brahmins. Perhaps here as well, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati is among the first of *native* historians and sociologists who was trained in classical learning and had no so-called modern, *read* British education. Apart from showing through scriptures but also through the social practice of marriage (he showed empirically) among Kanyakubjas, Bhumihars and Maithils that they belong to the same stock of Brahmins.¹¹

What distinguishes caste organisations of the latter part of nineteenth-early twentieth century from those of today is how the major function of all its major members was with Congress and National politics and all caste aspirations or functions were sub-servient to those of India's political freedom led by the Indian National Congress. It is also remarkable to note that most of these other leaders, if not all, retained their association with caste organisations till the very end, whereas the more mature Swami Sahajanand dissolved the Bhumihar Brahmin Mahasabha itself in 1929 for the larger interests of peasants and the country. He realised that all caste organisations were neither working for the poor members of their community or for the political freedom of India; they were only the mouthpiece of the few rich and mighty, mostly zamindars (landlords) and their *amlas* (managers or agents), who wanted to show their loyalty to the British. No other political leader has replicated this act for the rights of peasants or for the larger interests of the country. It is a great lesson for all the narrow caste and sectarian organisations mushrooming today.

It is also pertinent to note why Swamiji took part in Brahmin and more specifically Bhumihar Brahmin caste association at the beginning of the



twentieth century. Caste attitudes, exclusionary posturings and discriminations were definitely exacerbated by caste censuses by the British on arbitrary formulations if not entirely scripted by them (Dirks 2003; Kumar 2009). It also influenced the posturings and attitudes of different Brahmin castes among themselves leading to discrimination and persecutions. The more ritualistic Brahmins and the ones having better access to education discriminated against those Brahmins who had taken to secular (for the lack of a better word) pursuits like the Jujhoutias (another sub-caste of Brahmins) and the more numerous Bhumihars in the middle Gangetic plain. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati himself suffered discriminations on account of being considered a 'lesser Brahmin' than the more ritualistic ones. It was again his sense of justice and life-long fight for it which made him align with the Bhumihar Brahmin Mahasabha and writing a history of Brahmins to bring and emphasise on equality inter-se amongst Brahmins. At this initial stage, he was also concerned with the decline in values and religious adherence amongst Brahmins (Sharma 2003: vol. I, 43-106).

One also has to understand it in context that had it not been for Swamiji's reassertion of Bhumihar Brahmin's Brahminness by emphasizing on them taking up priesthood on a mass scale and start receiving charity, he would not have understood the 'feudal mind' of Bhumihar Brahmin landed aristocracy and zamindars in general and its contempt for poor tenant peasants and agricultural workers and those living off 'their charity'.

Sahajanand and Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh, the quintessential representative of Zamindari interests

Among those who represented the zamindari interests and were close to the British rulers from Bihar, the trio of Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh, Dr. Sachchidanand Sinha and the Maharaja of Darbhanga appears very prominently. Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh was not just a zamindar and a successful lawyer but also ended up being the longest serving minister and the most powerful political interlocutor between the British government and the "people" on the one hand and the "zamindars" and the "tenants" on the other, in the province of Bihar right since the reforms of Montagu-Chelmsford (enacted 1919, came into force in 1921) up until the formation of the Congress ministry in 1937. He had an impeccable personal record of living a life of piety and simplicity and gave huge personal wealth for public charity but was an equally shrewd political leader and protector of the interests of zamindars who lived a life of wanton opulence based on cruel exploitation of the peasantry. It was this complex character of Sir Ganesh which both



brought Swami Sahajanand close to him and also led to a final break with him.

It was during the days of Brahmin social activism and social reform of his early years that Swami Sahajanand Saraswati came in contact with Sir Ganesh at the All India Bhumihar Brahmin Mahasabha. Sir Ganesh wanted the Mahasabha to be a loyalist organisation loyal to the British Rule, protect the zamindari interests and bring about English and modern education among the ruling classes of Bihar. His idea was to restrict the membership and activities of the Mahasabha to the elites whereas ever since taking part in the Mahasabha, Swami Sahajanand brought in tenant-peasants in huge numbers to become part of the Mahasabha. He even brought in to bear a nationalist fervour to the Mahasabha leading to the election of a nationalist leader to become the President of the Mahasabha. By Swamiji's account his involvement led to an increased awakening among the Bhumihar Brahmin youths who took an increasing part in the freedom struggle and took part in the Non-Cooperation Movement in huge numbers. By Swamiji's first-hand account 75 per cent of the political prisoners during Non-Cooperation Movement came from Bhumihar Brahmin background (Pradhan 2018: 178f.; Hauser 2015: 265). Sir Ganesh Dutt was critical of Sahajanand in that he turned the brightest youths of Bhumihar Brahmin community as nationalists working against the British rule and then promoted mass Sanskrit learning to become priests taking charity or to become 'beggars' in Sir Dutt's estimation. This was in sharp conflict with the purpose with which the Mahasabha was formed and was functioning under the increased dominance of Sir Ganesh who for many successive terms became its President. This dominance by one person and his ideology was criticised sharply by Swamiji.

Swamiji's final break with Sir Ganesh Dutt was on ground of breaking the Gaya District Board and to summarily remove the Congress stalwart Anugraha Narayan Sinha who had garnered the maximum votes and was the then chairman and install a crony who was in support of the British government and was a loyalist (Hauser 2015: 348-50). Swamiji writes of the incident in his memoir,

But what of today's Gaya District Board episode? It did not matter if we had differences with Anugrah Babu. Here the question of justice to the Congress as a whole was involved. So how could this be tolerated? I had seen Sir Ganesh in his true colours and resolved never to see him again. (ibid.: 350)

And as always Swamiji kept his resolve not to see Sir Ganesh again.



Sahajanand and Kisan Sabha

West Patna Kisan Sabha, Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, All India Kisan Sabha

Peasants had revolted against the British rule at various places and at different points of time throughout British rule but they lacked an organisational framework and a sustained movement.¹² These peasant insurrections in the nineteenth century and earlier were led by great leaders like Birsa Munda, Jatra Uraon, Hansraj Bhatt, Jagannath Dhal, Govardhan Dikpati, Budhu Bhagat, Singi Didi, Sido Santhal and others but it depended only on the exceptional valour and sacrifice of these individuals rather than an organisational effort.¹³ Due to systematic destruction of forests and displacement of forest dwellers there were revolts like the Kol insurrection or Ho revolt.¹⁴ However, there was no organisation and there were no peasant cadres to lead the movement at a provincial or national level once the leaders were brutally killed and the insurrection violently suppressed by the British.

It needed a leader of the calibre and foresight of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati to organise peasants first at the local level, in and around Bihta (town west of Patna) by his West Patna Kisan Sabha in 1927, then into the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha in 1929, and then finally in All India Kisan Sabha in 1936. It all began at the request of Yadav kisans when Swamiji started the movement against the Bhumihar Brahmin zamindar of Majhiawan in 1927. The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha became the platform for Congress, Congress Socialists, Communists and others to continue the movement after the Civil Disobedience Movement was suspended in 1933 which then took the shape of a pan-India organisation in the name of All India Kisan Sabha. It became the platform from which all the major political figures from Bihar and in a lot of other places emerged like Sri Krishna Sinha, Jayaprakash Narayan, Ganga Sharan Sinha, Kishori Prasanna Singh, Pandit Karyanand Sharma, Pandit Jadunandan Sharma, Awadheshwar Prasad Sinha, Suraj Narayan Singh, Pandit Ramnandan Mishra, Rahul Sankrityayan, Baba Nagarjun, Indulal Yagnik, N. G. Ranga and Bankim Mukherjee, among others, received their political training and plunged into the freedom movement and a movement for empowerment of the rural peasantry.

At the first session of the All India Kisan Sabha in Lucknow with Acharya Narendra Deva, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Jayaprakash Narayan, K. M. Ashraf, Z. A. Ahmed, Sohan Singh Josh, Sampurnanand, Awadheshwar Prasad Sinha, Pandit Jamuna Karjee, Pandit



Jadunandan Sharma, Pandit Karyanand Sharma, N. G. Ranga, Indulal Yagnik, Achyut Patwardhan and others in attendance Swamiji was unanimously elected its first President (Gupta 1982: 132f.).

It was only after the entering of Swami Sahajanand that the peasants were at the centre of reckoning in the Indian freedom movement against British colonial rule despite all attempts by many moderate leaders including Gandhi and the party leading the Indian freedom movement, the Indian National Congress to contain them and either protect, or at best, moderately reprimand zamindars and their interests, yet that was not to be. The 'permanent settlement' of the British Raj was permanently unsettled¹⁵ by the Kisan Sabha led by Swamiji and zamindari was abolished across the country starting from 1950s itself.

Kisan Sabha and law

One of the direct impacts of Kisan Sabha movement on peasants and their legal entitlements during 1920s and 1930s was that peasants became aware of their rights under the existing framework of the *Bengal Land Tenancy Act, 1885*. Some of its major features are (Mishra & Kumar 2017: 254f.):

- (1) If a raiyat or tenant held any land for twelve years in a village, he acquired occupancy rights in all the lands he held, or might in future hold, in that village (this is a very expanded meaning of the twelve-year requirement which was absent in previous legislations like Act X of 1859);
- (2) In any proceedings between a raiyat and his landlord it was to be presumed that the raiyat was a 'settled raiyat' unless the contrary was proved. (This shifted the whole burden of proof on the zamindar that a raiyat/tenant was not a tenant, yet this was grossly absent in the court proceedings even in the heyday of Kisan Sabha Activism);
- (3) The enhancement of rent could take place by an enhancement suit (enhancement by contract was restricted). And once enhancement was done, it could not be enhanced before the expiry of 15 years and that also could be done if enhancement of agricultural facilities and improvements were implemented by the landlord. (There was massive violation of this rule as landlords would increase rent almost every year without providing rent receipts or worse still kept forged records);
- (4) Both the landlord and the tenants (here occupancy raiyats) had the right to commute the rent payable in kind to cash. (This also was flouted by the landlords because they would insist on having



rent paid in kind, as any benefit accruing out of rise in prices of agricultural products ended up benefitting just the zamindar. The tenants were not in knowledge of this provision and they certainly lacked the capacity/capability to exercise this provision to their benefit.);

- (5) Importantly, even the non-occupancy raiyats enjoyed certain rights under the act like: (i) He could be ejected at will only if he held occupation of the land under a registered lease; (ii) He was served with a six-month notice to quit; (iii) In cases where the non-occupancy tenant objected to pay an enhanced rent, it could be fixed by the court. When rent was not paid after following this procedure, only then could the tenant be evicted, and if he agreed to pay it he was entitled to hold that land on the same rent for the next five years. (A whole new research needs to be done culling into all the archival and revenue details to actually prove that such benign practice was ever followed by any zamindar!).

There were mainly two categories of land in Bihar, *zirat* and *bakasht*. *Zirator sir* lands have been in the cultivating possession of landlords which are recognised by custom and in the settlement records as being the private land of the landlord (ibid.: 251f.). *Bakasht* includes every other land which has come into the possession of the landlord through diverse origin such as (ibid.: 252):

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- (i) himself from waste land but has not been recorded as *zirat* (emphasis added);
- (ii) this land may have lapsed to the landlord on surrender; or,
- (iii) abandonment by the raiyat or because he has died without heirs; or
- (iv) may have purchased it in execution of a decree for rent; or,
- (v) he may have purchased the occupancy rights.

On such a *bakasht* land, the landlord may (ibid.):

- (a) either decide to cultivate himself or he may resettle it permanently;
- (b) he may lease it from time to time to tenants.

It is a basic principle underlying all the tenancy acts in force that (ibid.):

- (c) the rights of the landlords in land possessed by him, whether as *zirat* or as *bakasht* have been closely circumscribed.



(d) Any peasant who holds land as a raiyat in a village for a period of 12 years, thereby becomes a settled raiyat and obtains the right of occupancy in any land for the time being held by him as a raiyat in that village.

Once the tenant-peasants cultivated the bakasht lands for 12 years consecutively, they would have occupancy rights under the Act of 1885 (ibid.: 255). The Kisan Sabha under Swami Sahajanand Saraswati made the tenant-peasants aware of their rights and led a province-wide movement in the second half of 1930s for the right of tenant-peasants over Bakasht lands which is commonly called the Bakasht movement.¹⁶ The more the zamindars oppressed the peasants by acts of physical violence apart from not keeping rent records, destroying and forging of documents, using legal, extra-legal and police, including the mounted police to crush the movement, the Swami became even more strongly resolved to fight for the peasants ultimately supporting and passing the resolution at the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha for the abolishment of zamindari without compensation.

Due to the tireless efforts of the Swami-led Kisan Sabha, zamindari was abolished soon after independence and the Permanent Settlement of 1793 was undone. Bihar was the first state to abolish zamindari under the Chief Ministership of Sri Krishna Sinha in the early 1950s which was then replicated in the rest of the country. It was challenged in Patna High Court and the Supreme Court of India, where the Maharaja of Darbhanga won against the Government of Bihar. Then the Government of India made the first amendment to the Indian Constitution and made land reforms non-justiciable by placing them in the eighth schedule to the Constitution of India. Additionally, the right to property was reduced from becoming a fundamental right to just a legal right under the Constitution of India. Professor Walter Hauser attests to this fact that abolition of zamindari was a direct result of the Kisan Sabha movement led by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati since the second half of 1920s till his death in 1950. Congress, Socialist as well as zamindar figures in their interaction with Professor Walter Hauser since the late 1950s like, Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India; Sri Krishna Sinha, the first Premier and then Chief Minister of the Province of Bihar; K. B. Sahay, a prominent local Congress leader; Jayaprakash Narayan, a prominent ex-socialist leader; and Rajandhari Singh, an erstwhile zamindar all affirmed this fact (Hauser 2015: note 8 on p. 575).



Sahajanand and other leaders of the Indian freedom struggle: Gandhi and Rajendra Prasad

If there has been one political leader and thinker and actor who was a counter to Gandhi in his times and ours, he is Swami Sahajanand Saraswati (which also requires deeper exploration—both on convergences and divergences). It is quite remarkable that even as a Hindu Sanyasi of the Dandi Dashnami order (highest order of monkhood in Hinduism), he had apprehensions about mixing religion with politics in his very first meeting with Gandhi on 5 December 1920 (Hauser 2015: 196f.). Swamiji emphasised about how as soon as the Khilafat Movement¹⁷ was over, the Muslim religious leaders would walk away from the freedom struggle (ibid.). In sharp contrast with Gandhiji, Swamiji made a categorical distinction between Muslim religious leaders and Muslim masses in his 'Sangharsh' memoir (ibid.: 197).

His discomfort with the political ideology of Gandhi and its followers and practitioners were brewing right from his incarceration during the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922. Even earlier, he had encountered financial corruption at the local level in Buxar in 1921 (where fund was generated by Congress for Tilak Swaraj Fund) when out of exasperation he shifted base to Ghazipur (ibid.: 206f.). During this phase he was still distinguishing Gandhi from his avowed Gandhians. And the indiscipline, opportunism, lack of following rules and regulations which Gandhi had mentioned strictly about, clamour for being considered class one prisoner and the benefits accruing because of it especially with regard to rich food, to begin with, had simply disgusted the Swami and these instances are widely recorded across his autobiography.¹⁸

The final break with Gandhiji came in 1934 immediately after the devastating Bihar earthquake of 1934. Zamindars were taking away relief materials also as part of their rents which were due, leaving the peasants in miserable conditions. When Swamiji narrated this whole story to Gandhiji, he gave an unrealistic reply that he should go with the list of complaints (with names and details) to the Darbhanga Maharaja, and when Swamiji told that he would not provide any relief then Gandhiji suggested that he should go to the manager of Darbhanga Raj and he would help because he was a Congressman. After this meeting he never met Gandhi and broke off with him completely (ibid.: 416f.).

Rajendra Prasad kept a studied distance from Sahajanand. On one of the occasions, when they were in the same jail and there were expositions on the *Srimad Bhagwad Gita* by Swamiji for his fellow prisoners, Rajendra



Prasad avoided attending those sessions or discussions thereafter. When Swamiji had resigned from the Congress Executive Council in 1936, due to the impending provincial elections in early 1937 (as a result of the *Government of India Act, 1935*), Rajendra Prasad prevailed (and by his own admission couldn't sleep) in rejecting the resignation as its chairman. Had it not been for Swamiji's involvement, and the whole Kisan Sabha machinery which he rallied in support of the Congress, it would not have won with such a thumping majority. But when Swamiji resigned in 1938, it was quietly accepted by the same Rajendra Prasad as chairman of the Congress Executive Council, as the Indian National Congress was comfortably saddled in government with Sri Krishna Sinha at its helm. There was not the slightest murmur from Rajendra Prasad, leave alone having sleepless nights.

Rajendra Prasad was a member in the Board of Governors of the Bihta Sugar Mill set up by Ramakrishna Dalmia in 1932.¹⁹ The mill owner, Shri Ramkrishna Dalmia, had made promises that he would give more compensation to the farmers as compared to the European mill owners and the workers will get to work in better working conditions in his mill.

Rajendra Babu was reluctant to leave the office from the panel of directors of Bihta Sugar Mill but finally had to resign on pressure from Swamiji because the mill owner Mr. Dalmia was directly contesting against the Congress candidate, Anugraha Narayan Sinha in the Central Assembly Election of 1935, apart from being anti-Kisan (Hauser 2015: 505). Babu Anugraha Narayan Sinha won with comfortable majority with the support of Swamiji even when some kisans questioned Swamiji as to why they should vote for Anugraha Babu when he also was a zamindar against both Mr. Dalmia who spent '*money like water*' (emphasis in original) and Babu Jagat Narayan Lal who tried to create communal frenzy (ibid.: 504-6).

Such questionings gave Swamiji an internal pleasure that kisans were getting increasingly conscious of their rights and they could not be easily duped by zamindars any longer (ibid.). On the assurance of Swamiji's help, Anugraha Babu remained in contest and won with a sweeping majority (ibid.). This reflects Swamiji's principled stand. When he supported Anugraha Babu as a Congress candidate in the Gaya District Board, he broke away from Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh and now when he supported Anugraha Babu again to fight elections from Patna and Shahabad districts he not only forced Rajendra Prasad to resign from the panel of directors of Bihta Sugar Mill but also got its owner Shri Ramkrishna Dalmia defeated in the elections and the Hindu Mahasabha candidate, Babu Jagat Narayan Lal forfeit even



his security deposit (ibid.). Later on, Sahajanand did oppose Anugraha Babu also because he was on the side of the zamindars like Rajendra Prasad, Sri Babu and Sir Ganesh Dutt Singh.

Rajendra Prasad headed the Bihar Kisan Enquiry Committee in 1936 set up by the Working Committee of the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee which was to prepare a report and make it public as per the Lucknow session of the Congress (Shukla 1996: 415f.).²⁰ Almost all significant players of Congress from Bihar were included in the committee. Apart from Rajendra Prasad, the others were Anugraha Narayan Sinha, Sri Krishna Sinha, Bipin Bihari Verma, Ram Dayalu Sinha, Baldev Sahay, Binodanand Jha, Ganga Sharan Sinha and Krishna Ballabh Sahay (ibid.). Only Ganga Sharan Sinha was among the peasant sympathisers with his history of association with the Bihar Socialist Party since 1931 and subsequently the Congress Socialist Party since its inception in 1934 (ibid.). Even though the Bihar Kisan Enquiry Committee members visited only 43 places in the province and conducted a very perfunctory enquiry, it still brought to light the tyranny of zamindars (ibid.). Curiously enough, the most important peasant leader, Swami Sahajanand was excluded from membership of the Committee itself on the grounds that his presence would be divisive and a unanimous report could not be prepared (ibid.). It is striking to note how for unanimity, truth and propriety were sacrificed. It shows the insincerity of Bihar Congress as well as the ambiguous nature of the central party leadership when issues of peasantry and agrarian reforms were concerned. Many zamindars and their agents were active members of the Congress and provided funds for Congress initiatives.

Additionally, despite two resolutions of the Indian National Congress at its national session, the report was never made public and only Chapter IV recommendations were partially made available to select individuals which interestingly did not include Swami Sahajanand. All this happened with Rajendra Prasad as the Chairman of the Committee. Rajendra Babu's family members were hierarchical managers of the Hathwa Raj, one of the largest zamindars in Bihar belonging to a Bhumihar Brahmin family, which reflects his life-long softness for zamindars and their interests (Prasad 2010: 1-5).

Sahajanand and political parties/ideologies

Sahajanand and socialists

The Bihar Socialist Party was formed in 1931 at Phulan Prasad Verma's house with Rambriksh Benipuri, Ganga Sharan Sinha and Dr. Abdul Bari in



attendance. It became the precursor to the Congress Socialist Party which was formed in 1934. As the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was the lead organisation from Bihar which both worked for the peasants and was also seen to work for the peasants and the working classes, it was but natural for the socialist and other left leaning younger and dynamic nationalists to align with it under the leadership of Swamiji much to the chagrin of conservative zamindars and their sympathisers, including the self-professed Gandhians.²¹ The Kisan Sabha also provided these youths including Pandit Ramnandan Mishra, Suraj Narayan Singh, Jayaprakash Narayan, Basawon Singh, Rambriksh Benipuri, Ganga Sharan Sinha and others with a ready platform and relevant issues to work on. In fact, the most productive and empowering activities by these future famous leaders were with the Kisan Sabha (with the only notable exception of Basawon Singh who was active since the Non-Cooperation Movement and in the Revolutionary Movement and from his release from prison in 1936 continued to be active with the trade union movement and the gradually moth-eaten Socialist Party till his death in 1989). They could not break with the Congress ideology and Gandhiji who were more accommodating of the landed elites as well as the capitalists and thus were never able to either profess or provide a viable alternative to Congress government despite having committed nationalists and leading statesmen in their rank and file.

1934 was also the year when Swamiji had a *moh-bhang* (emotional-ideological break) with Gandhiji never to turn back on his charted path of empowerment of peasants and increasingly the landless agricultural labourers and workers to bring about *kisan-majdoor raj* or *majdoor-kisan raj*. The socialist contingent of the Kisan Sabha was crucial in the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936 with the Swami as its first president. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, another leading socialist leader had presided over the conference. Notwithstanding the fact that the socialist contingent stalled Swamiji's efforts at left consolidation in 1939 and again in 1948-49 to offer a counter to Congress politics, they also were leading the *Bakasht movement* in different parts of Bihar under the leadership and guidance of Swamiji in the latter half of the 1930s.²² The socialists sided with Gandhiji whereas Swamiji was with Subhas Chandra Bose both in 1938 (Haripura) as well as 1939 (Tripuri). During the 1940 Ramgarh session of the Indian National Congress which wanted a compromise with the British due to the Second World War, Swamiji along with Subhas Chandra Bose organised the All India Anti Compromise Conference which was a resounding success. Swamiji was jailed as a result of it to be released only in 1942. By this time, the socialists had completely sided with the Congress and Gandhiji and left



the peasant movement mid-way. The one tactical error which Swamiji committed was to oppose the Quit India Movement which was a mass movement in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar which was the main area of activity of Swamiji.

By 1942, the socialists went whole hog with the Congress and left the Kisan Sabha to form their own splinter organisations which in 1949 was headed by the same Pandit Ramnandan Mishra of the fame of Dekuli Dham and Pandaul in Darbhanga in the heyday of the Kisan Sabha movement of late 1930s (1938-39). Jayaprakash Narayan also left Kisan Sabha and later even left the Socialist Party. Basawon Singh devoted himself primarily to trade union movement. Suraj Narayan Singh was allegedly killed by Congress goons and no enquiry committee was ever set-up to look into the murder of such a great nationalist, peasant leader and socialist leader. Ganga Sharan Sinha and Awadheshwar Prasad Sinha re-joined the Congress party.

Sahajanand and communists

One of the biggest mistakes of Swamiji was to let the communists and Communist Party leadership take hold of Kisan Sabha and ultimately even usurp it for party politics. Swamiji was a man of the soil, from the stock of kore kisans, and an organic intellectual, who when functioned according to the needs of the people on the ground they made him a *jan adhinayak* (leader of the people), but when the Communist Party leaders influenced him to side with the Soviet Union which had by 1942 joined the allies as a people's war, it confused and conflicted his own peasant fellow travelers. Local issues and concerns of the peasants and landless labourers were issues which mattered the most rather than some ideological '*people's war*' on the Russian frontier. This temporary rendezvous with Communist Party ideological framework which had always been 'imported' became a deathblow to the Kisan Sabha movement for abolition of zamindari along with liquidation of British rule. Swamiji soon realised how spineless and rootless the Communist Party and its leaders were in India when they were not concerned with the real "class" issue of Indians and received their line of action from abroad. This temporary rendezvous with the Communist Party ended in 1942-43 itself, and as a result the Communist Party members who had infiltrated the rank and file of Kisan Sabha, decided to shift the headquarters of Kisan Sabha away from Sri Sitaram Ashram in Bihta in 1944, commonly referred to as Bihta Ashram, the centre of Swamiji's life and work. This was in addition to breaching into the membership,



cadre and leadership of Kisan Sabha members. Besides, through this infiltration Communists were using Kisan Sabha platform to support partition of India and the Pakistan movement when he himself was not in support of India's partition (Dhulipala 2015: 447f.). It sealed his break with the Communists and their real face was shown.

Most Indian communists and the Communist Party never had an independent line of thinking.²³ Without having, and rather because of not having a strong local base (independent communist leaders had it), they were governed by Moscow and later Beijing (earlier Peking). This is sharp contrast, for example, from the growth and responses of the communist party in Italy for example. It has become a constant reminder to the Indian public and the gradual electoral irrelevance of the party putting into prejudice even the ameliorative measures of a 'social state with social rights' (a stellar achievement of continental Europe cutting across political parties) with assurances of public health, education and transport on a scanner.

Their approach to religion, international politics and even local policies had to be attuned to the policies dictated by the Soviet Union through the Socialist International. This restricted their native and organic growth in the country which could never be based on insulting dharma or Indian religious-spiritual consciousness and belief or opposing Indian nationalism which was essentially in opposition to colonialism and colonial capitalism (or today's crony capitalism). Indian religious consciousness or the *sana-tana dharma*, commonly referred to as Hinduism today, is by nature pluralistic, dynamic and democratic without having a single prophet, single book or even a single God (in its folk and dominant practice; though Advaita Vedanta is a complex philosophical world whose God is formless, nirakar brahma; or that of the Rig Veda, which is the first text of Hinduism and perhaps the first text of mankind in its reach and scope, spoke of a single 'neuter' God; not to mention that belief in God, or a single God, does not make it intrinsically valuable). Whereas communism grew in areas where religion or political ideology (in China through Confucianism and state imperialism) had a very structured format and believed to be the final and only truth of mankind.

Such exclusivism as the ideological backdrop of the growth of communism (and their exact form and definition of communism) in these places gave communism also the same unilinear idea of being the final truth. Even the brightest cadres of the Communist Party were restricted by their party line. And this party approach was not suited to the native wisdom of Indian



people. And it is also a fact that most of the Indian communist leaders studied in western locations and despite their communism wanted to have a top-down model lumped under the throat of Indian masses. They functioned in severe disregard of Indian ethos and were always limited by the policies dictated by Moscow or Beijing. This is also an example of ideological imperialism. To counter British/European imperialism they wanted to counter it by using European political ideology often learned on European soil and implement it in exact European manner in India. It also largely betrayed their same colonial European contempt of Indian ethos, culture and religious practices.

It is here that Swami Sahajanand Saraswati becomes extremely relevant. He is the only major Indian political thinker and actor who had the most traditional and rigorous education in the Indian *gurukul* tradition (traditional form of learning among Hindus). Apart from his very early schooling, he had his entire education not just in Indian schools of learning and knowledge but also in the Indian methodology. Therefore, his pedagogical training was also not colonial. This is something which the other major players like Nehru, Subhas, Ambedkar, Savarkar, Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia or for that matter Gandhi himself did not enjoy. He was never against religion and belief per se. But he was certainly against religion used as an instrument of exploitation, where his reflection is that of a Dandi Sanyasi like Adi Shankaracharya himself, who spoke in his famous poetry *Bhaja Govindam* of how just wearing a saffron robe does not make one a pious and learned person, he could very well be a crook. Sahajanand carried this same native critical streak which endeared him to the masses. But it was never done at the cost of belief and culture itself. He kept performing the duties of an ascetic in his private capacity like performing ablutions till the last day of his life and even in jail. His routine, quantity and nature of food, and his saffron garb remained the same ever since he took to it in the year 1907. Even the *danda* of the *dandi sanyasi* became symbolic for the peasant movement.²⁴

Sahajanand on religion/religious issues

On Hinduism

Swamiji had a very unconventional and liberal view of religion despite being trained in the rigorous Shastric traditions and being a scholar of Nyaya, Mimamsa, *Sankhya*, *Vedanta*, Sanskrit grammar and other classical scholarly traditions and above all being a Dandi Sanyasi of the Dasnami Order (this is the highest order of sanyasis in the Indian ascetic tradition



and Adi Shankaracharya himself was a Dandi sanyasi). He always considered religion and faith to be a matter of private concern and not a matter of public display or for political manoeuvring and manipulation. Sahajanand remained a sanyasi with the highest personal discipline and kept on performing his ablutions till he breathed his last, but never once did he use religion for political purposes. His personal devotion to Lord Shiva as he belonged to the Shaivite tradition continued till the end even though he was quite respecting of some Vaishnavite traditions as well (in his times the sectarian differences were more striking). He fulfilled his life-long desire to visit the Amarnath shrine of Lord Shiva after the Bihar elections in January 1937 in his month-long visit of Kashmir in the midst of the raging peasant movements led by Kisan Sabha, across the province of Bihar, of which he was the supreme architect and leader.

Swamiji recounts his reservations during the Non-Cooperation Khilafat Movement itself where he had raised his questions about the sincerity of Maulanas being roped into politics with Gandhiji. He had his doubts that as soon as the movement was over or the objectives achieved, they would disappear from the scene of national politics. And this is exactly what happened. He had another presentiment that once such religious bigots were given political platform, they would understand that they could not just use the platform but also use it to realise their narrow objectives in the long run. This is also what happened in the long run. But in these early years of 1920-21 Swamiji did not press it any further with Gandhiji and was also unaware of the functioning of politics, rather he never aspired or did politics for furthering his own aspirations. His break with Gandhi did not appear until 1934, i.e., soon after the devastating Bihar Earthquake.

On cow slaughter

In 1921, Swamiji was involved in the cow protection movement in Buxar at the Brahmpur Mela. But he was struck at the hypocrisy of the Hindu community as a list of seven beneficiaries stalled his efforts at cow protection in which Swamiji genuinely believed. The seven beneficiaries were: 1. The Kshatriya zamindars on whose land the fair was held; 2. The Brahmin priests of the local temple; 3. The contractors of river ghats; 4. boatmen; 5. Professional buyers and sellers; 6. Professional butchers; 7. And the government itself. Thus, as Swamiji identified, the organised slaughter of cows can also be linked to colonial rule as the government promoted such cattle fairs in the country to provide ready source of meat for its English troops stationed in the country. The colonial rule created a



market for beef which has continued and grown unabated ever since, with India being a major exporter of beef in the world, even though the meat is largely derived from water-buffalo. In the process, it also shows the selfish merchandising of Hindus who very effectively used it for increasing their wealth and it betrayed the hypocrisy of those who are supposed to be protectors of religion being its worst violators: the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins, including those with Vaishnavite v-marks on their forehead acting as agents for the clandestine cow slaughter trade. Given this background, it became difficult for Swamiji to work against cow slaughter as well as to keep communal harmony intact. Even the slightest error might be used by the same beneficiaries to raise a communal hue and cry. Swamiji calls it his 'Himalayan Blunder' in his autobiography *Mera jivan sangharsh* and records,

The only lesson I could draw from that experience was that the issue of cow protection for most Hindus was nothing more than show business, hypocrisy, deceit and make-believe. I also drew the conclusion that it was an act of mere immaturity on the part of a man like me to get involved in such affairs. I concluded that Hindus were primarily responsible for cow slaughter, and as such, they would never successfully work for cow protection. Since then, I have been holding the same opinion about Hindus and their baseless claims about cow protection. (Pradhan 2018: 131f.)²⁵

On Islam and Muslims: notable encounter with peasant Noor Mohammad

In some ways, his respect for different religious traditions could be traced back to his childhood. Their family, despite their Brahmin heritage, protected the village mazar of a Muslim ascetic and would light lamps every evening at the mausoleum. Additionally, his earliest education was at the local madrassa for lack of any government or Hindu or *Sanskrit tol* (schools in villages run by traditional scholars) in the village which would surely have formed the earliest impressions that Muslims of India were the same as Hindus, and Islam is not necessarily an evil religion as was propagated by religious conservatives.

At the heat of the Bakasht movement in early 1937, when Swamiji was to tour Champaran, the Champaran District Congress Committee passed a resolution to prevent his visit and warned all Congressmen not to participate in his meetings and activities (Hauser 2015: 536). The Congress attitude became so anti-Swami and anti-Kisan Sabha and pro-zamindar interests that in the village Bhattiharwa, they could not find a place to hold



their meeting. It was a Muslim peasant, Noor Muhammad who offered his land to hold the meeting. Swamiji records,

At Bhattiharwa we could not find a place to hold our meeting! But then a young man named Noor Muhammad and who did not know me, came forward and offered his field of immature peas, which he ploughed under and invited us to hold our sabha on that very field! I learned later that he was put under much pressure for having offered us his land in this way. Other than this threat of social boycott against Noor Muhammad, there was also a threat to grab whatever money his brother had! [...] after the sabha I went to Noor Muhammad's field with others and rubbed some of its soil on my forehead and declared that in the history of the Kisan Sabha, this field and this young Mussalman will remain immortal. It is people like this who will strengthen the foundation of the Kisan Sabha. (ibid.: 537)

This incident is remarkable in its symbolism. A Hindu sanyasi of the highest order of the Dashnami Dandis, an order to which Adi Shankaracharya himself belonged, is rubbing his forehead with the soil from the land of a Muslim peasant, in complete solidarity with the idea of peasants and their struggles which cuts across castes and religious, is unique in Indian history. Swamiji transcended the borders of castes, sects and religions for a more just and equitable society. Professor Walter Hauser writes (ibid.: 605),

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The cultural and social connections and symbolisms in this description are many. The idea of Sahajanand Saraswati, the Shaivite Shankaracharya Dandi Dashnami Sanyasi and his encounter with a young Muslim Kisan, and then going to the field of that kisan and rubbing the earth of the peasant's field on his forehead, is a stunning ritual metaphor. It is in marking the forehead that committed Shaivites and Vaishnavites identify and distinguish themselves, more so in the south, but nevertheless the meanings here are clear. This Shaivite Hindu ritual act is performed here with the earth of the field, which in the process becomes a metaphor for the religious act itself. "The poor are my God", Sahajanand has said and here he completes that act of social, cultural, and religious conversion, so to speak. He remains a Hindu Dandi Dashnami Swami in every sense of the word, but he does so on his terms. In other words, he also becomes something else. As I suggest in the following paragraphs, the symbiosis between the Swami as Swami and Swami as Kisan activist is not only defined by what happened at Bhattiharwa, the transformation is completed by this consciously reflective act.

It is a conversion much like that which Sahajanand describes in the last paragraph of this section, where the danda of religious authority of the Dashnami Sanyasi, comes also to have political and economic meaning. In these encounters, can anyone speak of caste, or



Bhumihar Brahman casteism or communalism, or anything other than the open-ended activism of a committed advocate of justice, equity, and freedom in the broadest sense in which I use the term? This is the ultimate example of the concept of the indivisible freedom of which I have written in these notes.

The ritual act performed in the field of Noor Muhammad was possible for Sahajanand because he was quintessentially Indian in his personal and intellectual roots. As described many times in these endnotes, this meant a total dharmic, shastric intellectual environment, including many years of the most high-powered scholarship at Kashi, and in Darbhanga in the classical, philosophical traditions of Hinduism. But most fundamentally this was a man whose ideas emerged from his lived experience in the villages and in the fields and lives of the kisans and khet mazdoors of Bihar and India. No one, not Jayaprakash, Nehru, Ashok Mehta, Rajendra Prasad, Shri Krishna Singh, among others, had this kind of on the ground experience, and if they did, it was more often as zamindars, as for example, in the case of Rajendra Prasad and Shri Krishna Singh, among many other Congress and Socialist stalwarts. The only people who come remotely close to Sahajanand in this regard are his own closest associates and co-workers, such as Jadunandan Sharma and Panchanan Sharma. It is this history of Sahajanand as a man of the lived experience of the peasants, that made him the peasant activist he was.

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Swamiji's visit to the easternmost part of Bengal (it was his first address in Bengal) and his presidential address of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1938 in Comilla was extremely successful along with huge numbers of felicitation addresses presented to Swamiji. Peasants in huge numbers, an overwhelming majority of whom were Muslims (95 per cent) came to hear Swamiji and there were processions in the whole region despite the government's opposition (Fazlul Haque's ministry of Krishak Praja Party) and even acts of violence by it and disturbances created by the Muslim League in addition to the canard spread against the Kisan Sabha (Pradhan 2018: 339f.; Hauser 2015: 555f.).

On Christianity and Christian missionaries

Swami Sahajanand's views on conversion, reconversion and non-conversion are crucial. Though, one has to keep in mind the fundamental difference between the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam with Christianity and Islam having expansionist tendencies as against the Dharmic religions which emanated in India which do not have an organised method of conversion and increasing membership. Despite this, the very



notion of service which the missionaries render has to be learnt by their Hindu brethren, which comes best from his own reflection,

Christian missionaries came to these far-off places in the forest many years back when there were no railways or telegrams in the region. They settled down in these inhospitable areas, which was nothing but an act of extraordinary courage, conviction and unstinted labour. True, that they might have taken all these troubles for propagating and spreading their religion. Nevertheless, I bow my head before them for their manliness, sense of responsibility, and persistence. Hence, it is not fair to accuse these Christian missionaries of their attempt to convert these innocent tribal people to Christianity by using all kinds of persuasions, promises, pressures, and even inducements through offerings of material goods. We have to learn from them their kind of dedication, courage, conviction, and commitment for such tasks. Only people with such commitment should have the right to criticise these missionaries. (Pradhan 2018: 208)

Sahajanand on Srimadbhagvad Gita

Swamiji had read and remembered the Gita from his earliest childhood and had read all the available commentaries on it. It was during his incarceration in the Faizpur jail in 1922 during the Non-Cooperation Movement that he used to teach and give discourses on the Gita to his friends and fellow jail-mates (Hauser 2015: 229). And it was here that he got the true reflective meaning of the Gita which gave him a sense of freedom and peace of mind which his lifelong study of Vedanta and other philosophies had not done for him (ibid.: 229-32). It was this reflection which gradually bloomed into a full-blown commentary *Gita hriday* which he wrote in the last days of his incarceration in Hazaribagh jail in 1942. Even this massive tome in two parts is incomplete. He had planned a third part for which he never got time. In this work Swamiji has brought the message of Gita and Marxism closer to give a solution to the problems of our day. It rests on the message of "*lok sangraha*" or public service. Interestingly "*lok sangraha*" is also the name of the first journal he edited himself.

Legacy

The three swamis

Logically and thematically, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati follow one another. Swami Dayanand is a revivalist to the core who in order to shake up the Indian masses, and Hindu masses in particular, from their deep slumber makes the clarion call



of going back to the Vedas. In order to instil self-pride, he was also dismissive of other religions like Christianity and Islam whose more theological elements looked down upon Hinduism and Hindu practices and spread canards and demeaning writings about them in plenty. This was the first gush of self-pride among the Hindu masses as *Hindus* in a very rigorous tone quite unlike the more eclectic tradition developed by the Brahmos drawn from cultural and educated elites in Bengal led by Raja Rammohun Roy and Maharishi Debendranath Tagore. Then came the Vedantin, Swami Vivekanand who brought great esteem and respect for Hindu traditions with his humanity, service and intellect. His speeches and writings are nothing but positive and full of vibrant energy which instilled pride amongst Indians who wished to bring about a glorious future based on the hallowed past. It is this self-confidence which even turned his own younger brother Bhupendranath Datta as a revolutionary fighting against British colonial rule.

In this widely awakened Indian public sphere, then came the radical revolutionary Swami Sahajanand like a meteor who swallowed in a ball of fire the zamindari system which was the pillar of strength of the British rule in India. He was jailed, he suffered calumnies, deceit, and what not, but he never left the side of the peasants and wanted to bring about a kisan-majdoor raj on Indian folk terms. He localised Marx and Marxised the *Srimad Bhagvad Gita* or in other words he mainstreamed the folk culture of India and mixed it with his conception of *Gita* and Vedanta and added the masala of Marx to make a perfect socio-political-economic solution to Indian problems. A Vedantic Socialist like Subhas Chandra Bose paid the most handsome tribute to Swami Sahajanand,

Swami Sahajanand Saraswati is, in this land of ours, a name to conjure with. The undisputed leader of the Peasant Movement in India, he is today the idol of the masses and the hero of millions. It was indeed a rare fortune to get him as Chairman of the Reception Committee of the All-India Anti-Compromise Conference at Ramgarh. For the Forward Bloc it was a privilege and an honour to get him as one of the foremost leaders of the Left movement and as a friend, philosopher and guide of the Forward Bloc itself.²⁶

Political legacy

Sahajanand was one of his kind in the milieu of Indian political leaders in the first half of the twentieth century. As a Sanyasi he had left all worldly attachments which made him attached to the toiling and labouring masses



of the country. His spirituality was not removed from the world for personal *moksha*²⁷, his moksha was connected to the moksha of the masses through its material advancement to begin with. It is the true Vedanta in action and he is the truest *Vedantin* in the Indian political spectrum. His Gita was the Gita of *loksangraha* or public action and not escapism from challenges. He is counter-intuitive of the idea of subaltern, as the peasants are not mute spectators and mere subjects of change. Peasants in general and those during the peasant movement of the late nine-thirties in particular, and symbolised by Sahajanand's personality and work, show that peasants or kore kisans can be intellectuals, articulators of their problems and offer their own solutions to the problems. Therefore, to call peasants including the khet mazdoors or agricultural workers as subalterns could be taken as an attempt to take away their agency and their native genius. After all peasants know the slightest change in the air, water and soil affecting their profession of agriculture which feeds and keeps the world of humans alive. It is this that Swamiji knew intuitively and fought for. His writings and program of action are increasingly relevant for reviving agriculture and village life which is the heart and soul of India and its dharmic and cultural life.

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His work 'Khet Mazdoor' is perhaps the first tract by an Indian scholar in India on the condition of rural landless agricultural labourers and offers concrete legal and economic solutions for their upliftment. He is perhaps the first national leader to use the term *Dalitto* refer to the oppressed sections of Indian society as against the more stylised *Harijan* of Gandhiji. He is the forerunner of the movement for Jharkhand through his book *Jharkhand ke kisan* way back in 1941. He listed how government officials, Biharis from the Gangetic plains, mahajans and businessmen and others exploited and fooled the simple and hardworking tribals of the region of Jharkhand, who were *pukke kisans* (perfect farmers or farmers who could farm perfectly) like himself, and gradually took over their lands and turned them into *begars* (forced labourers) due to indebtedness.

Much before sociology and anthropology took root as formal disciplines in India, Sahajanand emerged as a native social anthropologist through his works like *Aaj ke Braman samaj ki sthiti*, *Bhumihar Brahmin parichay*, *jhoota bhay aur mithya abhiman* and *Brahmarshi vansha vistar* in the early years of twentieth century not just quoting extensively from *Dharma-sastras*²⁸ and other classical texts but also medieval works and modern English works and works of history and additionally doing field-work compiling extensively the marriage relations existing among different sub-



castes of Brahmins. It is a pathbreaking example of field-work and empirical research by a traditionally trained scholar who had no formal training in the British system of higher education. He is therefore not intellectually an illegitimate child of Macaulay who framed India's education policy for the subservience of its educated class of citizens. Something which persists even today through mental and intellectual slavery.

His program of action for farmers is more live, real and attuned to the Indian circumstances as against Lenin or Mao. As a city-bred, Lenin did not consider farmers to be the real proletariats so his theorisation and offering of solutions were purely for industrial societies or based its hopes on absolute industrialisation at the cost of agriculture, villages and local cultural lives. Mao did offer some solutions attuned to agricultural societies like China, but he destroyed its culture and its religious life. Neither Lenin nor Mao are suited for Indian circumstances. Whereas Swamiji never insulted religion or chastised local culture which might even have some superstitions attached to it. As Carl Gustav Jung points out, even myth is essential for human life, culture and civilisation. And therefore, the agricultural concepts of *gram devata*, *kul devata*, *pitr* (worshipping of ancestors), the entire cycle of festivals, worshipping of cows and the like are linked to India's agricultural society. And Swamiji never criticised or targeted these social practices but he targeted those who turned religion into a business and vehicle of oppression and exploitation of the masses. He considered religion to be a matter of personal realm or as Derrida famously said, 'I pray all the time'. Swamiji prayed all the time through his actions for empowerment of the masses. As an organic intellectual rooted to the ground and Indian tradition he harnessed tradition itself in the service of change and empowerment,

[...] in the Sitaram Ashram, a world where change was being propelled not in urban centers but in the village and countryside, and a world in which a leading proponent of that change was a man who insistently defined himself as a sanyasi, a staunch representative of a Brahmanical religio-ascetic tradition with deep civilisational roots. Furthermore, it was significant for Walter [Walter Hauser] that the Swami emphasised his status as a dandi sannyasi by virtue of his high-caste birth. As the Swami said many times, he understood that dand, the ritual staff, as a weapon (lathi) to be used on behalf of the peasants. He would deploy the weight of Brahmanical religious tradition, in other words, to demolish structures of oppression and create radical transformation. This was tradition in the service of change.²⁹



Swami Sahajanand's principled stand of standing by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in both elections in the Congress party and their expulsion from the Congress at the same time and their more successful All India Anti-Compromise Conference at Ramgarh as against the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress at Ramgarh attest to the popularity, influence and importance of Swamiji in national politics. But he was never *political* or aspired to be a political leader. He pursued "politics" *as a vocation* in a Weberian sense for the empowerment and rights of the peasantry who constituted the majority of Indian public, then and now; irrespective of whether he stayed at the helm or not; irrespective of whether the high and mighty supported him or not; irrespective of whether any political party supported him or not; irrespective of whether he acquired any name or fame or prominence or not; he continued working for the peasants till his last breath. The peasant movement led by Swamiji had a wide social base cutting across caste and community lines. It was a struggle, *sangharsh*, between British Raj and zamindars on the one side and tenant peasants and agricultural workers on the other. A zamindar was a zamindar who would be equally cruel on all his tenants irrespective of their social background which is what brought all the peasants and workers on the same platform of Kisan Sabha led by Swamiji. One incident of a Brahmin (Bhumihar Brahmin or locally called Babhan) zamindar's exploitation of his Brahmin tenants is narrated by Swamiji thus,

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At Reora about 1500 bighas of land had been sold at auction by the zamindars. The zamindars here are Shri Rameshwar Prasad Singh of village Samhey near Warisaliganj, and others. Nearly five to six hundred kisans lived in Reora in conditions of starvation and clothed in no more than rags. In this place, daughters of Brahmans were sold of necessity and the zamindar was said to demand half the sale price as a zamindari right! And the rest in rent! In such circumstances there was no way to save the land! I heard these stories myself from old women of the village who had witnessed all of this! If there were two squash growing on the thatched roof of a kisan, one automatically belonged to the zamindar! If two goats were born, one was his! Once he demanded milk from the villagers, but there was none. He then said, I was told, then go milk the women! (Hauser 2015: 547)

Thus, Swamiji had a concrete legal vision for the formation of Indian society with the empowerment of peasants and workers (the *kisan-mazdoor raj*, with its hint of left rhetoric) but he and his Kisan Sabha lacked a constitutional vision of an independent nation of India which was coming into being. The legal vision can be discerned in the demands raised by Kisan Sabha since its days of inception. One reason for such lack of constitutional



vision of functioning of a newly independent state could have been his unstinted involvement for the last thirty years (1920-50) in the active movement for India's freedom struggle and then his complete involvement in peasant issues which left very little time to develop a constitutional vision of a state. Besides, he never got time post-independence having died prematurely at the age of sixty in 1950. With his sharp intellect he had the potential to develop a constitutional vision in the future despite not being a professional lawyer and not having any formal training in the English legal system. We cannot discount the fact that he had a rigorous training in Indian logic (*Nyaya*) and the Dharmasastras, so he could have developed an alternative constitutional model for independent India. But as the literature stands today, Swamiji does not seem to have a comprehensive constitutional vision for the functioning of a modern state.³⁰ In hindsight, perhaps the biggest error of judgement for him was his impatience with Gandhian politics and a lack of understanding of constitutional culture which it promoted.

On few of the reasons for non-recognition of Swamiji's untiring work for his country and countrymen, William R. Pinch writes,

[...] by the time of his death in 1950 the Swami had become something of a political persona non grata, having alienated his associates in the Congress leadership as well as his closer allies in the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party. Similarly, the Swami had long since burned his bridges to powerful Bhumihar Brahman patrons (many of whom had, in any case, become prominent "Congressites"), on whose behalf he had worked in a social reformist context in the 1910s and early 1920s. Indeed, it was due to his political "untouchability" at the time of his death that the ashram and the Sanskrit school that the Swami established in the 1920s had subsequently fallen onto hard times.³¹

Endnotes

¹ Hindu vow of asceticism when becoming a Hindu Monk. There are many orders, of which the Dashnami Dandi order is the most revered and the highest, the order to which Swami Sahajanand Saraswati belonged. It is a gradual process to reach the highest order. For more, see: Ghurye 1995.

² Land owning Brahmins who took to mostly secular (for the lack of a better word) professions, but some traditionally performed priestly functions in Prayagraj, Gaya and Hazaribagh. Brahmins belong to the highest varna or social order in India. They have traditionally been priests and philosophers but have also been known to pursue agriculture and military functions. For more, see: Sharma 2003: vol. 1; Radhakrishnan 2014.



³ The myth propagated by some authors writing on the peasant movement empowering only the middle peasantry and the upper castes has been busted with the availability of all records in the public domain, see: Kumar 2015, 2017: vols. I - VIII. Earlier works which attest to the wide social basis of the peasant movement are, Gupta 1982; Dhanagare 1983; apart from of course the works of Walter Hauser, Arvind Narayan Das, A. R. Desai, Raghav Sharan Sharma, Awadhesh Pradhan and Ram Chandra Pradhan.

⁴ 'Few will know that it was Yadav peasants who, in 1927, pleaded with Sahajanand to aid them in their struggles against the Bhumihar Brahmin zamindars of Masaurhi, and that it was from that beginning that the most powerful peasant movement in India, the Bihar provincial Kisan Sabha, emerged. And among the many beneficiaries of that movement were precisely those productive and upwardly mobile middle caste groups now courted so assiduously by the Janata Dal, the Samata Party the Congress, and indeed, the BJP.' (Walter Hauser. 1996. Peasant surprise. *The Telegraph (Calcutta)*, 21 May, p. 8, <https://asianstudies.github.io/area-studies/SouthAsia/Misc/Sss/whpsnts96.html> [retrieved 02.11.18]).

⁵ This point was first highlighted by Professor Walter Hauser in his PhD thesis submitted in the University of Chicago in 1960, which has recently been published. For more, see: Hauser 2019.

⁶ This fact was attested to by Congress, Socialist as well as zamindar figures in their interaction with Professor Walter Hauser since the late 1950s like, Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India; Sri Krishna Sinha, the first Premier and then Chief Minister of the Province of Bihar; K. B. Sahay, a prominent local Congress leader; Jayaprakash Narayan, a socialist leader; and Rajandhari Singh, an erstwhile zamindar. cf. Hauser 2015: note 8 on p. 575.

⁷ Walter Hauser. 1991-92. Swami Sahajanand and the politics of social reform, 1907-50. *Indian Historical Review*, XVIII (1-2), pp. 59-75, note 13 on p. 64.

⁸ He has edited and published few other works of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati separately which are included in Sharma 2003.

⁹ Abhay Singh. 2018. American social scientist Hauser not a CIA agent. *The Times of India*, July 2, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/american-social-scientist-hauser-not-a-cia-agent/articleshow/64818558.cms> [retrieved 31.10.18].

¹⁰ The brief biographical works are: Sharma 2004; Nilanshu Ranjan 2014; an important and brief biographical sketch by his contemporary is, Sankrityayan 2011-12: 121-39; more academic and richly layered work whose expanded notes itself constitute a biography is, Hauser 2015; Das 2008: 193-232; Pradhan 2014: 74-104; Hauser 2004: 155-91; few works which are not biographies but have dealt with the peasant movement particularly well are: Hauser 1961; Gupta 1982; Das 1983; Sharma 1989; other works which have dealt with his ideology and action are: Chaudhary 1990; Khan 2014; Kumar 2001 to list out the major works.

¹¹ Kanyakubjas, Bhumihars, Jijhoutias, Sarjuparis, Maithils are all different sub-castes of Brahmins. The classical Varna social order was based on division of labour but when it degenerated into caste-system it became a division of society. The caste system is based on connubiality and commensality. If there is widespread marriage between all these castes or sub-castes of Brahmins, then there is no contestation that they are one and not just co-equals. If they are not, then they are "outside" the caste system. And there is no hypogamy or hypergamy prevalent among them, apart from of course hypergamy and hypogamy as an acceptable social practice was prevalent in the ancient times and ran out of practice since early medieval times. Therefore, if Kanyakubjas, Bhumihars, Maithils intermarry, then they belong to the same caste of Brahmins. Such marriages in societies conforming to connubiality and commensality did not (and still do not) exist with any other caste as a matter of traditional-arranged marriage with wider social acceptance. On this, see: Pandey 2013. All these castes, rather sub-castes of Brahmins, gave their daughters in marriage to each other wherever they are geographically present.



For example, in western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, Kanyukubjas and Bhumiars marry each other and in North Bihar, Bhumiars and Maithils marry each other (before Sahajanand, during Sahajanand and even today). It is rather remarkable how this social reality has been curiously overlooked by sociologists writing about the Bhumiar Brahman Mahasabha and placing their bets only on the dubious and often contradictory (differing in region to region and district to district) colonial caste censuses. Caste censuses were used to divide Brahmins among themselves on the one hand, and Brahmins and Rajputs on the other, as they were the sepoys from Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar who constituted the bulk revolting against the British in 1857-58. The Bengal Army was disbanded after 1857-58, and few years later, the first caste censuses were initiated by colonial officers having no clue of Indian society, with an agenda to divide them in addition to outright contempt for Indian society.

¹² A very systematic and comprehensive history of peasant movements throughout Indian history is still somewhat lacking. A gradual interest and writing of peasants in mainstream history writing was introduced by R. S. Sharma and D. D. Kosambi.

¹³ Short biographical sketches and the commendable contribution of these peasant leaders along with contextualising their movement is included in Sharma 2014: 164-228.

¹⁴ Kol and Ho are among the many tribal communities in India who are known for their simplicity, hard-working nature and legendary revolts against British oppression, see: Sharma 2014; Jha 1987.

¹⁵ Arvind Narayan Das used this term at the outset of his essay in Arvind Narayan Das, *Agrarian Change from above and below: Bihar 1947-78* in Guha 2008.

¹⁶ The movement was led in Barahiya; Reora; Majhiawan, Anuwan, Agda, Bhaluwa, Majhawe, Sanrha and other villages in Gaya district; Barhgaon and Darigaon among other villages in Shahabad district; Amwari, Parsadi, Chhitauli, etc. in Saran district; Raghapur, Dekuli, Pandaul, Padhri (Vithan), Amwari and others in Darbhanga district; Darampura, Ankuri, Jalpura, Tarpura, Beldarichak and other villages in Patna district and in the districts of Champaran and Bhagalpur among others, see: Pradhan 2018: 327-39; Hauser 2015: 541-55 at 551.

¹⁷ In a peculiar and regressive turn of events, after the First World War and the fall and liquidation of the Caliphate or the Ottoman Empire in Turkey, some feudal and elite segments among the Muslims in the Indian sub-continent wanted the Caliphate in Istanbul to be reinstated and they started the so-called Caliphate or Khilafat Movement. These Muslim feudal elites saw the liquidation in the same light as the liquidation of the Islamic Mughal Empire in India and took it as an affront to Islam. On its own, it was a marginal movement led by marginal figures like the Ali Brothers (Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali), but when Mahatma Gandhi aligned the Indian National Movement of Non-Cooperation with the Khilafat Movement as a move for Hindu-Muslim unity against the British Rule in the Indian sub-continent its predictable and counter-productive consequence was further Islamisation of the variegated, eclectic and Hinduised Muslim community of the sub-continent into a more "pure" form of Islam and Islamic brotherhood cutting across national, cultural and linguistic barriers. There were riots perpetrated against non-Muslim communities including the Moplah Genocide with the killing of thousands of Hindus and their forced conversion into Islam in the Malabar coast of India. It gave the ideological fillip to Muslims being a separate "nation" from Hindus and the future idea of Pakistan in the 1940s, the partition of India and the bloody communal riots which preceded as well as followed it. It turned a fringe group into a Frankenstein monster leading to one of the most sectarian Muslim politics of modern India and its eventual partition. It is a recurrent theme for a more muscular and assertive Hindu identity in India. On this whole sad trajectory, see: Prasad 2000, 2009; Minault 1982; Nanda 2002; Dhulipala 2015.

¹⁸ Such moral degradation in the political leaders of the day who would then lead independent India has rarely been recorded with such forthright candidness by any major political leader of the day



including Gandhiji himself. Most of the top leaders had somewhat of an ideal in place but right from the second in command till the provincial and local leaders there was a lot of opportunism and even a display of Gandhianism just for political mileage which the top leaders of the day including Gandhiji himself glossed over. Something which an ideal like Swamiji was unable to reconcile with. For more, see: Hauser 2015: 217-30, 242-4.

¹⁹ Rajendra Prasad was also a member of the board of Dalmianagar factories in Dehri-on-Sone. Rajendra Prasad played a dubious role when he headed the Labour Enquiry Committee Report (immediately post independence) constituted at the behest of Jawaharlal Nehru and negotiation of Jayaprakash Narayan (who suggested Prasad's name) after the historic fast-unto-death for 30 days by firebrand revolutionary and trade unionist Basawon Singh in 1949. Rajendra Prasad unfortunately again decided in favour of the management in dismissing 3500 workers from their jobs. It was only after the 1952 general elections and the resounding victory of Basawon Singh from the Socialist Party against his Congress adversary and stalwart Abdul Qayum Ansari, and the reinstatement in services of all those dismissed 3500 workers by 1955, that both Dalmia and its supporter Rajendra Prasad who was then the President of India had to bite dust. Cf. Statement to the Press on Basawan Sinha's Fast, 14 March 1949. *J.P. Papers* (NMML). The statement, written during the train journey from Delhi to Calcutta on 14 March 1949, was published in newspapers on 15 March 1949. Cf. Prasad 2005: vol V, 160-2. For more, see: Udaibhan Singh. 1998. Dalmianagar aur mazdoor andolan ki kahani: Udaibhan Singh ki zubani [Dalmianagar and the history of peasant movement: in the words of Udaibhan Singh] In: Sinha & Manivannan, eds., pp. 58-62. Sri Udaibhan Singh came to Dalmianagar as an illiterate worker and, under the influence of Basawon Singh, joined the trade union movement, becoming Secretary of the Rohtas Industries Mazdoor Sangh (RIMS) at Dalmianagar.

²⁰ R. L. Shukla. 1996. Bihar Congress and the agrarian problem in the 1930s. In: Jha, ed., pp. 413-24 at 415f.

²¹ The contribution of socialists in the Kisan Sabha movement is nicely and briefly recorded in Gayatree Sharma. 1991. Socialists' contribution to peasant movement in Bihar. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 34 (4), pp. 425-30.

²² Gayatree Sharma. 1991. Socialists' contribution to peasant movement in Bihar. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 34 (4), pp. 425-30.

²³ On the ambivalent and sometimes outrightly anti-nationalist stance of the Communist Party, though there were sterling individuals and nationalists also with a communist line of thinking, but they were more like free thinkers, often at odds with the party line. See: Pradhan 2008: 239-47.

²⁴ "Danda" evokes a myriad sense of imagery for the rural Indian masses. Danda or stick is in its literal physical existence is meant for self-defence but it also signifies "danda" as the spiritual authority of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati as a dandi sanyasi of the dasnami order which has traditionally signified immense spiritual and temporal authority of such sanyasis/ascetics. And here the dandi sanyasi has become one with the peasants for their right to self-defence by the use of danda/lath/stick. Also, danda signifies punishment or penance for wrongdoing. And the intelligent and fiery Swami wants to give "danda" to the zamindars and British rulers for perpetrating violence and suppression of the peasantry.' Kumar 2019: n. 24 in p. 304.

²⁵ Without covering all the aspects of the debate as identified by Swamiji, especially the British colonial economic imperative (and its hegemonic presence) which is part of the demand side of the supply chain, an author highlighted this in popular media. see: Ajaz Ashraf. 2017. 'Hindus are 100% responsible for cow slaughter': a sanyasi freedom fighter's claim still holds true. *Scroll*, 2 July, <https://scroll.in/article/840763/hindus-are-100-responsible-for-cow-slaughter-a-sanyasi-freedom-fighters-claim-still-holds->



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