

**AGRARIAN STRUCTURE AND PEASANT
MOVEMENT IN THE PUNJAB
1925-1947
(IN THREE VOLUMES)**

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PART TWO

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		<u>Page</u>
Chapter 7	Peasant Protest: The Historical Background	333
Chapter 8	Peasant Protest: Finding its Feet 1924-29	373
Chapter 9	Peasant Protest: As Part of National Upsurge 1930-32	433
Chapter 10	Peasant Protest: A Time for Consolidation 1933-37	493
Chapter 11	Peasant Protest: The High Water-Mark 1938-39	558
Chapter 12	Peasant Protest: Straying from the Straight Path 1939-47	661
Chapter 13	Peasant Protest: In a Non-Hegemonic State: Patiala 1930-53	739

CHAPTER 7

PEASANT PROTEST: THE HISTORICAL
BACKGROUND

We take up the story of peasant struggles in Punjab in the middle of the third decade of the twentieth century when the first signs of the emergence of modern peasant organisations become visible. These stirrings were a product as much of the new consciousness on the part of different political trends of the significance of and need for the political organisation of the peasants, as they were of the new urges and awakening of the peasants themselves to modern politics and ideologies and modern forms of political organisation - the two processes were in fact dialectically woven together.

To reach this point, at which a new type and genre of politics was to become a part of their historical agenda, the peasants of Punjab, or at least significant sections of them, had traversed a long and tortuous road. The many twists and turns, triumph and disappointments, joys and travails that marked this journey are an indelible part of their story; in these pages, however, we are constrained to recount the early part of the story only in its barest outline.

I

The Kooka movement¹

It is customary to regard the Kooka or Namdhari movement as the first major movement that mobilised the Sikh peasants of

1. I have based my account of the Kooka movement on the following: Fauja Singh, Kuka Movement, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1965; M.M. Ahluwalia, Freedom Struggle in India, Ranjit
contd...

Punjab after the onset of colonial rule. Founded sometime in the late 1850s or early 1860s by Baba Ram Singh, himself a disciple of a saint, Baba Balak Singh, this was a movement basically of religious and social reform, with emphasis on protection of the cow, giving up of worship of idols and graves, and against female infanticide, early marriage, bride-price, and lavish celebration of marriages. It is also said to have had political overtones such as a desire to restore Sikh sovereignty and injunctions to non-cooperate with the British educational institutions, law courts, postal services and to use Swadeshi instead of British goods. The evidence on this aspect is, however, far from convincing and the political significance of the movement stems mainly from the fact that the British used the most inhuman and brutal repression against its protagonists.

The authorities had been watching the growth of the Kooka movement with increasing suspicion, and had on an occasion even interned Baba Ram Singh in his village. In 1871, the murder of some butchers involved in the slaughter of cows by some fanatical bands of Kookas in Amritsar and Raikot was punished with executions and public hangings, and in 1872, when another fanatical

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Publishers, Delhi, 1965, pp.245-54; Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, PPH, New Delhi, pp.1-15; R.C. Majumdar, ed., The History and Culture of the Indian People, Vol.IX, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1963, pp.901-4; Mohinder Singh, The Akali Movement, Macmillan, Delhi, 1978, pp.6-7.

band of 150 Kookas, against Baba Ram Singh's advice, attacked the palace and treasury of the small Indian State of Malerkotla (near Ludhiana), the Deputy Commissioner of Ludhiana lost all sense of proportion and had 49 Kookas blown from the cannon's mouth, without even a summary trial. Baba Ram Singh was deported to Burma (where he died in confinement 13 years later) despite the fact that he had informed the authorities immediately about the plans of the fanatical band that attacked Malerkotla. The blatant ignoring of the rule of law, the lack of any sense of proportion in the punishment meted out (only 10 had died in the attack on Malerkotla), the barbaric nature of the punishment itself, the vindictiveness shown towards Baba Ram Singh, who was held in high esteem by the vast mass of the ordinary Sikhs and whose guilt was never established, all this created an image of British rule in the popular mind that was vastly different from the one sought to be projected by the British themselves - the image of a benevolent, paternalist government based on the rule of law.

The Agrarian Agitation of 1907²

A qualitatively different position in the history of peasant resistance in Punjab is, however, that of the famous 'Punjab

2. I have based my account of the agrarian agitation of 1907 on the following: Sucheta Mahajan, "Anti-British Agitation in 1907 Punjab", Punjab History Conference Proceedings, Fifteenth Session, 1981, pp.290-309; N. Gerald Barrier, "The Punjab Disturbance of 1907; The Response of the British Government in India to Agrarian Unrest", The Panjab Past and Present, Vol.VIII, Part II, October 1976, pp.444-76;

'Disturbance' of 1907, which can truly be described as the first significant struggle of the peasants of Punjab against the colonial state. Peasant discontent arose out of a series of Government measures, the most important of which was the Punjab Land Colonization Bill introduced in the Punjab Council on 25 October 1906 which sought to drastically change the conditions on which land was granted to colonists in the canal colonies of the Punjab. In addition, the Government also ordered in November 1906 a sharp enhancement in the canal water-rates on the Bari Doab canal which irrigated the districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Lahore; the average increase itself was 25 per cent, but on special crops as high as 50 per cent. Simultaneously, there was a sharp increase in the land revenue of Rawalpindi district as the result of a new settlement.

The measure that aroused the strongest reaction was the Colonization Bill, coming as it did as the culmination of a series of recent attempts by the Government to tighten their hold on the colonists by means of levying fines or confiscating land for infringements of the conditions laid down for grant of land.

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Satya M. Rai, Punjabi Heroic Tradition, 1900-1947, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1978, pp.9-26; Master Hari Singh, op. cit., pp.16-30; Pardaman Singh and Joginder Singh Dhanki, Buried Alive: Autobiography, Speeches and Writings of An Indian Revolutionary, Sardar Ajit Singh, Gitanjali, New Delhi, 1984.

These conditions, which included the obligatory planting of trees, maintenance of sanitary conditions, building of houses in designated areas, residence requirements, etc., were resented by the colonists, and when the system of fines was sought to be applied with great strictness, many of the better-off colonists, such as the 'yeoman grantees', had taken the matter to the civil courts and even secured favourable judgements. The Colonization Bill of 1906 sought to legalise the imposition of fines, declare the colonies outside the purview of the courts, and make the conditions governing the grant of land more stringent, especially by introducing a new rule which flouted the customary laws of inheritance by insisting upon primogeniture and even the lapse of land to the Government in case there were no male heirs. It further sought to debar the colonists from purchasing property-rights in the land, thus altering an earlier provision whereby they could purchase these rights after an initial period of probation as crown tenants.

Already irritated with the Government's attempts at interfering in their everyday existence, as well as with the rampant corruption among the lower bureaucracy which used every opportunity provided by the web of regulations to harass them for bribes, and fearing that the new law would only add to interference and harassment, angered by the attack on customary laws of inheritance, and insecure because of the failure of the cotton crop, their chief commercial crop, in 1905 and 1906, the colonists reacted with a vehemence that took the 'paternalist' British administration of Punjab completely by surprise. The

initial lead was taken by some 'yeoman grantees' belonging to the Bar Zamindar Association, many of whom were also local lawyers, and by the Zamindar newspaper edited by Siraj-ud-Din Ahmad, who organised mass meetings at which resolutions condemning the Bill and advocating refusal to pay fines were passed. The numbers attending these meetings grew rapidly, and a meeting held at Lyallpur on 3 February 1907 was attended by 10,000 people. A marked feature of the meetings was the participation of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs and the complete absence of any communal divide.

Agitation intensified further in March, and a new element was added by the participation of nationalist leaders and activists from Lahore, such as Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, who contributed to the movement by sharpening its political focus as well as by popularising its demands outside the colony areas and thus garnering much-needed support from the urban and rural population of the province as a whole. From April onwards, especially through the efforts of Ajit Singh, the peasants of Amritsar and Lahore also began to voice their protest against the enhanced water-rates on the Bari Doab canal through mass meetings and resolves to refuse to pay the new rates. Meetings were marked by their sharp anti-government tone, by their appeals for maintenance of communal unity, and by their appeal to the peasants to stand up for their rights, to protect their self-respect. The movement is also therefore popularly known by the opening line of the poem that became its symbol and was first recited at a mass gathering in Lyallpur in March 1907: 'Pagri Sambhal

O Jatta' (O Peasant, protect your self-respect).

By the beginning of May, the Government of Punjab was in a panic. A riot in Rawalpindi town on the occasion of the arrest of three leaders who had organised a public meeting to protest against the increase in water-rates in Bari Doab canal and in land revenue and municipal taxes in Rawalpindi strengthened the Government's growing conviction that the whole movement was being organised by urban nationalist agitators as part of a conspiracy to overthrow the Government. Reports of disaffection spreading among soldiers and ex-soldiers further contributed to the alarmist atmosphere and repression began in earnest. Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, who were considered the chief conspirators, were deported in May and June to Burma. Meetings were banned in five districts, the press was gagged and incitement to non-payment of Government dues made a penal offence. Simultaneously, however, independent enquiries directed by Lord Kitchener, the Commander-in-Chief, and conducted by army officers in the affected districts convinced the Government of India that the unrest could not be contained without a retreat on the Colonization Bill and the water-rates enhancement, and that its repercussions on the loyalty of the soldiers could be serious. The Colonization Bill was thus vetoed by the Viceroy and the Punjab Government withdrew the enhancement of water-rates. In November, Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh were released. An official enquiry established that the agitation against the enhancement of water-rates was largely justified; and the Colonization Bill that was finally enacted in

1912 was free of almost all the objections raised to its precursor of 1906.

The agitation of 1907 demonstrated to the Government the potential of agrarian grievances becoming major issues of agitation unless they were handled with care, and that the proverbial 'loyalty' of the Punjabi peasants - a loyalty that was essential if the peasant communities were to continue to be designated as 'martial races' from which a major component of the British Indian Army was recruited - could no longer be taken for granted; it would have to be continually monitored and actively maintained. It was clear that the strategy of 'paternalism' evolved in the nineteenth century to contain Punjab was not going to be enough to deal with the potential havoc that could be caused by the new winds of change sweeping the country. The rural masses must be kept isolated from the urban agitators, the carriers of the new ideas, and for this a three-pronged strategy gradually evolved. Its crucial elements were: one, use of severe repression against urban agitators; two, substantial concessions to agrarian demands to prevent the growth of widespread disaffection and maintain the image of 'paternalism'; three, strengthening and propagation of the ideology of the urban/rural divide, which could also be translated as the urban Hindu/rural Muslim divide, by continuing the policy framework that underlay the enactment of the Land Alienation Act at the turn of the century and which was to continue to be reflected in later years in the support to and close links with the Unionists as well as in reservations

in government jobs for the rural classes, etc. The first two elements of this strategy were clearly reflected in the response to the 1907 agitation, the third was to assume greater prominence in subsequent years.

On their part, the peasants learnt the power of sustained and organised agitation ^{and} its capacity to make the authorities concede their demands. They also became familiar with the new ideas of nationalism and representative government emphasized by the nationalist agitators from the towns; and the interest that was taken by people like Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh in their problems, and their willingness to suffer for their sake, became part of the political experience of the peasants. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was Ajit Singh, the man who was the most active in trying to integrate the various sectors of the 1907 agitation and to give it a militant political edge, who became the hero of 1907; the fact that he was an 'urban agitator' and not a peasant did not stand in the way of his canonization. This link that was forged between militant nationalism and the peasants' struggle for their rights in 1907 continued to inspire later generations of political activists who in turn ensured that the experience of 1907 remained alive in popular memory as a symbol of militant nationalism and peasant resistance.

The Ghadar Movement³

The next important movement that was to have a far-reaching impact on the peasants of Punjab was the famous Ghadar movement

3. I have based my account of the Ghadar movement on the following:
contd...

by the early nationalists. It also consciously attempted to create a secular consciousness amongst its readers. Since the majority of its readers were Punjabis, it specifically targeted them for appeals to abjure their loyalist past (e.g. their role in the Revolt of 1857) and rise in revolt. The paper obviously answered a deeply-felt need among immigrant Indian communities, and was avidly read not only in North America but also in the Philippines, the Malay States, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Burma, Trinidad, the Honduras, etc.; at some places people gathered together regularly to read, discuss and debate the issues raised by the paper and recite the poems it carried.

While the Ghadar was busy spreading the message of revolt, the events surrounding the fateful voyage of the ship Komagata Maru further inflamed immigrant passions. Already harassed by the increasing restrictions placed by the U.S.A. and Canada on Indian immigration with the connivance of the British government (who did not want Indians to be exposed to the democratic ideas of the West though it had no objections to Indian immigration to Fiji or Africa or the Caribbean), the Indians deeply resented the inhuman treatment meted out to a group of 376 Indian passengers aboard the ship, the Komagata Maru, who had travelled to Vancouver from various places in Southeast and East Asia because of the hope raised by a temporary relaxation of Canadian immigration laws. The Canadian government refused them entry despite vigorous agitation by resident Indians in Canada and the U.S.A., the ship was turned back after days of waiting, and

using the excuse of the outbreak of the First World War, the British government ordered that all passengers aboard the ship, regardless of where they had embarked on their journey, could disembark only at Calcutta. The real reason was of course the fear that the passengers had been infected by Ghadar propaganda and were therefore 'dangerous', and that this was a neat way of catching them all at once. The return journey of the ship was therefore marked by growing resentment and anger among Indians at every place where the ship stopped but its passengers refused permission to leave. The final act in the drama was enacted at Budge Budge near Calcutta where the irate passengers engaged the police that had been detailed to detain them in a bloody brawl, which left 18 of the passengers dead and 202 under arrest, while a few escaped.

The outbreak of the First World War had also placed the Ghadar leaders in a dilemma. This was the opportunity they had been waiting for, since it was obvious that the best time for a revolt in India was when the British had their hands full with the War, but they were not yet quite ready - their organization in India was almost non-existent and they had no arms. Despite these limitations, however, the Ghadar leadership gave the call for a war on the British. Indians abroad were asked to return home, lack of time and organization were to be made up by zeal and lack of arms by organizing mutinies in the Indian Army. The remarkable fact was that 8000 Indians actually heeded the call and returned home, and the vast majority of these were

Funjabi Sikhs. The Government of India was, however, better prepared and systematically intercepted the returning emigrants, separated the 'dangerous' ones and interned them or restricted their movements. A few of the 'dangerous' ones escaped detection.

But the Punjab of 1914 was very different from what the Ghadarites had expected -- the Punjabis were in no mood to join their romantic adventure. They tried their best; they toured the villages, addressed gatherings at melas and festivals -- all to no avail. The Chief Khalsa Diwan, proclaiming its loyalty to the British sovereign, declared them to be 'fallen' Sikhs and helped the Government to track them down. Efforts at getting the soldiers to mutiny were equally unsuccessful. Further efforts at revolts, which included inviting Rash Behari Bose, the famous Bengali revolutionary terrorist, to assume the leadership -- which he did in January 1915 -- and establishment of contacts with numerous army units, also proved futile since the British had succeeded in penetrating the organisation upto the highest level. Most of the leaders were arrested and severe repression launched. Conspiracy trials led to the execution of forty-five revolutionaries and long years of imprisonment for over two hundred others.

Despite its apparent failure, the Ghadar movement was to have a powerful impact on Punjab politics, and especially on the peasants.. It established a tradition of militant and secular anti-imperialism, enriched in

subsequent years by social radicalism, which was to continue to inspire subsequent generations. The movement threw up a committed leadership which, despite the tremendous depletion of its ranks due to repression, played a crucial role in the development of the peasant movement from the 1920s to the 1940s. In fact, one can speculate that had it been possible to avoid this tremendous loss of valuable human resources, the impact of the Ghadar movement, especially in strengthening the secular and radical anti-imperialist forces, would have been even more powerful. This in no way belittles, however, the contribution of the movement in carrying forward the process of anti-imperialist politicization and mobilisation in the province. The Ghadar experience also showed up the difficulties and consequences of attempts at armed revolt, and thus contributed to the accumulation of a political experience which pointed towards the adoption of other, more effective forms of protest and struggle.

The Akali Movement: 1920-25⁴

The Akali movement or the movement for reform of the Sikh shrines or Gurdwaras which lasted from 1920 to 1925 was of

4. I have based my account of the Akali movement on the following: Mohinder Singh, op. cit.; Richard G. Fox, Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, pp.78-104; K.L. Tuteja, Sikh Politics, 1920-1940, Vishal Publications, Kurukshetra, pp.29-134; Satya M. Rai, op. cit., pp.132-46; Master Hari Singh, op. cit., pp.101-31.

profound significance, as it was the harbinger of a democratic, anti-feudal and anti-imperialist consciousness among the vast mass of the Sikh peasantry of Central Punjab. Its central aim, that Gurdwaras must be managed by the popularly elected representatives of the Sikhs and not by the corrupt, feudal-style mahants or priests, or by the government or its representatives, though obviously religious in form, had a clear democratic and anti-feudal message. And as the struggle developed and the British lined up behind the loyalist priests, the anti-imperialist focus of the movement also grew sharper.

Since the eighteenth century, the Gurdwaras had been managed by Udasi Sikh mahants who had escaped the wrath of the Mughals because, though Sikhs, they did not wear their hair long. In the course of time, many Gurdwaras had also acquired large areas of land as grants from various Sikh rulers, chieftains and other devout Sikhs. The mahants increasingly started treating those lands and the offerings at the Gurdwaras as their personal income, and many of them also lived luxurious and dissipated lives, thus losing the respect of the people. They also acted as stooges of the British and preached loyalty to them. The growing anger against the mahants among Sikh nationalists and reformers came to a boiling point first when the priests of the Golden Temple at Amritsar declared Ghadar revolutionaries as 'fallen' Sikhs or renegades and then when they specially honoured the notorious General Dyer (who was responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919) and even declared him a Sikh.

The movement began in 1920 with the organisation of jathas or groups of volunteers whose task was to liberate the Gurdwaras from the control of the mahants and Government-appointed managers. The Government had not yet decided on a clear policy nor was it aware of the potential strength of the movement. Consequently, not wanting to alienate the reformers at this stage, it allowed the control of many Gurdwaras to fall into the hands of the reformers. Encouraged by the easy early success, especially on the question of the control of the Golden Temple and Akal Takht at Amritsar, the movement surged forward. The mahant of the Gurdwara at Nankana, Guru Nanak's birth place, however, had different ideas. When a jatha of Akali volunteers entered the Gurdwara on 21 February 1921 to pray, he ordered his band of 500 armed mercenaries to open fire and attack the jatha. Nearly 100 Akalis were killed in the process, and the incident immediately attracted nation-wide attention. The Akalis succeeded in wresting control of the Gurdwara by continuing to send jathas, but the experience had transformed the perceptions of the nature of the struggle. After this, the Akali movement moved closer to the ongoing Non-cooperation movement and not only adopted many items of its programme, such as boycott of British goods and liquor and setting up of panchayats in place of British courts, but also accepted its emphasis on non-violence.

The next major round was a test of strength with the Government in October 1921 over what came to be known as the 'Keys Affair', and ultimately the Government relented, handed

over the keys to the Toshakhana of the Golden Temple and released all the Akali prisoners arrested in that connection. Having stemmed the rapidly growing discontent by making concessions at a time when the entire country was charged with anti-British feeling and when therefore it was necessary to follow a conciliatory policy, the Government decided to strike back when the nation-wide upsurge had subsided. In August 1922, a confrontation developed between the Akalis and the mahant of Guru-ka-Bagh Gurdwara near Amritsar over control of the lands attached to the Gurdwara. The Akalis, who had already gained control of the Gurdwara, cut some firewood from the disputed land. The mahant reported a theft to the police, who promptly came and arrested the Akalis and put them on trial. At this, jathas began to arrive and cut trees from the disputed land. The Government arrested 4000 Akalis, but then suddenly changed track and decided to order beating up of the jathas with lathis. In subsequent days, Guru-Ka-Bagh was witness to the most harrowing scenes of police brutality and the most heroic examples of non-violent resistance. Countrywide condemnation followed and the Government was again forced to retreat. Another big struggle took place at Jaito in Nabha after the Akalis took up the cause of the Maharaja of Nabha who they believed had been deposed because of his pro-Akali sympathies. The response was not as powerful as in the case of Guru-Ka-Bagh, nor was it crowned with similar success.

Meanwhile, the Government had also begun the process of weaning away the moderate section of the Akalis by the offer of

legislation which would grant their main demand of democratic population control over the Gurdwaras. It had simultaneously launched an ideological onslaught on the movement by directing local officials to assist in the formation of Sudhar or Reform Committees with local notables at their head and use them for carrying the official points of view to the people - a move that was not without success. Through this policy of propaganda, negotiation with moderates and isolation of extremists -- the main architect of which was Malcom Hailey, who assumed the office of Governor of Punjab in 1924 -- the Akali movement was ultimately contained by 1925.

After this, the activists of the movement divided into three broad political trends. Many of the more moderate and loyalist elements whose goal had remained confined to Gurdwara reform returned to loyalist and moderate politics and allied with other similar-minded men to strengthen the emerging Unionist Party. A second stream that was clearly nationalist in its ideological orientation, and for whom the struggle for Gurdwara reform was only one battle in the ongoing war for Indian freedom, merged with the mainstream national movement, some joining its Gandhian wing and others moving towards the more radical emerging trends represented in Punjab by the Kirti-Kisans and Communists. The third group, which kept the nomenclature of Akali, gradually acquired communal overtones and increasingly became the political organ of Sikh Communalism. This group, however, largely because of the prestige of the Akali movement to which it claimed sole rights, retained considerable popularity among the rural Sikh masses. Besides, within this group

as well, there were some who were more militant and nationalistically-inclined and others who were moderate and communally-inclined, and the former tended to often team up with nationalist and left currents for expressing peasant grievances and during major national struggles. For the other group as well, the loyalist logic of its communal approach did not fully unfold till the 1940s, and it continued in the 1920s and 30s to vacillate between nationalism and loyalism. The reason for our dealing at some length with the subsequent political choices of those who emerged as leaders in the Akali movement is because these choices had profound effects on the subsequent politics of the peasants as well, as will become apparent in later pages.

The Akali movement had succeeded in mobilising a broad front of all sections of Sikhs, urban as well as rural, as well as in gaining the sympathy and at times even participation of other religious groups such as Hindus and Muslims. Nevertheless, it is accepted beyond doubt that its main base was among the Sikh peasantry of Punjab, including the Princely States. The scale of this mobilisation was remarkable indeed — all told 30,000 went to jail and of these the vast majority were peasants. An estimate made of the strength of the Akali jathas in early 1922 placed the total number, excluding the Princely States and South-west and South-east Punjab, at 15,506 of whom 10,200 were Jats (the major landowning caste of the Punjab) and another 2,399 were menials (the non-landowning artisan and labouring castes). Besides these activists, there were obviously thousands

who participated by feeding the jathas, making other contributions, attending meetings, etc. The main strength of the movement was in the districts of Lahore, Amritsar, Sheikhpura, Gurdaspur, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur and Lyallpur, as also in the Princely States of Kapurthala, Patiala and Nabha, all in Central Punjab. The significance of the politicization achieved by the Akali movement becomes immediately apparent when we find that it is this area that was to remain the main base of the subsequent national and peasant struggles as well. The struggles for reform of the Gurdwaras thus performed for the Sikh peasantry the task that was performed for most other regions of the country by the Non-Cooperation movement: the task of awakening them to modern, democratic and nationalist consciousness and organisation.

The Babbar Akali Movement⁵

A few groups of militant Sikhs had broken away from the mainstream of the Akali movement in early 1921 and by 1922 had united and formed what came to be known as the Babbar Akali Jatha.

5. I have based my account of the Babbar Akalis on the following: Susana B.C. Devalle and Harjot S. Oberoi, "Sacred Shrines, Secular Protest and Peasant Participation: The Babbar Akalis Reconsidered", Punjab Journal of Politics, Vol.VII, No.2, July-December 1983, pp.27-62; Kamlesh Mohan, Militant Nationalism in the Punjab, 1919-1935, Manohar, New Delhi, 1985, pp.41-77; Mohinder Singh, op. cit., pp.113-62; Satya M. Rai, op. cit., pp.77-84; Master Hari Singh, op. cit., pp.133-49; Richard G. Fox, op. cit., p.92.

Their main difference at that stage with the Akali leadership was over the latter's insistence on non-violence, as they believed that only armed revolt could win against the British. They also believed in using terror to pressurize the loyalist elements and frighten the officials. Organizing themselves into an armed band, these militant Akalis carried on their activities mainly in the districts of Jullundur and Hoshiarpur. They killed informers, officials and ex-officials. They brought out an illegal newsheet in which they talked of British exploitation of India, the misery of the peasantry and the need to drive out the British by force. Their activity was at its height in 1922 and 1923 and in this period they obviously enjoyed considerable support and sympathy from the peasants of the area, as is evident from the ease with which they operated their guerilla-style movement and the reluctance and even refusal of the people to divulge information and to co-operate with the police in running them down.

The Babbar Akali jatha had many returned emigrants of the Ghadar Party in its ranks, and the prestige of the Ghadar Party, born out of the heroic sacrifices of its members, undoubtedly helped in establishing the popularity of the Babbar Akalis. Besides returned emigrants, the activists of the Babbar Akali movement were chiefly ex-soldiers, many of whom had been demobilised at the end of the First World War, and were disgruntled with the British for their failure to keep the war-time promises of grants of lands and other rewards. The war had also meant for them an exposure to the wide world. They had fought in the battlefields

of Europe and the Middle East and had in the process picked up new ideas, were more self-assured and also found it difficult to return to the traditional family occupation of small peasant farming. Interestingly, the Babbar Akalis also attracted to themselves some groups of dacoits or bandits who, inspired by the Babbar example, decided to direct their activities towards a wider social and political cause.

It is also significant that the Babbar Akalis, while continuing to support the aims of Gurdwara reform, placed much greater emphasis on the anti-British part of their objectives than many Akalis. They addressed, in however rudimentary a fashion, the economic grievances of the peasantry, something which the Akali movement failed to do. The fact that their ideological discourse was replete with religious imagery and that the notions of the loss of 'Sikh' sovereignty and of the need to assert the 'Sikh' identity were its constituent parts only points to the inevitable transitional stage spanned by anti-colonial peasant-based movements of the time as well as, of course, to the necessity of further ideological development before such movements could command the maturity and sophistication necessary for handling the complex modern world in which they were situated.

II

Besides the groups and parties that emerged out of the movements discussed above, a number of other political parties

and groups were active in organising and mobilising the peasants in our period and we present below a brief political profile of these parties and groups in the 1920s.

The Punjab National Unionist Party⁶

This party, popularly known as the Unionist party, which was to crucially influence Punjab politics almost till independence, was a product of the peculiar contours of British colonial policies and ideologies in Punjab. Though it formally emerged as a party in 1923 at the time of the second elections to the Punjab Legislative Council held under the Reform Act of 1919, the ground for its existence was created by the manner in which the 1919 Reforms were applied in the province. Unlike other provinces, where the division of the seats and the electorate was primarily on a communal or caste basis, in Punjab a further division on a rural/urban basis was introduced within the communal division. This was in keeping with the ideology and policy of Punjab officialdom embodied in the Land Alienation Act which

6. This introductory account of the Unionist Party is based on my reading of the primary sources as well as on some published works. It is not possible to cite the primary sources at this stage nor is it necessary as they will be cited in due course. The important published works that have been used, however, are the following: Azim Husain, Fazl-i-Husain: A Political Biography, Longmans, Green and Co., Bombay, 1946; Prem Chowdhry, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram, Vikas, New Delhi, 1984; Satya M. Rai, Legislative Politics and the Freedom Struggle in the Panjab, 1897-1947, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, 1984; Kripal C. Yadav, Elections in Punjab, 1920-1947, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo, 1981; Madan Gopal, Sir Chhotu Ram, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1977.

in the name of protecting the 'agriculturists' from the 'non-agriculturists' had fostered a new cleavage in Punjab society which turned out to be as useful for the British in Punjab as their other favourite cleavage along religious lines was in the country as a whole.

The significance and possibilities of the new electoral arithmetic created by this division were first grasped by Fazl-i-Husain, a man of considerable political ambition and acumen, who had parted company with the Congress and the Khilafatists when they adopted the policy of Non-cooperation. He was elected to the Punjab Legislative Council in 1921, and was appointed a Minister under the new scheme of dyarchy. He soon saw that even if he secured the complete support of all the Muslim members, which he did since he had emerged as a major spokesman of moderate and loyalist Muslim opinion in the Punjab, he still could not command a majority in the Council, whereas if he could organise the rural members, Muslim and non-Muslim, into a solid bloc, he could easily get a majority. He could also count on many of the urban Muslims supporting this bloc, since the preponderance of Muslim members in the rural bloc would ensure that the bloc would generally work to protect communal Muslim interests. To facilitate such a combination, he emphasized that the idea was to unite all backward classes and groups, and that Muslims and agriculturists were both backward.

Thus, from 1921 itself, Fazl-i-Husain began in the Council the process of organizing what was first called the Rural Bloc,

then the Rural Party and later the Punjab National Unionist Party. Besides, the time he chose for pushing forward this process was a particularly suitable one, since the elections on the basis of which this Council was constituted had been boycotted by the Congress and the Khilafatists. Consequently, the elections had been fought totally on a non-party basis, and the type of men who were elected to the Council were of a particularly loyalist variety and those who might have offered some opposition were absent. By the time the next elections came around in 1923, he had succeeded in consolidating this group into a party. The inability of the nationalist elements to present a united front, now that they were back in the electoral fray, also worked to Fazl-i-Husain's advantage. The Congress was split between the Swarajists who wanted to contest elections and the No-changers who did not, and the Swarajists were therefore unable to bring the whole weight of the Congress to bear on their electoral mobilisation; the communal amity of the Non-cooperation days was already breaking up as was shown by the outbreak of communal riots in Punjab in 1922 and 1923; the Hindu traders, merchants, professionals and educated groups, who might otherwise have supported the Swarajists, were increasingly turning to communal Hindu organisations to counter the perceived threat from the pro-Muslim and pro-agriculturist policies, especially reservations in educational institutions and government services, promoted by Fazl-i-Husain in collusion with the Government. As a result, the Unionist party was able to command a

majority in the second Council, and get two of its members appointed as Ministers, one being Fazl-i-Husain and the other Lal Chand, a Jat agriculturist from Rohtak district in South-east Punjab. The latter, however, had to soon resign his post as he lost his seat due to a successful election petition against him, and Chhotu Ram, another Jat agriculturist from Rohtak, was appointed in his place. Interestingly, Chhotu Ram had been from 1921-23 a bitter critic of Fazl-i-Husain's pro-Muslim policies but now seized the opportunity of emerging in place of Lal Chand as the leader of the Jat Hindu agriculturists of South-east Punjab with the aid of his official position and the anti-urban, anti-bania ideology of the Unionist Party. In fact, he remained from this time the most important non-Muslim leader of the Unionist party.

In the next Council, formed in 1926, Fazl-i-Husain was shifted to the 'reserved' side of the Government and made Revenue Member, which meant that he no longer represented the elected members, and an 'urban' Hindu and a 'rural' Sikh, both non-Unionists, were made Ministers. This was done because the Governor, Malcolm Hailey, felt that the Unionists should not be allowed to become too powerful as this could prove difficult in case they pressed strongly for measures such as reduction of agricultural taxation which could upset the provincial finances. He also wanted to conciliate the more loyalist and communal elements among the 'urban' Hindus who felt that only Government support could save them from the 'excesses' of the

Muslim majority in the Punjab and were willing to trade loyalty for protection. But the Unionist Party agitated and was able to secure the appointment of Firoz Khan Noon, a 'rural' Unionist, as a third Minister. However, the Unionist position was no longer as strong as it had been in the Second Council from 1924-26, and this had predictable effects on the unity of a party whose members had come together largely to be able to partake of the fruits of power and office. Factions grew, rifts developed and the party was torn by personal, family, communal and urban/rural rivalries. As a result, in the next elections in 1930, its strength diminished, and the Government again conceded only one Minister to the party. However, it continued its policy of having a Unionist Muslim as Revenue Member, and Sikander Hayat Khan, a scion of one of the biggest landowning families of West Punjab, was appointed to this post in place of Fazl-i-Husain, who was elevated to the Viceroy's Executive Council in 1930. This situation continued till the grant of provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act of 1935 and the consequent elections of 1936 gave the Unionists a clear majority and enabled them to form their own Ministry, thus entering a qualitatively new stage which we shall discuss at length in later chapters.

The leaders of the Unionist Party were in the habit of making loud claims that theirs was a truly non-communal party constituted on purely economic lines, and that all communities were represented in its ranks. The hollowness of their claims

was to become increasingly clear from the late 1930s and 1940s when Muslim communalism acquired an aggressive posture under Jinnah's leadership and many of the Muslim Unionists began to fall prey to Jinnah's expansionist designs. But even earlier, the fact that Chhotu Ram, who was recognised officially as the leader of the Unionist Party since 1926, was consistently forced to surrender his claims to office -- in 1927 and 1930 to Ministership and in 1936 and again on Sikandar Hayat Khan's death in 1942 to Premiership -- in favour of a Unionist Muslim, speaks volumes for the pro-Muslim communal bias of the party.

At the ideological plane as well, communal categories were freely used. For example, anti-urban or anti-non-agriculturist was usually translated as anti-Hindu at the popular level by the Muslim leaders, taking advantage of the fact that moneylenders and traders were mostly Hindu. Chhotu Ram, who could obviously not use the same translation, as his constituency was that of Jat landowners, adopted a casteist translation: Jats versus Banias (Banias being the trading and moneylending caste in South-east Punjab). This variety of ideological formations -- communalism, casteism, anti-urbanism, etc. -- was held together by the overarching ideological framework of furthering the interests of the backward elements vis-a-vis the advanced elements. This overarching framework also provided the basis for co-operation with the Government and opposition to the nationalist politics of the Congress, since the special protection of the Government was considered essential for promoting

the interests of backward groups and classes, and any strengthening of the allegedly urban Hindu-dominated Congress was declared to be not to their advantage. This framework ideally suited the conservative and loyalist predilections of the land-owning and communal elements, and loyalty was not without its benefits. As we noted earlier, Fazl-i-Husain was first nominated as Revenue Member in Punjab and then a Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. Sikandar Hayat Khan became Revenue Member in 1930 and then was sent as Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank, before being brought back as Premier of Punjab in 1937. Firoz Khan Noon ended up as the High Commissioner in London. Along with high office, came titles, honours and grants of land. For the Government, the utility of having a bulwark against the growth of nationalist forces was apparent enough, and a bulwark that was not overtly communal had obvious advantages in the context of Punjab and the army recruited largely from Punjab from Muslims as well as Hindus and Sikhs.

As far as the peasant movement is concerned, the Unionists worked primarily through the Punjab Zamindar League, an organization set up by Chhotu Ram in 1924. Unlike the majority of the Muslim landlord members of the Unionist Party hailing from West Punjab, who could rely on the backwardness and traditional loyalty of their tenants (most of whom were also Muslim) to retain their influence and had thus no need for populism till pretty late in the day, Chhotu Ram knew that he had to continually fight his way if he was to be able to resist nationalist

and left influence on his constituency, and that for this a certain amount of populism was essential. He used the Zamindar League as the vehicle for mobilisation on issues which affected the peasants and since he was unencumbered by office from 1927 to 1936 he was also free to adopt a strident tone. Besides, there were many demands which were in the interest of all landowners, big or small, and on these he could be vociferous in his pro-peasant rhetoric without in any way threatening landlord interests. The Zamindar League also had the advantage of being able to claim that it had the ear of the Government, and that it could use the weight of the Unionists in the Council to press for concessions; it also suited the Government to project that it was granting concessions because of Unionist pressure rather than to have the people believe that it was succumbing to nationalist or left pressure. As a result, the Zamindar League was able to establish, at least initially, till the competition from nationalist and left-wing peasant organisations emerged, some influence on the peasantry.

The Congress⁷

In the mid-1920s, the Congress party in Punjab was in

7. Since secondary sources on the Congress in Punjab are almost non-existent, we have based ourselves almost entirely on primary sources for this introductory account. Given the wide range of the sources, citation is not possible at this stage and will be done in due course; the sources, however, include the Hailey Papers, Government of India records in the Home Department, the fortnightly reports from Punjab to the Government of India in the Home Department, The Tribune newspaper, etc.

none too good a shape. During the Non-cooperation days, the initial doubts and reservations expressed by Lala Lajpat Rai and some others regarding the wisdom of a policy of boycott had melted away and the organisation had succeeded in presenting a united front and running a successful campaign. Its success, however, had been much more in the towns than in the villages, barring a few pockets in South-east and Central Punjab, and the predominantly Muslim areas of West Punjab had remained untouched by either the Congress or the Khilafat movement. The Sikh peasants of Central Punjab had indeed experienced a considerable degree of anti-imperialist politicization, but this was largely under the aegis of the Akali leadership and organisation, and the Congress had not much direct claim to their loyalty. As noted earlier, the Akalis divided themselves in the mid-1920s into three broad political trends, and of these only one identified itself clearly with the Congress. Nevertheless, by the end of the Non-cooperation movement, Congress prestige in the province was considerable.

From 1922 onwards, however, various factors contributed to a decline in its position. Congressmen themselves divided into Swarajists and No-changers, the former arguing in favour of entering the Councils and the latter in favour of mass constructive work. But the real blow to the Congress was struck by communalism. Communal riots broke out in many Punjab towns and added to the feeling of insecurity engendered among urban Hindus

by Fazl-i-Husain's policy of reservations for Muslims in services and educational institutions. So strong was the pull of communalism that even a stalwart like Lala Lajpat Rai began to fall prey to it along with many lesser men. This inevitably led to a loss of influence among those Muslims who had united with Hindus and Sikhs during the Non-cooperation days. Hindus and Sikhs, on their part, felt that the communal organisations could protect their interests better than the Congress. Matters came to a head in 1926 when Lala Lajpat Rai, under pressure from the secular and radical elements in the Congress led by Satyapal who were unhappy with his communal bias and especially with his participation in Hindu sangathan activities, resigned from the Congress and joined Madan Mohan Malaviya to form the Independent Congress Party. This split in the Congress ranks, though a victory for the secular forces, in the short-run at least led to a decline in Congress influence, for the loss of a leader of Lajpat Rai's stature was no small loss.

An index of the weakness of the Congress is provided by the fact that in February 1927 the President of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee announced that due to lack of funds he was being forced to dispense with all the paid Congress workers and discharge all the head office staff. This, commented a Government report, was a result of the decline in its prestige due to dissensions.

The announcement of the all-White Simon Commission in November 1927 led to new efforts at unity, and though these

were quite successful, the time for organisation was short, and the country-wide boycott announced for 3 February 1928, the day Simon set foot on Indian soil, met with a relatively lukewarm response in the province. But later in the year, when the Simon Commission reached Lahore, a very successful demonstration was organised on 30 October with Lala Lajpat Rai at its head. A vicious lathi-charge by the police on the demonstration led to injuries to many of the senior leaders, and Lala Lajpat Rai succumbed to these on 17 November. This led to a mass outrage, and his death was avenged by Bhagat Singh and his comrades of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha, a youth organisation whose members had earlier denounced Lajpat Rai in the strongest terms for his communal outlook. They shot dead on December 17 a White police official they suspected had been responsible for Lajpat Rai's death.

A new atmosphere, reflective of a new wave of struggle, had been born and throughout 1929 nationalist feeling was on the upswing and the Congress was regaining its position. Organisational activity was stepped up, members enrolled, volunteers enlisted and trained and political conferences and propaganda tours organised. The annual session of the Congress for 1929 was held at Lahore and its declaration of complete independence and its call for a movement of civil disobedience set the stage for a new phase of struggle, with which we shall engage ourselves later.

Left-Wing Groups and Parties³

As elsewhere in the country, the 1920s were witness to the emergence in Punjab of new left-wing ideological currents, largely under the influence of the Russian Revolution which fired the imagination of many young nationalists by opening up new vistas of human liberation. They were attracted both by the staunch anti-imperialism of the new Soviet regime, as well as by the idea of ending all exploitation of man by man. The Soviet Communists also declared their support to all anti-imperialist movements for national liberation. The Third Communist International (Comintern) was set up to act as the centre of the Communist movement in the world and guide and extend support to Communists the world over. M.N. Roy, an Indian ex-revolutionary terrorist, was in Moscow and playing an active role in the deliberations of the Comintern. In 1920, he along with seven other Indians founded a Communist Party of India in Tashkent. One of these seven was Muhammad Ali, who had left Lahore for Kabul in 1915 as part of a group of 15 Muslim college students. These students were Muhajirs or emigrants who under the influence of the Pan-Islamic movement (which later took the form of the Khilafat movement) had come to believe that it was their religious

8. For this account of the emergence of left wing parties and groups in the Punjab, I have used both primary and secondary sources, but for reasons already stated, the primary sources will be cited in due course. The most useful secondary sources are the following: Kamlesh Mohan, op. cit.; Bhagwan Josh, Communist Movement in Punjab, Anupama Publications, Delhi, 1979; and Master Hari Singh, op. cit.

duty to refuse to live under the rule of an infidel who did not protect their religious rights and that they should go on hijrat (emigrate) and launch a jehad against the infidel rulers. These muhajirs had also participated in the 'Provisional Government of India' set up in Kabul in 1915 by the revolutionary adventurer, Raja Mahendra Pratap. Muhammad Ali and another muhajir, Rahmat Ali Zakaria, became Communists and played an active role in Indian Communist activities abroad, especially in running the Kabul centre which maintained links with the Punjab Communists.

A second group of muhajirs inspired by the Khilafat movement who had left India reached Tashkent in late 1920 and joined M.N. Roy's CPI, and received training in Tashkent and Moscow. Among these were three who were to play an active role in the left movement in the Punjab: Ferozuddin Mansoor, M.A. Majid and Fazal Ilahi Qurban. When members of this group tried to return to India, they were arrested and tried in a series of four Peshawar Conspiracy Cases between 1921 and 1924.

Another group emerged in Lahore in 1922 from within the country as part of the efforts of M.N. Roy and others to set up Communist groups in various cities. Ghulam Hussain, Shamsuddin Hassan and M.A. Khan formed this group and even brought out a journal in Urdu called Inquilab for some time, which mostly reproduced M.N. Roy's writings. The Kabul centre of the CPI was in touch with this group and even helped them financially. When the different Communist groups in various parts

of the country were brought together by Singaravelu in the 'Labour and Kisan Party of Hindustan', the Lahore group also affiliated itself to this organization. The main activity of this group was among labour, especially in the Northwestern Railway Workers Union, but Ghulam Hussain's arrest and his subsequent betrayal in agreeing to give evidence against other Communists and asking for a pardon was a severe blow to this group.

Meanwhile, the Ghadar Party of America had also established links with Soviet Communists and two of its representatives, Rattan Singh and Santokh Singh, attended the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922. Santokh Singh, a founder-member of the Ghadar Party, had already become a Communist in the United States, and spearheaded the effort to find an alternative after the Ghadar debacle of 1914-15. Having made arrangements for the training of Ghadar Party activists in Moscow in the University of the Toilers of the East and having established an independent link with the Comintern, which was not mediated by M.N. Roy, Santokh Singh returned to India in 1923. He was interned in his village for two years, but used the time to study the political situation. At the end of those two years, he moved to Amritsar and, along with other members of the Ghadar Party such as Bhag Singh Canadian and Karam Singh Cheema, started the Kirti, a monthly paper in Gurmukhi and Urdu, in February 1926. The Kirti or 'Worker' was meant to be the vehicle for carrying the new Marxist ideological framework to the people. Santokh

Singh unfortunately fell seriously ill in August 1926, could no longer run the paper, and died in May 1927. But he had succeeded in establishing a nucleus around which radical-minded individuals continued to coalesce.

Under Santokh Singh's stewardship, the main emphasis of the Kirti was on the need for a workers' organisation, on news of workers' movements, etc., and there was very little practical concern with the peasantry except for the argument that land must be nationalised and small peasant holdings were uneconomical. There was no discussion about the need to organise the peasants, or how they could play a role in the revolutionary movement. In April 1927, however, for the first time, there was a mention of the need to form a Kirti Kisan (Workers' and Peasants') Party. This was possibly due to the fact that, since January 1927, Sohan Singh Josh had assumed charge of the paper and he was responding to the current Communist trend in other parts of the country where Workers' and Peasants' Parties had begun to be formed since the beginning of 1927. In September of 1927, the Government reported that a 'Peasants' and Workers' Party' had been formed by extremist Sikhs connected with the Kirti magazine of Amritsar. This 'party' is reported to have held meetings at Hoshiarpur on 5 and 6 October 1927 along with the session of the Central Sikh League. However, while indeed a group had started functioning and the conference was also held, a formal party was only founded on 12 April 1928 at Amritsar.

when 60 persons gathered at the invitation of Sohan Singh Josh and Bhag Singh Canadian. Josh and M.A. Majid were elected secretary and joint secretary, and Kedar Nath Sehgal, M.A. Majid, Gopal Singh Quami, Hira Singh Dard, and Sohan Singh Josh formed a committee to frame the rules of the party. The meeting was also attended by Dr. Satyapal, Raizada Hans Raj, Ferozuddin Mansoor and Master Kabul Singh.

The emergence of the Kirti Kisan Party also coincided with the revival of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha, originally founded in Lahore in March 1926, by a group of radical youth - Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Bhagwati Charan Vohra and Ram Kishan - influenced by the revolutionary terrorist movement led by the Hindustan Republican Association, as a forum for the mass organisation of youth. In its early phase, which lasted from March 1926 till mid-1927, the Sabha had mainly been active in organising a series of public meetings in Lahore addressed by speakers with generally left-wing views. Its revival in April 1928 was partly at least due to the efforts of the Kirti group and in this latter phase many of the leaders of the Kirti Kisan Party and the NJBS were the same - Sohan Singh Josh, Kedar Nath Sehgal, M.A. Majid, for example - though organisationally the two remained separate. Government reports also suggest that the Kirti Kisan Party, which had more money, was hesitant about funding the activities of the NJBS because of its anarchist leanings and strong anti-religious and anti-communal tone.

However, regardless of the organisational differences, what is important for our purposes is that by 1928 a distinct left-wing trend had come into existence in the Punjab, and within this the Kirti Kisan Party and the NJBS were the most important. This left-wing trend also had close links with the Congress, and most of its leaders also functioned simultaneously as what were called 'extremist Congressmen'. It was this group that was responsible, for example, for Lala Lajpat Rai's exit from the Congress on grounds of encouraging communal tendencies. This group was also the main force behind organizing the boycott of the Simon Commission, protests on the lathi-charge on the leaders, on Lajpat Rai's death, etc. They had also been active in organising meetings to express solidarity with the Bardoli struggle. In July 1929, Congress leaders co-operated with the NJBS to celebrate Bhagat Singh-Dutt Day and collect money for the Lahore Conspiracy Case Defence Fund. In September 1928 and March 1929, the Kirti Kisan Party held its conferences along with the Provincial Political Conferences organised by the Congress at Lyallpur and Rohtak respectively.

Thus, both by creating new left-wing organisations as well as by increasing left-wing influence over the Provincial Congress, the emerging left trend created a climate that was conducive to the organisation of peasants for their own demands and in their own organisations. To this left trend were attracted the most militant and staunchly anti-imperialist elements that had emerged from the Ghadar, Non-Cooperation, Khilafat and Akali movements.

And in course of time, it was this trend that emerged as the most powerful and active mobiliser of the peasant movements in Punjab.

PEASANT PROTEST: FINDING ITS FEET
1924-29

In this chapter, I discuss the process of the emergence of the modern peasant movement in Punjab, the efforts of different groups to form province-wide organisations, extend existing peasant organizations, conduct agitations and struggles on specific issues and demands, as well as the evolution of a consensus around some basic issues. This takes us roughly through the years 1924-1929. In 1930, we enter a qualitatively new phase in the development of the peasant movement with the onset of the world economic depression and the launching of the Civil Disobedience movement.

I

The curtain-raiser to this first phase is provided by the agitation for the cancellation of an enhancement in the abiana or canal water-rates which lasted from 1924 to 1925. In March 1924, the Government of Punjab announced an increase in the water-rates amounting to roughly Rs.75 lakhs. This was the parting gift of Maclagan, the Governor of the province, who left immediately afterwards, bequeathing to the new incumbent, Malcolm Hailey, an old Punjab hand, an unresolved Akali agitation and the prospect of a new agitation on the issue of the canal or water-rates.¹ The Government had already been

1. Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in the Punjab, 2nd half of April, 1924, Home Department, Political Branch, Government of India, File No.25/1924, National Archives of India, New Delhi. (Hereafter Fortnightly Reports will be referred to as FR, the first or second half of the month will be indicated by (1) or (2), and Home Department, Political Branch, abbreviated to H.P.) Also see Hailey to Sir Campbell Rhodes, contd...

warned against the wisdom of such a step, both by its own members, such as Sunder Singh Majithia, as well as by members of the Legislative Council.² The canals already earned a profit of 12 per cent annually, and it was pointed out that anything more would be usurious as well as beyond the capacity of the cultivators. The dangers of supplying the agitators with a new grievance had also been pointed out, but the Government nevertheless went ahead.³

As the news of the increase became public and trickled down to the districts and the villages, murmurs and whispers of protest became increasingly audible. The first reports of meetings of protest began to come in around May 1924,⁴ and on 7 June there was an important meeting in Lyallpur to protest against the enhancement which was attended by roughly 2,000 people, including a large number of Akalis.⁵ By early July, several districts reported that meetings of protest had been held. Deputations of agriculturists also met the local authorities, as in Lyallpur.⁶ The Government was apprehensive that

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16 November 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6(c),
India Office Library and Records, London.

2. See, for example, Sardar Sundar Singh Majithia Papers, F.48, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; and Punjab Legislative Council Debates (PLCD), Vol.V, 21 March 1923.
3. Ibid.
4. FR(2) May 1924, H.P. F.25/1924.
5. FR(1) June 1924, H.P. F.25/1924.
6. FR(1) July 1924, H.P. F.25/1924 .

the Akalis might use this opportunity to fuel unrest among peasants⁷; and for a while their fear appeared to be coming true as reports came in of the issue being raised at Akali dewans (religious meetings) and in the Legislative Council, and of suggestions of non-payment of dues in Akali papers.⁸ But the initiative for organising the protest came not from the Akalis, as the Government expected, but from the Congress.

In July 1924, the provincial Congress appointed a sub-committee headed by its secretary, Dr. Satyapal, a man known for his militant stance, to explore the possibilities of agitation against the enhanced abiana rates.⁹ Following this, a number of meetings were organised in different parts of the province, with audiences ranging from three or four hundred in the smaller meetings to two thousand in the larger ones, at many of which resolutions asking the Congress to intervene in the matter and for adoption of 'all peaceful and legitimate means' to secure redressal were passed. The speeches at these meetings were described as 'seditious' and 'mischievous' by the Government; and there were apparently also references to the weapon

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7. FR(1) and (2) June 1924, FR(1) July 1924, FR(1) August 1924, H.P. F.25/1924.
 8. FR(2) June 1924, FR(1) July 1924, FR(1) August 1924; H.P. F.25/1924.
 9. FR(2) July 1924, H.P. F.25/1924; Hailey to Langley, 3 July 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6A.

of civil disobedience.¹⁰ By early September, the Congress had reportedly sanctioned a sum of Rs.5000 for the purpose of the campaign and had also decided to pursue the task of setting up zamindar sabhas (peasant associations) in different parts of the province.¹¹

Meanwhile, however, Malcolm Hailey had not been idle. He was acutely aware that "there was a great danger that this measure would lead to a widespread agitation among the Punjab agriculturists."¹² Nor had he forgotten the lesson of the 1907 agitation when he was a young Punjab officer.¹³ In his opinion, the prospect of agitation in Punjab on the water-rates issue was "something infinitely more dangerous than any political or even anarchical movement in Bengal or Madras." Besides, "he was very unwilling that the Sikh situation should be further complicated by an agitation of this nature."¹⁴ And, of course, he believed that the Congress and the peasant must be kept apart at any cost. To quote:¹⁵

10. For example, meetings were held in the Lahore, Sheikhpura and Rohtak districts. FR(2) July 1924, FR(1) and (2) 1924, FR(1) September 1924, H.P. F.25/1924.

11. FR(1) September 1924, H.P. F.25/1924; and Hailey to Sir William Vincent, 30 September 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6(b).

12. Hailey to Sir Campbell Rhodes, 16 November 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6(c).

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Hailey to Hirtzel, 13 November 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6(c).

It think it is of supreme importance to us to keep the Punjab agriculturist from agitation. I am afraid that I constantly repeat myself on this point, but I am convinced that the Congress people can never succeed in being a danger to us unless they enlist the services of a physical force brigade. The Muslims having now failed them owing to decline of interest in Khilafat question, they have been attempting to secure the sympathies, or, at all events, to arouse the feelings of agriculturists in North India. To my mind everything indicates that it is essential that we should manage to keep them apart. Within next two or three years, another big agitation will come, of non-violent type, and I should like to think that when that time came, the Punjab agriculturist was apathetic, if he was not actually hostile to the movement.

It is obvious then that Hailey was more than keen to avert an agitation. Accordingly, he began to explore the possibilities of withdrawing at least a part of the increase in order to stem the protest. He simultaneously started the process of negotiations with members of the Rural or Unionist Party in the Council via Fazl-i-Husain who was a Minister in the Government. His object was to prevent this party from joining hands with the Swarajists and the Akali members in the Council, and also from participating in and supporting the agitation outside the Council. He persuaded the Government of India to readjust the repayment of some heavy overdrafts and thus juggled the provincial accounts to make it possible to knock Rs.25 lakhs off the anticipated increase of Rs.75 lakhs.¹⁶

16. For details of the negotiations and manoeuvres, see Langley to Hailey, 2 July 1924; Hailey to Langley, 3 July 1924; Hailey to Sir G. de Montmorency, 10 August 1924; Joint Secretary, Ministry of Education to Hailey, 16 August 1924; Hailey to Sir William Vincent, 30 September 1924; Hailey contd...

With this concession, he succeeded in winning over the Unionists, who in any case were "not prepared to join the Swarajists... in a general attack on Government for they foresaw that if there were a general agitation the Swarajists would take matters out of their hands."¹⁷ The Unionists, therefore, confined their protest to voting in favour of a resolution in the Council in November 1924 condemning the increase.¹⁸ On their own, they were even willing to forgo this token protest, provided no other member pressed for it, but since the non-Unionist members were insistent, they did not want to be singled out as having supported a measure which was obviously unpopular with their electorate.¹⁹ Thus, though they voted with the others, "the tone of the debate was moderate", and they "supported the Government in practically all its demands for supplementary grants as well as two taxation

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to Hirtzel, 13 November 1924; Hailey to Sir Campbell Rhodes, 16 November 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6A, 6(b), and 6(c).

17. Hailey to Sir G. de Montmorency, 10 August 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6(b).
18. FR(2) November 1924, H.P. F.25/1924.
19. Earlier, in August 1924, when the resolution was first slated to come up for discussion in the Council, the Unionists even declined a Government offer to give an extra day for the discussion (since it had not come up in the scheduled time), saying that they hoped a settlement would come about, and refused to support the Sikh members who pressed for an extra day. FR(1) August 1924, H.P. F.25/1924; Hailey to Sir G. de Montmorency, 10 August 1924, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/6(b).

bills which will affect the urban classes."²⁰

The concession succeeded in taking the sting out of the popular agitation. The Congress water-tax sub-committee continued its efforts to sustain the protest.²¹ Meetings demanding cancellation of the enhancement continued to be held till April 1925, mainly in the Lahore, Amritsar and Shekhupura districts,²² and efforts were even made to set up a provincial organisation of peasants.²³ But neither of the two objectives, that of sustaining agitation on the water rates issue and of furthering the process of setting up peasant organisations in the villages and at the provincial level, appears to have met with much success. The only reference to a peasant organisation we find is to the Lahore Zamindar Sabha,²⁴ and the effort to set up a province level organisation appears to have ended rather than taken off with the Punjab Provincial Zamindars Conference held in Lahore on 11 April 1925 with the express object of setting up a provincial organisation.²⁵ Similarly, audiences at

20. FR(2) November 1924, H.P. F.25/1924.

21. FR(1) November 1924, H.P. F.25/1924.

22. The Tribune, 3, 25 and 27 January 1925, 12 and 17 April 1925; FR(2) Jan 1925, FR(1) and (2) February 1925, FR(1) and (2) March 1925, FR(1) April 1925, H.P. F.112/1925.

23. The Tribune, 3, 25 and 27 January 1925, 12 and 17 April 1925; FR(2) January 1925, FR(1) February 1925, FR(1) April 1925, H.P. F.112/1925.

24. The Tribune, 3 January 1925.

25. FR(1) April 1925, H.P. F.112/1925; The Tribune, 12 and 17 April 1925. No references for any later dates were found.

protest meetings were reported to be dwindling, and appeals for refusal of water for a year or for funds to run the agitation evoked little response.²⁶

While Hailey's manoeuvres with the Unionists as well as his concession of withdrawing roughly one-third of the proposed increase were undoubtedly critical in stemming the tide of protest, other factors also contributed. The political group with the greatest hold on the politicized sections of the peasantry, that of the Akalis, was at this time still deeply involved in sorting out the tangled threads of the last phase of the Akali movement, including negotiations with the Government, dissension within its ranks, meeting the onslaught of repression and conciliation let loose by Hailey, etc.²⁷ This was therefore the least opportune moment for them to engage with a new issue. Similarly, the Sikh peasants of Central Punjab had as yet barely had time to recoup their energies after the intense struggle, involving considerable sacrifices, they had been involved in: the last major struggle of the Akali movement, the Jaito Morcha in Nabha, reached its peak only in February 1924 and continued for some time even after that.²⁸ Thus, for the Sikh peasants

26. FR(2) January 1925, FR(1) and (2) February 1925, FR(1) March 1925, FR(1) April 1925, H.P. F.112/1925.

27. See, for example, Mohinder Singh, The Akali Movement, p.133.

28. For the last phase of the Akali movement and the Jaito Morcha, see ibid., pp.62-81, 133-36.

as well, this was not the best time to engage in a new round of confrontation with the Government. And since the Congress efforts at mobilisation of protest were also concentrated among the predominantly Sikh strongholds of Central Punjab, where it had a political base, these reasons would explain its relative lack of success as well. The Congress did make some efforts in Southeast Punjab, where it had some influence, but with Chhotu Ram and his Zamindar League, whose influence in the region was undoubtedly greater, remaining quiet,²⁹ it had little chance of success. Besides, as we shall see a little later, the Congress base in the rural areas of Southeast Punjab was more among the tenants and the agricultural labourers who were not directly affected by the issue of water-rates. In Western Punjab, the Unionist Party held almost complete sway in the rural areas, and its big landlord members were the least likely candidates for leading a vigorous movement of popular protest. Nor was the situation made desperate by any sharp fall in prices or failure of crops; in fact, the year 1924-25 was a moderately good year as far as prices and crop output was concerned.³⁰ All told, it appears that once

29. Chhotu Ram's Zamindar League was founded in 1924, but there is no reference to its participation in this agitation.

30. See Table 1.1 in Chapter I above.

the concession was announced, the peasants preferred to accept the rest of the enhancement rather than struggle actively for its cancellation.

II

The momentum generated by the agitation against the water-rates enhancement for the organisation and mobilisation of the peasantry withered away with the fizzling out of the agitation by mid-1925 and there was no evidence of a new urge till late 1927. This is not surprising, given the situation prevailing among different political groups and parties in the province.³¹ The Congress, as noted above, was at this time torn apart by the controversy over the communal bias of Lala Lajpat Rai and other prominent leaders, and its influence, which was at a very low pitch, began to revive only from early 1928 when the Simon Commission boycott came to occupy centre-stage.³² The Akalis, too, were preoccupied in this period with the Gurdwara legislation and its fall-out in terms of the emergence of new groupings and their mutual struggle for control of the SGPC.³³ The

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31. For an overall assessment of the political situation in Punjab at this time and the position of different political groups, see H.P. F.11/10/1927.
32. See, for example, FR(2) September 1925, FR(2) October 1925, FR(1) April 1926, FR(2) September 1926, FR(1) December 1926, FR(2) February 1927, FR(1) December 1927, FR(2) January 1928, FR(1) February 1928, in H.P. F.112/1925, F.112/IV/1926, F.32/1927, and F.1/1928. Also see H.P. F.11/10/1927, and Memorandum by H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 23 April 1928, in Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/12B.
33. See Mohinder Singh, op. cit., pp.133-6, 142-3; and K.L. Tuteja, Sikh Politics, pp.118-23.

left trend was yet to consolidate itself; the earlier groups had fizzled out and the new coalescence around the Kirti, begun only in early 1926, took a while to manifest itself in concrete political activity.³⁴ Similarly, the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha, founded for the first time in early 1926, had in its first phase till mid-1927 functioned only in the urban areas and after that had virtually ceased all activity till it was revived in 1928.³⁵ Nor is there much evidence of activity on the part of the Zamindar League till early 1928.³⁶ One reason for this could be that Chhotu Ram, its main promoter, was a Minister from 1924 till early 1927,³⁷ and had therefore less predilection for organising the peasants at this time. Besides, the absence of any immediate issue or grievance also probably contributed; the immediate announcement in December 1926 of remission of Rs.30 lakhs in land revenue and water-rates when the cotton crop failed in

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34. See, for example, H.P. F.82/1925 and K.W.; H.P. F.18/XVI/1928; FR(2) November 1926, FR(1) March 1927, FR(2) September 1927, FR(1) October 1927, in H.P. F.112/IV/1926, and F.32/1927. Also see section on Left Wing Groups and Parties in Chapter VII above.
35. See, for example, FR(2) September 1926, FR(1) April 1928, in H.P. F.112/IV/1926 and F.1/1928. Also see section on Left Wing Groups and Parties in Chapter VII above.
36. The only evidence is of the holding of annual sessions, and a couple of other meetings, and the emphasis appears to be on congratulating members of the Unionist Party who were assuming office and on discussing issues like indebtedness, and what the government had done to solve the problem, and reform of district boards, panchayats, and redistribution of the tax burden. However, there is not much evidence of popular mobilisation. See, for example, The Tribune, 6 January and 12 December 1925; 25 February, 16 March and 16 June 1926.
37. Prem Chowdhry, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram, pp.172-4.

certain districts removed one possible source of discontent.³⁸

The first signs of a revival of activity among peasants began to emerge towards the end of 1927 along with the general revival in political activity triggered off by the announcement of the Simon Commission. The Kirti group, now going by the name of the Peasants' and Workers' Party, had already come to the notice of the Government when it held a meeting along with the sixth session of the Central Sikh League at Hoshiarpur on 5 and 6 October 1927³⁹ at which a resolution in favour of the assessment of land revenue on the same basis as income tax was passed, the official report commenting that it appeared to be "an attempt to discover a grievance capable of conversion into a live issue for the purpose of rural agitation."⁴⁰ The comment proved prophetic for, as we shall see, this issue was soon to become the staple of the programme of almost all organisations engaged with agrarian demands. The Hoshiarpur conference is therefore significant in that, to our knowledge, it was the first to publicly

38. FR(1) December 1926, H.P. F.112/IV/1926.

39. FR(1) October 1927, H.P. F.32/1927. The Central Sikh League was an organisation that represented the nationalist elements among the Sikhs. This was its sixth session, and Sardar Kharak Singh was the President. The audience was said to consist of "Jullundur division extremists". Ibid. For the Central Sikh League, see also FR(1) March 1926, H.P. F.112/IV/1926.

40. Ibid. The Peasants' and Workers' Party, as explained in Chapter VII above, was formally founded only in the following year, in April 1928.

raise the demand. The only prior mentions we have found are in Sardar Jogendra Singh's dissenting memorandum to the Taxation Inquiry Committee report in early 1926⁴¹ and Chaudhuri Chhotu Ram's abortive attempt to move a resolution on this issue in the Council in March 1927.⁴² The articulation of the demand for a reform in the system of land revenue in this particular form, that land revenue be assessed on the same progressive basis as income-tax -- that as in income-tax, incomes below a certain level be exempt from tax and after that be taxed on a graduated basis -- brought out the regressive and inequitable nature of the land revenue in a particularly evocative and telling fashion. It could be easily grasped by the target audience and was difficult to refute for the opponents. Little wonder then that it captured the imagination of political activists in no time.

Similarly, as political activity picked up in the first few months of 1928, other demands that were to become almost permanent fixtures of the agitational programme of peasant-based organisations also emerged. The abolition of the chowkidara tax, levied under the Punjab Village and Small

41. The Tribune, 10 March 1928. Interestingly, Sardar Jogendra Singh's recommendation and his alleged advocacy of this proposal in the Press got him into trouble with the Government later on when he became Minister, and he had to officially deny that he had done any such thing since assuming office. See Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/11(b).

42. PLCD, Vol.XA, 17 March 1927.

Town Patrol Act passed in 1918, which the villagers were made to pay for the appointment of village guards or chowkidars, was one such demand. Reduction of canal water-rates and cancellation of a recent enhancement of land revenue on well-irrigated lands were the other two demands that came up with considerable regularity in the gradually increasing number of meetings and conferences that addressed agrarian issues. The organisations most active in this initial period were the Zamindar League, the Kirti group, the Akalis, and the NJBS (after its revival in April 1928).⁴³

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43. The following is a representative sample of the kinds of meetings held and the nature of the demands put forward: A number of meetings in several districts by the Punjab Zamindars League passed resolutions in favour of abolition of Chowkidara tax. PLCD, Vol.XI, 9 March 1928. Resolutions in favour of Income-tax principles being adopted for land revenue assessment, abolition of Village Patrol Act, lowering of water-rates, etc. passed in second session of the Workers' and Peasants' Party in Lyallpur in September 1928. The Punjab Provincial Political Conference, whose session was held simultaneously with that of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, also passed resolutions in favour of land revenue on income-tax basis and reduction of water-rates. FR(2) September 1928, H.P. F.1/1928. The District Zamindar Conference at Sheikhpura presided over by Chhotu Ram passed resolutions on land revenue on income-tax basis, water-logged areas be replaced by new land, increase in number of instalments in Nili Bar Colony, checking of corruption in government departments. The Tribune, 4 July 1929. A Zamindar League meeting in Ludhiana demanded land revenue on income-tax basis, abolition of Village Patrol Act, cancellation of enhancement of land revenue on well-irrigated land. A Sikh meeting in Jullundur condemned enhancement of land revenue on well-irrigated lands, demanded abolition of Village Patrol Act, Chaukidara tax, and assessment of land revenue on income-tax basis. FR(1) July 1928, H.P. F.1/1928. A meeting of Sikh agitators at a religious gathering in Hoshiarpur district demanded abolition of land revenue enhancement on well-irrigated lands and remission of land revenue. FR(2) July 1928, H.P. F.1/1928. The main contd...

The demand for the reform of the land revenue system received support in the Punjab Legislative Council as well, though different members of the Rural or Unionist Party had obviously different perspectives on the issue. For example, Sikandar Hayat Khan moved a resolution in November 1927 that Rs.50 lakhs per annum be set aside for 10 years out of the remission made by the Government of India on the annual contribution of the province to the Central budget, at the end of which time a special fund be created and the interest devoted to relief of land revenue, especially in the barani or unirrigated tracts which could not bear a heavy burden. The resolution was defeated by the Government with the aid of the urban Hindu members.⁴⁴ A few months

contd...

focus of the "extremists connected with Communist and revolutionary Kirti group of Amritsar" was on payment of land revenue on income-tax basis, collection of chaukidara tax, non-reduction of canal-rates. FR(1) January 1928, H.P. F.1/1928. A memorial was submitted by about 15,000 zamindars of Ludhiana district to Government relating to assessment on well-irrigated lands, chaukidara tax, thikri pehra (compulsory patrol duty), principles of assessment of land revenue, water-rates and other taxes and general economic condition. PLCD, Vol. XII, 29 November 1928. "A feature of most politico-agrarian meetings during the last few months has been the criticism of the land revenue system, demand that it be levied according to income-tax, exemption below Rs.2000. The moderate zamindar associations are trying to bring this about through steady constitutional pressure, but the extremists are hopeful of an agitation." FR(1) December 1928, H.P. F.1/1928. Resolution on land revenue reform passed at 3rd Session of Workers' and Peasants' Party at Rohtak in March 1929. Also on begar, thikri pehra, remission of water-rates, etc. The Tribune, 12 March 1929.

44. FR(2) November 1927, H.P. F.32/1927; The Tribune, 25 November 1927.

later, in February 1928, Chhotu Ram moved a most radical resolution that land revenue be assessed on the same basis as income-tax, but even he only demanded that this be accepted as a goal to be achieved in the next 40 years. The resolution was supported by every elected member in the house, but Fazl-i-Husain, the Revenue Member, opposed it on behalf of the Government saying that there was no chance of the Viceroy and the Secretary of State accepting such a proposal.⁴⁵ Similarly, in the debate on the Land Revenue Amendment Bill in May 1928, proposals were made recommending the exemption of small holdings and imposition of income-tax on big landlords who enjoyed unearned incomes. Sections of the press, too, came out in support of proposals for reform of the system of taxation of agriculture.⁴⁶

Recognizing the significance of the demand for land revenue reform and especially of its potency when expressed through the means of comparison with the income-tax system, Hailey wrote:⁴⁷

45. The Tribune, 24 February 1928; FR(1) March 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

46. The Tribune, 10 May 1928 and the Kirti, November 1929. The Standing Committee for Land Revenue of the Punjab Legislative Council also discussed the possibility of exemption of small holdings. Opinion was divided, but majority agreed to start the experiment with exemption of local rates. The Tribune, 27 June 1928. For a general statement on the support to this demand, see Memorandum by H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 23 April 1928, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/12B. Also see Hailey to Viceroy, dated 23 March 1928, Ibid., E220/12(a).

47. Private Letter from Hailey, Governor of Punjab to E.B. Francis, dated 10 May 1928. Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/12B.

...the rub comes in the fact that land revenue is a universal tax hitting the poorest as well as the richest, and that whereas the income-tax payer escapes if his income is less than 2,000/- a year, there is no such provision for the rural assessee. The answer that land revenue is rent may be good enough historically, but is not very convincing in other ways; indeed, I myself feel that you cannot get over a somewhat unpleasant fact by a change in nomenclature. As time goes on, therefore, there will be persistent attempts to place land revenue on a new basis, graduated much in the same way as income-tax. All I can say is, that I hope I shall not have to face this problem in my time; for it stands to reason that we could not hope (particularly with a Legislative Council largely rural in composition) to recover from the richer landowner the very large amount we should lose by relieving the small holder of the payment of land revenue.

But the immediate issue that became the focus of a sustained, though brief, agitation was provided by the failure of the wheat harvest in many districts in April-May 1928. The failure was a severe one, with peasants in different areas claiming that the crop was one-fifth or one-eighth of the normal.⁴⁸ Meetings demanding remission in land revenue and water-rates began to be held by the beginning of May with the lead being taken by what the Government called 'extremist Congressmen' organised in the NJBS and the Kirti Party.⁴⁹ The Zamindar League was also very active and organised a number of meetings in Lyallpur as well as formed a new branch in Sheikhpura to voice the demand for remission. Resolutions were passed and telegrams

48. The Tribune, 9 and 10 May 1928.

49. FR(1) May 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

sent to the Governor and to members of the Legislative Council.⁵⁰ The radical nationalists of the NJBS, the Kirtis, etc., were also quick to emphasize the similarity with the on-going Bardoli peasant struggle; and threats of following the example of Bardoli by refusing to pay taxes were often voiced at their meetings.⁵¹ Among these groups, the NJBS showed the greatest energy in organisation and mobilisation of popular support, despite being handicapped by lack of funds (which the Kirtis were reluctant to give to them, as mentioned above).⁵²

The agitation proved effective and soon the Government decided that the best course, as in the case of the water-rates agitation in 1924-25, was to announce remissions and take the sting out of the protest. Coming as it did in a general atmosphere of heightened political activity in the country and the province, in a situation where the demand for general reform in the land revenue system of the province was gaining ground, and when the opportunity was being seized by the left-wing groups to consolidate their hold, the impact of the agitation was much greater than its actual intensity would indicate. Hailey

50. The Tribune, 2, 9, 10 and 17 May and 14 June 1928.

51. See, for example, the report on an Akali dewan at Bilga Village in Jullundur district at which Gopal Singh Quamd, a prominent left-wing nationalist, made a speech in which he told the audience how the Government had been threatened by the Bardoli agitation. H.P. F.26/I/1928. Also see the letter by Ram Chandra to The Tribune, 15 June 1928.

52. FR(2) May 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

himself was quick to note the long-term implications and larger significance of the new political mood:⁵³

Political agitation has not lately made such headway as we feared, but I find somewhat disturbing signs in the fact that the agricultural element is now much better organised and more vocal than it used to be.... They (the rural classes) have acquired a class consciousness of their own which must find an outlet. They are easily disturbed and not very wise. This year we had what appeared to be an excellent wheat crop, and over large areas it was spoilt by storms and winds at the end of March and April. It has been difficult to deal with it by the ordinary revenue methods, because the mischief only came to light when the crop came on the threshing floor. In the old days there would have been complaints from districts which would have been dealt with by Deputy Commissioners. Now we find large bands of agriculturists, headed by their representatives in the Legislative Council, sitting at the entrance of the Council itself and urging rural members to oppose Government on every possible question, whatever subject it may relate to, unless the rabi instalment is remitted. I fear that the political agitator may awake to the fact that he has a very good field open to him for creating trouble among this class; we know that Russian money is coming in to support agitation in the villages. It may be a certain advantage that your agriculturist is not much concerned with abstract political theories, and is somewhat interested in the concrete facts of life; but we shall find as time goes on that he can be just as troublesome, or even more troublesome, than your urban politician.

Thus, to avert further trouble, the Government, in early June 1928, announced remissions of Rs.40 lakhs on land revenue and water-rates. The districts of Lyallpur, Gujranwala,

53. Private letter from Hailey to E.B. Francis, dated 10 May 1928, Hailey Papers, Mss. Eur. E220/12B.

Sheikhupura, Jhang and Gujarat were among those given full remissions.⁵⁴ The concession was extended to Montgomery after the NJBS began to build up an agitation in that district.⁵⁵ The Government was satisfied that the remissions were "well-received" and that the agitation on this issue had been stemmed.⁵⁶

The momentum provided by the agitation was, however, sought to be sustained by the political activists in a variety of ways. One excellent opportunity was provided by the Bardoli struggle which at this time was at its peak. All over the country, solidarity was being expressed with the peasants of Bardoli by the celebration of Bardoli Day, collection of funds, holding of meetings to spread the message of Bardoli, etc. In Punjab as well, the young nationalists, enthused by this symbol of mass resistance to foreign rule, organised the Bardoli Day celebrations on 12 June, collected funds, etc. Once the agitation for remissions on account of harvest failure subsided, even more attention was riveted on Bardoli.⁵⁷ At meetings in rural areas, the audience was told that the success in the agitation for

54. FR(1) June 1928, H.F. F.1/1928; The Tribune, 3 June 1928.

55. FR(1) July 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

56. FR(1) and (2) June 1928, FR(1) and (2) July 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

57. FR(1) and (2) June 1928, H.P. F.1/1928; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, H.P. F.18/XVI/1928.

remission of taxes was due to the sacrifice of the peasants of Bardoli, and also because the peasants of Punjab had threatened to follow the Bardoli example of refusing to pay if remissions were not granted. Those areas where there had been no protest on agrarian issues were told to learn from Bardoli and from the other areas of Punjab which had realized that they could only secure their demands if they asserted themselves. In order to counter the Government's argument that it took ameliorative measures on its own initiative out of concern for the people, examples were given of the backward areas of Punjab, such as Kangra, where the condition of the people was utterly miserable, and of the treatment meted out to the backward people like the Junglis of the Canal Colonies.⁵⁸ The message being driven home was that only organisation and struggle would yield results.

Further, an attempt was made to sustain popular interest in agitation by reiterating the other continuing and long-standing peasant demands such as the cancellation of the enhancement in land revenue on well-irrigated lands, abolition of the Village Patrol Act, and of course the assessment of land revenue on the income-tax basis.⁵⁹

58. See, for example, speeches made by Gopal Singh Quami, Sant Ram Pandha, Kedar Nath Sehgal at political meetings in villages in the Jullundur and Hoshiarpur districts, for which they were later prosecuted. H.P. F.26/I/1928 and 26/I/1929. Also see The Tribune, 15 June 1928.

59. See, for example, FR(1) and (2) July 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

While there was not much to differentiate the programme of the Zamindar League, which also continued to be active in this period, from that of the radical nationalists as far as agrarian demands were concerned, the crucial difference was in the nature of the political message that accompanied the economic demands. While in the discourse of the Zamindar League there was no room even for nationalism, leave alone for its left-wing version, the radical nationalists were very particular about the political content of their activity. Their speeches emphasized anti-imperialism, contained references to other struggles, such as those by the Babbar Akalis or the Bardoli peasants, and often to the Russian Revolution as well.⁶⁰ Further, they articulated their political and economic programme not only at meetings organised specifically for the purpose (as was the case with the Zamindar League) but at any platform that was available to them - be it a religious fair in Hoshiarpur district or an Akali dewan in a village in Jullundur or a conference of another political group. Pamphlets were brought out, articles written in the Kirti weekly as well as in other sympathetic vernacular newspapers, and 'letters to the editor' columns of

60. See, for example, FR(1) October 1927, H.P. F.32/1927; FR(1) and (2) July 1928; FR(2) September 1928, FR(1) November 1928, FR(1) December 1928, H.P. F.1/1928; FR(1) March 1929, H.P. F.17/1929; H.P. F.26/I/1928 and 26/I/1929; The Tribune, 15 June 1928, 5 October 1929.

major newspapers such as The Tribune used to propagate their ideas.⁶¹

By September, the momentum generated by political activity among the peasants, as well as in general, was sufficient for the left leaders, especially Sohan Singh Josh, to organise a session of the Kirti Kisan or Workers' and Peasants' Party along with the Punjab Provincial Political Conference organised by the Congress at Lyallpur.⁶² Also, the left activity among peasants had by now caused an apprehension strong enough for the Government and loyalist landlords to actively carry on counter-propaganda to dissuade the peasants of the surrounding areas from attending the conference.⁶³ The resolutions demanding assessment of land revenue on income-tax basis and reduction of water-rates were passed both at the Political Conference and the Peasants' and Workers' Conference while the latter went on to demand abolition of the Village Patrol Act, etc.⁶⁴ The Government report on the

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61. See, for example, letter by H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, H.P. F.18/XVI/1928; H.P. F.26/I/1928 and 26/I/1929; The Tribune, 15 June 1928; FR(1) October 1927, H.P. F.32/1927, FR(2) July 1928, FR(1) September 1928, H.P. F.1/1928; FR(1) March 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
62. FR(2) September 1928, H.P. F.1/1928; The Tribune, 13 September 1928; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, H.P. F.18/XVI/1928.
63. The Tribune, 27 September 1928; FR(2) September 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.
64. FR(2) September 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

proceedings remarked that "Communist doctrines were preached with greater candour than on any previous occasion."⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the Government was not yet too worried about the "Communist menace" in the province as a whole, or about the left's attempts at mobilisation of the peasantry. In a long and exhaustive note on the subject that H.W. Emerson, the Chief Secretary, wrote in October 1928 in response to the Government of India's queries in connection with the Public Safety Bill,⁶⁶ the basic position of the Punjab Government was that "there is no immediate cause for anxiety in this Province." The reasons for this were, one, that "there are no big scale industries and with the exception of the North-Western Railway, there is no industrial body which offers to the Communist any considerable scope for fomenting discontent and strikes among industrial labour." Second, the pattern of land ownership did not provide much scope either, since land was owned^{by} "not only the few large landed proprietors and the multitude of small peasant owners, but also an increasing number of medium size owners, who have acquired by grant or purchase, squares in the canal colonies." On the assumption that Communist theory was opposed to private property and that Communist mobilisation among the peasantry would reflect this understanding, he went on to argue that "the theory of the

65. Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, H.P. F.18/XVI/1928.

66. Ibid. All references in this and the next three paragraphs are from this note.

nationalisation of land is thus entirely opposed to the instincts and to the interests of a section of the rural population which is numerically large and politically powerful."

Further, since it was expected that Communists would, given their theory, naturally take up the anti-landlord demands of tenants and agricultural labourers, it was argued that the scope was limited in this direction: "the relations between the landlord and the tenant are ordinarily good. The predominant system of rent is by division of the produce and this system creates an identity of interests which operates to reduce friction and ill-feeling. The Communist agitator cannot, therefore, attack the interests of the landlord without adversely affecting those of the tenant, and he cannot attempt to seduce the hired agricultural labourer without raising the opposition both of the owner and tenant bodies." Moreover, it was expected that "in his belittlement of religion as a political and moral force, the Communist cannot fail to fall foul in the Punjab of both the Muhammadan and the Sikh communities, among whom religion is not only a vital part of their social life, but the determining factor in their political aims and ambitions."

The Chief Secretary, however, made it clear that this optimistic assessment was valid only "in as much as the activities of the communist in the Punjab follow the lines of the Communist International," in which case "opposition will develop as his doctrines and plans become more widely known." However, with a foresight that reflected the deep understanding of the potential

of an alliance between communism and nationalism, he pointed out that "the proximate danger lies in a direction other than communist, namely, in the association of the "Kirti" and the "Naujawan Bharat" group with anti-Government movements.... It has also to be borne in mind that at times of acute excitement, during which racial feeling runs high, the various groups of political extremists are apt to sink their differences and to combine against Government; and in this connection the emergence of a new party of political workers, whose aims are revolutionary and whose theories are calculated to appeal to the lowest strata of society, represents a danger, the potentialities of which it would be a folly to underestimate."

The report also pointed out that this is what the Communist movement, "so far... represented in the Punjab mainly by the 'Kirti' party and the 'Naujawan Bharat Sabha' - two bodies which work in close association", has been doing. "The policy of the Communist leaders is to associate themselves actively with any agitation that gives promise of embarrassing Government. Thus they have attempted to take a prominent part in the demonstrations against the Simon Commission, in the agitation for the remission of land revenue, and in the organisation of support for the peasants of Bardoli."

Two months later, in December, the official report noted that "Lahore extremists" were "trying to capture the zamindar associations" and exploit rural grievances for political purposes.⁶⁷

67. FR(1) December 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

(The reference was probably to the loyalist organisations which the Government had earlier in the year unofficially tried to sponsor through the District Boards by asking the zamindar members of the Boards to meet separately and form them themselves into "zamindar associations" which could then present the 'rural' point of view (as opposed to the nationalist 'urban' point of view) before the Simon Commission.⁶⁸) They were also taking up local issues such as the demand of peasant grantees in Shahpur that they be relieved of the onerous conditions on which land was granted to them for horse-breeding, and the discontent in Lahore over the remodelling of a canal distributary, in addition to the reiteration of the general demand for the reform of the land revenue system to bring it in line with that of income-tax.⁶⁹ The new Governor, Geoffrey de Montmorency, writing around this time to the ex-Viceroy, Lord Reading, about the troubles he had just stepped into, commented: "Troublesome also is a growing campaign to rope in the peasant proprietors of the Province into a combination against land revenue and a refusal to pay taxes. This is fostered by the Communist group and seems to get some financial help from sources outside India and certainly at the moment from extreme Congress politicians. It is politically very dangerous and not easy to stop as it is fostered to a large extent by comparatively harmless lectures

68. See The Tribune, 17 July 1928.

69. FR(1) December 1928, H.P. F.1/1928.

on rural economics."⁷⁰

It is indeed significant that while at the same time the Zamindar League under Chhotu Ram's leadership was also quite active in taking up issues similar to those tackled by the left groups, and was in some ways far more advanced in the actual setting up of its branches in the various districts,⁷¹ there is never any note of worry in the official reports on its activities. And for good reason; its meetings and conferences were attended and addressed by the big landlord members of the Council such as Sikandar Hayat Khan;⁷² and the Government was right in assuming that despite its avowal of radical changes in the land revenue system, etc., there was never any danger that its mobilisation on these issues would become the prelude to a more generalised anti-British popular mobilisation, as was the case with left-wing nationalist mobilisation.⁷³

Meantime, however, political attention began to rivet on other developments: the fresh wave of anti-Simon Commission

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70. Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency to Lord Reading, Undated (but just after Lajpat Rai's death, i.e. in November 1928), Reading (Pvt.) Collection, Mss. Eur. F.118/58, India Office Library and Records, London.
71. See, for example, The Tribune, 6 January and 12 December 1925; 25 February, 16 March and 16 June 1926; 24 February, 10 May, 12 May, 17 May, 30 October, 6 December, 29 December, 1928; 4 July, 7 December 1929; FR(1) July 1928, H.P. F.1/1928; PLCD, Vol.XI, 9 March 1928, Vol.XII, 29 November 1928, etc.
72. See, for example, The Tribune, 12 December 1925, 16 March 1926, 24 February, 17 May, 30 October 1928, etc.
73. For example, Fazl-i-Husain, who remained the unquestioned leader of the Unionist Party even after he joined the reserved half of the Government as Revenue Member (and even after he left for Delhi in 1930 to join the Government of India), had consistently put his weight against

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protest at the end of October, the brutal repression and Lala Lajpat Rai's death. The avenging of his death by members of the NJBS marked a new stage in the left movement in the province, for it soon led to a spate of arrests of those suspected of involvement, thus forcing others to also lie low. This also inevitably meant that all attention would now focus on the more directly political issues affecting the organisation, rather than on the task of peasant mobilisation.⁷⁴ The Kirtis were able to function freely for some time longer. They organised the third session of their party in early March 1929 in Rohtak along with the 15th session of the Provincial Political Conference organised by the Congress, at which resolutions urging land revenue on income-tax basis and refusal to pay taxes if demands were not met were passed.⁷⁵ But repression soon hit

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any radical proposals for reform of the land revenue system, etc., that came from members of his party and in favour of the Government. A very good example is the speech he gave to his party members when they were bidding him farewell on his appointment as Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council in 1930. After telling them not to argue for tax reform, such as assessment of land revenue on income-tax basis, etc., he went on to list all that the Government had done for the agriculturists in the last four years. He then explained that this policy was in the interests of the Unionist Party, for he obviously saw no contradiction between the two. The gains of this policy consisted in "establishing in the minds of the zamindars, tax payers, the countryside that Government is ready to administer the laws justly and fairly. The Government has enabled them (the Unionists) to assure the countryside that the best interests of the countryside are nearest to the heart of the administrators." This speech was later published by the Unionist Party as "Our Political Programme". The nexus between Government and Unionists could not have been better stated. Fazl-i-Husain Papers, Mss. Eur. E352, India Office Library and Records, London.

74. See, for example, FR(1) January 1929, FR(2) February 1929, FR(2) March 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
75. FR(1) March 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.

the Kirtis as well; and later in the month Sohan Singh Josh, Kedar Nath Sehgal and M.A. Majid were arrested along with other major Indian Communists to stand trial in the famous Meerut Conspiracy Case.⁷⁶ After this, while both the NJBS and the Kirtis continued to make sporadic attempts for the rest of the year to maintain their links with the peasants and even succeeded in a few cases in organising meetings, etc., the scale of their activity was nowhere compared to that in the previous year.⁷⁷ Bhagat Singh and Dutt's arrest in the Assembly Bomb Case and then the initiation of the process of their prosecution in the Lahore Conspiracy Case greatly boosted the popularity of the NJBS, as did Jatin Das's death after a prolonged hunger strike in jail, but it also ensured that its members' attention was occupied with the organisation of the defence, collection of funds, celebration of Bhagat Singh-Dutt days, holding of meetings in Jatin Das's honour, etc. -- all very important in themselves -- and there was little time for continuing with the process of politicization and organization of the peasantry which they had initiated with such enthusiasm.⁷⁸

76. FR(1) March 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.

77. See, for example, The Tribune, 5 October and 20 October 1929, and FR(2) June 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.

78. See, for example, FR(1) June 1929, FR(1) and (2) July 1929, FR(1) August 1929, FR(1) and (2) September 1929, FR(1) October 1929, FR(1) November 1929, FR(2) December 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.

The Kirtis, on the other hand, were disoriented not only by the Meerut arrests but also by the new Comintern line given by Stalin that it was wrong for Communists to ally with the bourgeoisies in colonial countries -- a line which ruled out alliance with or working within the Congress, which the Indian Communists via the Workers and Peasants' Parties had been doing with remarkable results till then. The new line was initially resisted in India and it took time for the local units to fall in line, thus leading to a considerable period of ambiguity through 1929.⁷⁹ But by the end of the year, clearer signs that the new line was being adopted began to appear,⁸⁰ though even here the situation in Punjab was complicated by the fact that the Communists with Ghadarite origins had too strong a nationalist orientation to follow this line the whole hog, as we shall see later. The activists of the NJBS were not particularly inclined to anti-Congressism of this variety, and this soon led to their distancing from the Kirti Kisan Party.⁸¹ In other words, by the time the situation was ripening for the next major national

79. Aditya Mukherjee, "The Workers' and Peasants' Parties, 1926-30: An Aspect of Communism in India", in Bipan Chandra, ed., The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals, Vikas, New Delhi, 1983.

80. See, for example, The Tribune, 28 December 1929; Telegram from Punjab Government to Government of India, dated 27 December 1929, H.P. F.98/1930.

81. See Chapter IX below.

struggle, the process of the consolidation of a left nationalist trend, which looked so promising in the year of the anti-Simon Commission movement, had been considerably checked, and this was to have important consequences for peasant politics as well.

However, before we go on to an assessment of these formative years of the modern peasant movement in Punjab, we have yet to recount a few smaller stories that were difficult to include in the account given so far since they represented quite distinct strands on their own. One is a story of rural labourers, the second of tenants and the third of ex-soldiers.

III

The first story is of the class of people known in the villages as kamins, belonging to the lowest castes, who generally worked as agricultural labourers (and sometimes as petty tenants) along with their other hereditary occupations such as scavenging, skinning of dead animals, making earthen pots, etc. The story is important not because it narrates some heroic saga or great struggle, but because of its rarity. Generally speaking, this section of the rural population was the least politically conscious, least organized and least assertive. Its interests found hardly any reflection in the programmes of even the most radical groups and parties, and this was true not only of the years till 1929, which we are dealing with presently, but all the way to independence and many years after that as well. Therefore, when we find evidence of any effort at voicing their needs, however

small, or a glimmering of a spirit of resistance on their part, however faint, the story needs to be told.

The Punjab Achhut Uddhar Mandal, an organisation run by two well-known nationalists, Mohan Lal and Achhint Ram of the Servants of People Society (founded by Lala Lajpat Rai), took the initiative in mobilising against the practice of begar, or forced labour, which all kinds of revenue, police and other officials would exact from the kamins of the villages. Their effort was to make the people aware that they had the legal right to refuse begar. There was already a Government notification against it, but people were not aware of this, and therefore they started an educative propaganda campaign via publication and distribution of thousands of copies in Hindi, Urdu, Gurmukhi and English of the Government notifications banning begar. A department for receiving complaints and sending them on to Government and publicizing them in the press was set up, and another one to carry on an extensive lecture campaign throughout the province.⁸² That these efforts met with some success is indicated by Fazl-i-Husain's acknowledgement in the Legislative Council, in response to a question, that complaints regarding forced labour had been received against Tehsildars, Thanedars, Zaildars, Sufaidposhes and Lambardars and that the Commissioners had been asked to enquire into these,⁸³ as well by some evidence

82. Letter to the Editor by Mohan Lal, Secretary, Punjab Achhut Uddhar Mandal, The Tribune, 31 May 1927.

83. The Tribune, 25 November 1927.

that local level mobilisation on this issue was taking place.⁸⁴

Apart from begar, the other major issue on which attention was focused was a decision of the Government to classify the kamins as 'non-agriculturists' under the terms of the Land Alienation Act, thus depriving them of the right to become owners of land. Protests against the injustice of this classification -- which legally disabled 3 million kamins who mainly performed agricultural labour as farm servants, field labourers, and tenants -- were voiced by the Punjab Achhut Uddhar Mandal at the Punjab Provincial Political Conference in Amritsar in April 1928.⁸⁵ The next year a Punjab Landless Agricultural Workers League was set up by a representative conference of the depressed classes with Mohan Lal as the secretary, and this body too demanded the cancellation of this invidious classification. It was pointed out at the conference that the Government's decision had expropriated them even from their dwelling-sites, and a demand was made that they be at least declared de facto owners of the dwelling-sites and of the houses in which they lived if they had occupied them for more than twelve years.⁸⁶

84. The Tribune, 9 September 1927, reports a meeting of the Punjab Achhut Uddhar Mandal on the issue of begar held at Zafferke in Lahore district which Balmiki representatives of 30 villages attended.

85. The Tribune, 11 April 1928.

86. The Tribune, 7 September 1929.

Glimmerings of a spirit of resistance on the part of the kamins were also reflected in the dispute that occurred between landowners and kamins in 1927 in village Baghiana in Lahore district. The initial spark was provided by the refusal of the kamins, who belonged to the Balmiki sect, to continue to perform the traditional task of the flaying of dead animals. Apparently, this was a consequence of their being influenced by the Depressed Classes Uplift movement. The landowning community of the village retaliated by trying to force the Balmikis into accepting a collective contract for performing the task, and at rates lower than the ones they had been getting under the earlier system of contracts with individual landowners. Mohan Lal of the Achhut Uddhar Mandal offered to intervene and asked for time to consider the proposal, but the landowners refused and insisted on an immediate reply which the Balmikis refused to give. On this, the landowners resorted to a complete boycott of the Balmikis, forcing shopkeepers to refuse them goods, preventing them from using the village tank, thoroughfares and shamlat or common lands and even from going to the police station to report the developments. Following upon this, a minor incident led to an attack by the landowners on the Balmikis, and many of the latter were seriously injured.⁸⁷ It appears that the assertion by the kamins of their right to refuse to continue to perform a traditional service was seen as a threat serious

87. The Tribune, 7 July 1927.

enough for the landowners to combine to put down the resistance with a heavy hand, a course of action they would not need to resort to if the kamins were quietly accepting their traditional roles.

IV

The second story is that of the tenants of Skinner's Estate, comprising 15 villages in the Hansi tehsil of the Hissar district. This was an area in which the Congress had some influence in the rural belt, due to the dedicated efforts of grass-roots level Gandhians like Pandit Neki Ram Sharma. The Skinner family had owned these 15 villages for over 100 years, and the land was cultivated by tenants-at-will. The grievances related to begar, illegal ejections and high rates of rent. In January 1929, largely through the efforts of Pandit Neki Ram Sharma, the tenants organised themselves into a kisan sabha.⁸⁸ A panchayat of all the 15 villages was held, the grievances discussed, and a vow taken to remain non-violent even in the face of repression. Pandit Neki Ram Sharma, who addressed the panchayat, also explained to them that their quarrel was not with the members of the Skinner family or their employees personally, but with the unfair treatment, and therefore they were not to cause personal harm to anyone. The panchayat resolved to first refuse begar, i.e., there would be no labour without remuneration, and nothing would be sold without securing the market price. Other grievances

88. The Tribune, 16 January and 1 March 1929. This was, probably, the first time that the name 'Kisan Sabha' was used in the Punjab.

were to be taken up soon.⁸⁹

The Kisan Sabha now gave notice to the owners to have their grievances redressed and simultaneously stepped up the work of popular mobilisation. Pandit Neki Ram Sharma toured from village to village along with his comrades. Mobilisation was carried on in neighbouring villages as well, as well as in the area around Hissar. A big show of strength in the form of a conference was planned for 24 February 1929 at Garhi village.⁹⁰ The conference was reported to be a success, with more than 15,000 attending, including representatives from 125 villages. People had also come from Meerut, Delhi, Rohtak and Bhiwani. Among the leaders who extended support by attending it were Pandit Thakurdas Bhargava, MLA, Chaudhri Mukhtiar Singh, MLA, Lala Deshbandhu, and Shri Shamlal. The conference expressed dismay at the lack of response on the part of the proprietors of the estate and passed a resolution asking the tenants to, while remaining non-violent, withhold rent.⁹¹

Following upon this, a special meeting of the Kisan Sabha was held at Alakhpura on 27 February to discuss the proposal for non-payment of rent made in the conference at Garhi. The decision taken was to non-cooperate with the owners and their servants; and in pursuance of this decision a lambardar was

89. The Tribune, 16 January 1929.

90. The Tribune, 25 January 1929.

91. The Tribune, 28 February 1929.

totally boycotted by all 15 villages.⁹² A deputation of the tenants also met the Governor but nothing seems to have come out of it. By May, when rents became due, the resolve of the tenants had hardened, and on 5 May a decision was taken to refuse payment of rent. The tenants considered all the possibilities that this would entail including ejectments and prosecutions, and decided to still go ahead with non-payment of rent.⁹³

The pressure of non-payment of rent was sufficient to force one of the two proprietors, Stanley Skinner, to enter into an agreement in July accepting all the demands of the tenants of his eight villages. Begar was abolished, nazrana and illegal ejectments stopped, and rents reduced. The employees of the estate who had been responsible for oppression were to be transferred. The agreement was announced in the presence of the Deputy Commissioner, Abdul Aziz.⁹⁴

In accordance with the agreement, the tenants, while continuing the struggle against the other proprietor, Robert Skinner, paid up the rents at the lower rates due to Stanley Skinner, despite the existence of severe difficulties due to drought. Having secured the rents, Stanley Skinner now did a turnabout, and refused to implement his part of the agreement. Employees were not transferred and fresh ejectment proceedings

92. The Tribune, 5 March 1929.

93. The Tribune, 8 and 15 May 1929.

94. The Tribune, 2 August 1929.

were begun. By October, the situation came to a head with the other proprietor also intensifying the repression by launching prosecutions against the tenants and even getting some of them arrested. Rumours of the impending arrest of Lajpat Rai, the secretary of the Kisan Sabha, also became common.⁹⁵ Tension was high, and rose further when a peasant, Harsukh, was sentenced to a month's imprisonment in early November. Many others were also being implicated in criminal proceedings.⁹⁶

The proprietors had clearly hoped to cow down the tenants with threats of arrest, etc., but this attempt only served to strengthen their resistance. Bodies of volunteers were seen parading in the Hansi bazar and preparations for a huge conference on 10 November were set in motion.⁹⁷ Garhi was again the venue, but this time the occasion was graced with the presence of a national leader of the stature of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. Messages of support came from Gandhiji himself, as well as from Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, and others. The conference decided that civil disobedience in the form of non-payment of taxes and rents would be offered by the residents of all 15 villages, and a band of volunteers was to be organised.⁹⁸

95. The Tribune, 10, 16 and 26 October 1929.

96. The Tribune, 7 November 1929.

97. The Tribune, 7 and 10 November 1929.

98. The Tribune, 10 and 13 November 1929.

The timing of this decision, November 1929, ensured that the tenants' struggle in Hansi tahsil would now become part of the nation-wide civil disobedience movement to be launched shortly.

The significance of the tenants' struggle on Skinner's Estate is that it is the only example we have of such a movement in this early period. It is also important to note that both in the case of the tenants, as well as in that of the kamins, the lead is taken by those nationalist workers or leaders who had been deeply impressed by Gandhiji's emphasis on working among the masses, and especially the untouchables. In a period when no one else had come round to taking up the cause of these sections, the Gandhian nationalists, in their own way, initiated and kept up the resistance.⁹⁹ It is also important that Neki Ram Sharma did not just organize the tenants under the Congress banner but formed a kisan sabha, thus recognizing the necessity of forming class organizations to express the sectional interests of various classes or strata.

V

The third and last story in this series is of ex-soldiers, but it is very much a part of the larger story of peasants and their struggles that we are narrating, because these were not only ex-soldiers who hailed from peasant families, but were themselves now actively engaged in agriculture after serving

99. Pandit Neki Ram Sharma had been taking up the issue of begar among Harijans since 1921. So had Shri Ram Sharma, Interview with Shri Ram Sharma. Also see The Tribune, 19 May 1925.

their stint in the army. The story is important for many reasons, but perhaps the most significant of these is that it shows how the new spirit of assertion of one's demands through mass mobilisation - rather than through appeals and petitions - was manifesting itself even in quarters considered the most loyal to the British.

Ex-Risaldar Anup Singh, a resident of Palmerabad village in the district of Lahore, described in Government documents as a "megalomaniac" and "a heavy drinker and opium-eater",¹⁰⁰ is the hero of this story. He may well have been all that the documents call him, but along with that he also emerges as a tremendous organizer and mobilizer, a man who succeeded in becoming a first-class headache for the Government of the Punjab. Anup Singh had served in the Central India Horse but was made to take his discharge in 1914 for fomenting an agitation in the Regiment. Later, he worked in the police as a Sub-Inspector for a few months. In 1922, he became the President of the Soldiers' Association, which was described as "a body which... means nothing more than some hundreds of ex-soldiers collected occasionally for a definite purpose under his leadership."¹⁰¹ This probably

100. Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.D. Haig, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 27 November 1929, H.P. F.138/1930.

101. Letter from F.H. Puckle, Deputy Commissioner, Lahore to F.W. Kennaway, Commissioner, Lahore Division, dated 7 December 1928, H.P. F.138/1930.

meant that the Association did not have a formal constitution, office-bearers, regular meetings, etc., but served as the banner under which the subsequent agitation was organized.

The first time the activities of Anup Singh came into prominence was in early 1926 when he organised a dewan in Amritsar.¹⁰² In November of the same year he took a jatha of 100 military pensioners to Montgomery district with the declared intention of seizing the land of some big landlord grantees in protest against the Government's failure to recognise the services of ex-soldiers with adequate rewards, especially by way of grants of land. They marched to the estate of Sir Ganga Ram, the noted Punjab industrialist and philanthropist, but were met by the D.C., the D.I.G. and the S.P. who persuaded the jatha to return to their homes and submit petitions stating their grievances. At that time the incident was dismissed as of no consequence, especially since the jatha had remained non-violent and not actually tried to seize land.¹⁰³

Nothing more was heard of Anup Singh till March 1928, when he recommenced his activities in village Pander in Hoshiarpur district. For the rest of the year he was busy organizing meetings in the districts of Lahore, Hoshiarpur, Lyallpur,

102. Report by E.W. Kelly, Col., Deputy Director, Military Intelligence, dated 11 December 1929, H.P. F.233/1930.

103. Ibid. and FR(1) November 1926, H.P. F.112/1926.

Gurdaspur, Ferozepore, and Jullundur. The main brunt of the message he delivered in these was that military pensioners and discharged soldiers should press their demands at all costs.¹⁰⁴

At the time, however, no particular note was taken of these activities.¹⁰⁵

The Government woke up only in December 1928 when Anup Singh arrived in Lahore with a jatha of 500-600 ex-soldiers. "All sorts of old soldiers turned up, some very old, others maimed by wounds, others the ordinary discharged men out of work and a considerable number of Mazhabis. There were a few Indian officers."¹⁰⁶ They had come in response to a proclamation that Anup Singh had issued and circulated widely throughout Central Punjab, calling upon all ex-soldiers who had grievances to come to Lahore on 3 December:¹⁰⁷

All friends should gather at the Railway station of Lahore City by 12 noon. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon a grand military procession with band will start and pass through the streets of Lahore. In the evening after the Diwan is held the Govt. and the world will be told what our state is.... In the morning after approaching His Excellency

104. Report by E.W. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930.

105. For example, the Fortnightly Reports of this period contain no reference to his activities. Nor have we found any memorandum or note or letter by any government official in the files relating to this period.

106. Letter from F.H. Puckle, D.C., Lahore, dated 7 December 1928, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930. 'Mazhabis' is the term used to describe low-caste Sikhs to distinguish them from high-caste Sikhs such as Jats and Khattris.

107. Ibid.

with our request the force will start towards Rakh Baikuntha where the agitation is to take place. Every soldier should wear his medals on his chest....

The jatha, however, was not very well-organized, and was unable to agree on the composition of the deputation of five members that the Governor agreed to receive. Nor were they able to draft a joint petition and finally dispersed on 7 December after agreeing to forward a petition signed by Anup Singh, with the proviso that they would all return on 7 January 1929 to receive the Governor's reply.¹⁰⁸

Having succeeded in persuading the jatha to leave, the Government machinery now swung into motion to prevent their return in January. Anup Singh's petition had made it clear that what the ex-soldiers wanted was "land and nothing else will they take as a satisfactory substitute for it." The Government's view was that if they could determine the exact grievances of those who had come in the jatha, through enquiries by Deputy Commissioners and with the assistance of the District Soldiers' Boards, and if something could be done for the really deserving cases, it may prevent their return.¹⁰⁹ By early January, it became clear that at least some would return, and the Commissioner of Lahore Division called in a number of prominent Indian officers

108. Ibid.; and Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930.

109. Letter from F.H. Puckle, D.C., Lahore, dated 7 December 1928, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930.

and Sardars from the districts in his division. On 5 and 6 January, these men "did their best by meeting trains and by visiting the motor lorries stands to turn back the ex-soldiers." Their success was clearly marginal and by the evening of 7 January at least 1500 people had collected in Lahore at Gurdwara Dera Sahib. The efforts of the Government-inspired Indian officers to persuade them to leave proving futile, the Deputy Commissioner went to the jatha and handed them a warning notice. This too had no effect, and Anup Singh declared that the next day they would all march to Government House, the jatha shouting "that they would accompany him even at the cost of their lives."¹¹⁰

The next day Anup Singh and his lieutenant Sampuran Singh were arrested before they could march to Government House, but members of the jatha, among whom there were many women, on hearing of this, started to march to the kutchery where the two leaders were held. They were intercepted on the way, warned, asked to disperse. They stopped but refused to disperse and sat down on the side of the road in an orderly manner. They stayed without food or blankets in the cold January night till the next day when the local Gurdwara Committee received permission to provide food and fetch their beddings from the godown where they had been stored. They remained thus, on the road-side,

110. Letter from F.H. Puckle, D.C., Lahore, to F.W. Kennaway, Commissioner, Lahore Division, dated 29 January 1929, H.P. F.138/1930.

till 19 January -- a full 12 days. The Government roped in many local Sikh notables to put pressure - but to no avail. Notices were served again on the 14th, but these were publicly burnt on the encouragement of Anup Singh's wife. Further notices on the 17th had no effect either.¹¹¹

It was only when Anup Singh was released on bail after furnishing a security of Rs.30,000 on 18 January, and Sampuran Singh on a security of Rs.3,000 on 19 January, and they had returned to the jatha, that strong unofficial pressure succeeded in persuading them to move from the roadside to the Dera Sahib.¹¹²

Obviously impressed with the determination of the jatha, which it had failed to disperse by threat or pressure, the Government decided that the only way to defuse the situation and get the ex-soldiers out of Lahore was to allow a deputation to meet the Governor. Accordingly, an 18-member deputation met the Governor, de Montmorency, on 21 January. He assured them that individual cases of hardship would be dealt with by the district authorities and asked them not to alienate the sympathies of Government by foolish acts since the Government had already done a lot for them. Individual petitions would be accepted and investigated. The ex-soldiers wrote out their individual petitions -- 1950 of them, which shows that the numbers assembled in Lahore were at least that much -- which Anup Singh handed

111. Ibid. and The Tribune, 10 and 18 January 1929.

112. Letter from F.H. Puckle, D.C., Lahore, dated 29 January 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930.

over to the Deputy Commissioner, and returned home by 22 January.¹¹³

Having averted the immediate crisis, the Government appears to have again taken a rather sanguine attitude. A very large number of additional petitions, from those who had not joined the iatha, were also received -- 2,000 from Ambala district alone -- as word went round that petitions were being considered.¹¹⁴ At the end of the cold weather, a meeting of the Provincial Soldiers' Board was held, presided over by the Governor and attended by the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Northern Command, which considered the problems of ex-soldiers. At the district level, enquiries were made by the Deputy Commissioner with the assistance of the District Soldiers' Boards.¹¹⁵ The enquiries found that "there is a certain amount of genuine distress among ex-servicemen whose pensions are small or who have not been found eligible for pension and have little or no land of their own... (and among) soldiers who have been disabled by

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113. Ibid.; Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930; and The Tribune, 23 January 1929. An editorial in The Tribune, dated 24 January, made the point that the soldiers' real grievance was that Government grants were not fair, those having access to officials manage to get favours and the rewards are not for real services rendered.
114. Letter from C.M.G. Oglivie, Officiating Home Secretary, Punjab to the Secretary to the Government of India, Army Department, dated 14 June 1929, H.P. F.138/1930.
115. Letter from C.M.G. Oglivie, Officiating Home Secretary, Punjab to All Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners in the Punjab, dated 11 July 1929, H.P. F.138/1930.

wounds and whose pensions are insufficient...."¹¹⁶ But in terms of concrete action, of the 1950 petitions submitted by the jatha in January, only 354 had been examined by June, of which 73 had been declared deserving of some relief or monetary grant and 11 eligible for grant of land.¹¹⁷

However, what probably dashed all the hopes of the ex-soldiers, and provoked another round of confrontation, was the letter issued on 11 July 1929 by the Home Secretary, Punjab, and circulated to all Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners in the province with the request that it be placed before the District Soldiers' Boards so that they may make the situation clear to all the ex-servicemen in their area. This letter stated that Government has thought it necessary to "make it clear that there is no more land available for grants to ex-servicemen and no applications for grants of this nature can be received or entertained."¹¹⁸ It is hardly fortuitous that "the temporary lull" reported in Anup Singh's activities since January also ended in July when this letter was made public, and he resumed his campaign through meetings and correspondence.¹¹⁹

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116. Letter from Oglivie, Officiating Home Secretary, Punjab to the Secretary to the Government of India, Army Department, dated 14 June 1929, H.P. F.138/1930.
117. Ibid.; and Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930.
118. Letter from Oglivie to All Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners in the Punjab, dated 11 July 1929, H.P. F.138/1930.
119. Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930; FR(2) July 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.



This time, however, there was a different tone to the campaign. Whereas earlier there were no references in Government reports to any political connections of Anup Singh or his followers, or any real worry about the basic loyalty of the ex-soldiers,¹²⁰ there was, from July 1929 onwards, an awareness that the mood of the ex-soldiers had changed and that there was an anti-British sentiment that was becoming evident. The first meeting held in July, in Chokhan village in Hoshiarpur district, was reported to be proof of the fact that "among Anup Singh's adherents are a certain number of ex-soldiers who are definitely hostile to Government and who would not hesitate to join an anti-Government movement...."¹²¹ By September Anup Singh had issued posters calling upon ex-servicemen to gather in large numbers at the annual conference of the Central Sikh League being held in Lyallpur on 11 and 12 October. The Central Sikh League was an organisation that represented the radical nationalist elements

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120. This was despite the fact that at the third session of the Punjab Workers' and Peasants' Party, held at Rohtak along with the 15th session of the Provincial Political Conference in March 1929, an attempt had been made to "affect the loyalty of ex-soldiers" by referring to the treatment given to Anup Singh's men in Lahore (in January 1929). This attempt had been dismissed as not having had much effect. FR(1) March 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
121. Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930. There had also been a meeting in May in Hoshiarpur district where in the presence of a large number of ex-soldiers a letter supposed to have been written by Anup Singh was read out which advised the formation of jathas by tahsils and thanas to force the Government's hand. FR(2) May 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.



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among the Sikhs and his choice of its conference as the venue for his rally was indeed reflective of a desire to establish contact with anti-Government nationalist forces. He also announced a demonstration in Lahore in December in the Congress week -- again important because the annual session of the Congress was being held in Lahore at that time.¹²² Besides, in his propaganda to prepare for the December jatha, he was reported to have "gone to the extent of urging ex-soldiers to support the Congress." The Recruiting Officer of Jullundur district had already reported to the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence in August 1929 that Anup Singh's propaganda was very dangerous and was being fanned by "other seditious leaders" as well. He had also begun to receive the support of newspapers such as Milap, Zamindar Gazette, The Akali, and Inqilab.¹²³

By the third week of November, when it became increasingly clear that Anup Singh's campaign was continuing strong in many districts and that he was determined about the December demonstration, and that all the Government's assumptions about his declining influence were proving wrong, the Government finally initiated a series of steps to handle the situation. It asked the Army Department on 21 November to send specially selected officers to tour in the Labana villages of Sheikhpura and

122. FR(2) September 1929, FR(2) October 1929, H.P. F.17/1929; Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. File 233/1930.

123. Ibid.

Lyallpur districts as well as in the Hoshiarpur district — the three most affected areas.¹²⁴ A week later the Chief Secretary, H.W. Emerson, addressed a long letter to H.D. Haig, the Home Secretary to the Government of India, giving a full account of the past history of the movement, and detailing the dangers inherent in the proposed demonstration in the Congress week in an atmosphere already charged with the threats of an extremist — moderate split in the Congress and communal assertion by sections of Sikhs and Muslims. He also listed the action being taken and the steps proposed to be taken, which included a notice to be issued around 5 December warning all concerned that participation in the jatha will mean non-eligibility for land grants. He also proposed taking action under the Criminal Procedure Code and, if absolutely necessary, the declaration of the Association as an unlawful organization.¹²⁵

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124. Ibid.; FR(2) November 1929, H.P. F.17/1929; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930. Interestingly, a proposal for sending a special officer, made in early October 1929, had been turned down. Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930.
125. Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930. The last proposal, of declaring the association unlawful under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, was rejected by the Home Department and the Army Department of the Government of India on the ground that "such action would be liable to misunderstanding and misrepresentation, not only in the Army in India, but generally in England, and it would be alleged that special powers have been invoked to prevent a body of ex-soldiers representing their grievances to government." See exchange of letters between H.D. Haig, Home Secretary, Government of India and G. Mackworth Young, Army Secretary, Government of India, dated 29 November 1929 and 2 December 1929, H.P. F.138/1930.

The tour reports by the special officers deputed to counteract Anup Singh's influence further confirmed the extent of the discontent as well as revealed the causes that underlay it. For example, Lt. Col. W.A.H. Bird of the Corps of Sikh Pioneers, who toured the Labana villages of Sheikhpura, reported to the Chief of the General Staff that the general condition in the district, though not bad, was difficult and that all those who had no land or animals of their own and "depend on casual employment for their living definitely find it difficult to get enough to eat."¹²⁶ And since Labanas were a low caste, with much less access to land than the dominant landowning caste of the Jats, it is understandable that they were more affected and therefore more susceptible to Anup Singh's persuasion. (In this context, it is very significant that the main recruiting ground for Anup Singh's activities were reported to be the Labanas of Sheikhpura and Lyallpur and the peasants of Hoshiarpur,¹²⁷ a district with extremely small holdings.) Lt. Col. Bird also acknowledged that the Labanas who served during the War had undoubtedly been

126. Copy of a report of No.2/Tour, dated 6 December 1929, from Lt. Col. W.A.H. Bird, the Corps of Sikh Pioneers, Sheikhpura, to Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, New Delhi, H.P. F.233/1930.

127. See, for example, letter from W.H. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.138/1930. This was also confirmed by reports of tours conducted by army officers in different districts of Punjab during 1930. See, for example, reports on the tours in Lyallpur, Jullundur, and Sheikhpura and Montgomery districts carried out in August, February and April 1930 respectively, H.P. F.265/1930.

promised land by the civil recruiters. And knowing that many of their own class had received land grants, they "cannot or will not understand why they also have not received a land grant." This combination of circumstances, which also included generally bad economic conditions and the fact that these men got used to a better standard of living during the war, and that many of them were discharged without even a pension, "has created discontent... and these are the men who will fall victim to Anup Singh's propaganda."¹²⁸

Thus, reinforced with first-hand reports of the degree of discontent prevalent, and wary of the new political linkages of the agitationists, the Government began to enact what was to be the final act in this extraordinary story. A notice warning all those who might participate in the jatha that they would forfeit all rights to being considered for grants of land was issued and Anup Singh was served on 14 December with a notice to show cause why his securities should not be forfeited. Anup Singh was brought to trial, a fresh case was also instituted against him, and proceedings under the Criminal Procedure Code launched against his lieutenants in Hoshiarpur, Sheikhpura, Lyallpur, Gurdaspur and Amritsar. Despite this, 200 ex-soldiers turned up in Lahore and "adopted such an unruly attitude that it had to be declared an unlawful assembly." Some dispersed, but about 110 had to be

128. Report of Tour in Sheikhpura district by Lt. Col. Bird, dated 6 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930.

arrested. This effectively brought the movement to an end.¹²⁹

Anup Singh's movement is fascinating in a myriad variety of ways, both for what it was and for what it wasn't. For one, it showed how a section traditionally considered 'safe' and 'loyal' by the Government could become influenced by the general mood prevailing in society once the conditions were ripe. The ex-soldiers who came to Anup Singh's jathas were mostly Sikhs, and this is important because it reflected the deep politicization that had occurred among the Sikh peasantry as a result of the various movements preceding this one, among which the Akali movement undoubtedly was the most important. It also showed the possible consequences for the British of the type of recruitment that had to be resorted to during the First World War when men were in short supply and the Army had to go beyond its traditional recruiting grounds -- to communities like the Labanas which had not been rendered 'safe' by long years of ideologisation that they constituted the 'martial races' who were the sword-arm of the Empire and whose loyalty was rewarded by generosity on the part of the rulers. The traditionally designated 'martial races' could be kept 'loyal' through a selective system of rewards but then the groups that expected rewards in return for service became too large, and the initial generosity made possible by the developing canal colonies became impossible as the canal colonies

129. FR(1) and (2) December 1929, H.P. F.17/1929; The Tribune, 18 and 22 December 1929.

filled up. Such groups then flocked to the agitator who promised returns through struggle.

The sudden demise of the movement after December 1929, as well as its sporadic character before that, also demonstrated the weaknesses of a movement that depends too heavily on the personality of a charismatic leader who emerges to answer the needs of a specific situation. Once that leader is removed, or turns his back, the movement collapses. This points to the necessity of the building up of an organization, with a continuing line of leadership, which is not dependent on one individual.

Further, the way the movement was finally handled also demonstrates the tough line the Government was willing to take when it realized that its sources of recruitment might get contaminated and a wrong message might go to serving soldiers that Government was soft towards indiscipline. It came down hard, much harder than it would have against comparable civilian agitation, not even allowing a peaceful demonstration to be held once it saw the dangerous potential of the movement.¹³⁰ Till the

130. In this context, it is pertinent that the measures suggested by the special army officer who toured some of the affected areas were even harsher than the ones actually implemented by the Punjab government. He had suggested that the pensions of those who participated in jathas, etc., should be taken away, they should be arrested and prosecuted, and land revenue remissions be withdrawn from the villages whose inhabitants join any jatha. Report of tour in Sheikhpura District by Lt. Col. Bird, dated 6 December 1929, op. cit., H.P. F.233/1930.

basic loyalty of the ex-soldiers was not in doubt, and they were thought of as discontented but misguided, they were treated with kid gloves, but once their loyalty was in question, the mailed fist came into full view. The understanding reflected in this was that harsh treatment of genuinely loyal ex-soldiers would alienate the serving soldiers and the communities from which they were drawn, but softness towards disloyal elements would send the wrong signals about the incapacity and softness of the state, which in itself would be an invitation to disloyalty.

VI

The end of the year 1929 is a good point at which to stop and take stock of the previous few years, for after this, with the launching of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the manifestation of the effects of the Great Economic Depression, a new phase of peasant protest and organization began. It was clear that by now a considerable ferment existed among sections of the peasantry, and there was evidence also of a willingness to take to the path of agitation and struggle for the assertion of one's demands.¹³¹ Political organisations had also become more

131. Apart from the protest movements and the demands discussed above, one can list a considerable variety of issues on which peasants came out to assert their views and demand change. For example, complaints were voiced against the Canal Department for arbitrary re-modelling of canal outlets and distributaries, changes in water-rates, closure of canals in the summer months, shortage of canal water, especially for poorer and weaker landowners, arbitrariness in giving compensation for water-logged land, etc. Others wanted changes in conditions on which land grants were made for horse-breeding purposes and for supplying grass. Land revenue and water-rates remissions were demanded as were

aware of the need to mobilise and organise the peasantry around their own demands and in their own organisations -- and not only for wider social and political objectives such as Gurdwara Reform or Indian independence. A distinct left-wing had also emerged which by its very nature was clearly committed to the task of mass organisation and mobilisation around class demands. Besides, this left-wing moved inevitably towards the rural masses, in the absence of a substantial industrial labour force in the province. This process was facilitated by the fact that a large section of the left, especially those from Ghadar party background, were of peasant origin and had a natural affinity with the needs, urges and ethos of the peasantry. Also, the fact that many of the activists of the left had emerged from one or other of the militant anti-imperialist movements known for their heroic sacrifices -- Ghadar, Non-cooperation, Akali, Babbar Akali, NJBS -- gave them a certain prestige and established their bona fides among the rural masses which enabled them to carry conviction. Consequently, they were able, in the relatively short time of a couple of years, to make their presence felt in a number of local struggles and advance the process of politicization of the peasants.

Further, through the different struggles, big and small, and via the process of ideological advance that occurred in these

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generous grants of tagavi loans and opening of famine relief works. These demands were expressed through deputations, representations, resolutions, letters to the editor, telegrams to the Governor, meetings and conferences.

years, the broad outlines of a programme - a charter of demands - had also begun to emerge. It was evident that remission of various Government taxes, especially when crops failed or some other disaster struck, and cancellations or prevention of enhancements of existing rates of taxes were major issues around which peasants were willing to agitate. Similarly other government impositions such as the Village Patrol Act were resented. The demand for a basic reform in the inequitable system of land revenue had also been articulated in a particularly telling manner by means of its comparison with the principles of income tax assessment, and had attracted a rare degree of unanimity. However, many demands were yet to emerge with any force, as for example those specifically affecting tenants or agricultural labourers. Similarly, the demand for a solution to the problem of indebtedness had yet to be formulated. As is obvious, the drawing up of a programme marks a critical stage in the development of a movement, and therefore the initiation of this process was an important achievement.

However, what had clearly not emerged yet were stable peasant organisations, whether at the village, tahsil, district or provincial levels. The early effort, in 1925, by the Congress, which flowed out of the momentum generated by the water-rates agitation, had died out rather quickly and after that the pattern was that the leadership and the organization of the agitations was provided by different political parties and groups that happened to be functional at that time, rather than through any

stable peasant organisations. The Punjab Zamindar League, however, did function with a certain degree of continuity, held annual sessions, though not regularly, and also had some district level branches, though only very few of these functioned with any consistency. Also, despite the fact that, at this stage, with Choudhuri Chhotu Ram out of office and probably therefore in a militant mood, and also because its political complexion was not yet very clear (as it became during the Civil Disobedience Movement), it was able to attract to itself some nationalist political activists committed to the peasantry, it was not able to really build up either at the provincial or at the grassroots level a really stable and representative organisation. The reliance on individuals such as Chaudhuri Chhotu Ram and other local notables and members of the Legislative Council was indicative of a style of politics very different from the one needed for the building up of a strong peasant organisation.

It is also to be noted that the limits of the area covered by the peasant struggles were defined very much by the political map of the political movements that were their predecessors: Central Punjab and pockets in South-east Punjab (present-day Haryana). Western Punjab had remained outside the ambit of these movements and continued to remain untouched by peasant resistance as well. In this respect, the pattern of future peasant struggles was also anticipated, thus pointing to the intimate connection between generalised political consciousness and resistance on specifically peasant issues -- a connection

we shall explore at length later.

The ferment and the churning that occurred in these years as a result of the mass political movements, the peasant struggles and the new movements with their radical new ideologies, were an essential pre-requisite for the qualitative leap forward that the peasant movement in Punjab made in the subsequent years. Experiences were gained, contacts established and the lessons learnt; different techniques of struggle were tried out and their effectiveness tested; the tolerance levels of the Government were determined - all of which was to prove invaluable in the years to come.

PEASANT PROTEST: AS PART OF
NATIONAL UPSURGE
1930-32

The Lahore session of the Indian National Congress in the last week of the year 1929 which declared complete independence as the aim of the Congress and also resolved upon a movement of civil disobedience to be launched shortly brought to a culmination the nation-wide process of politicisation and ferment that had been gathering strength at least since 1928, a process marked by the signs of a new militancy and ideological radicalisation among the intelligentsia, the youth and among many sections of peasants and workers. The tone of the new stage was reflected in Jawaharlal Nehru's declaration in his Presidential Address to the Lahore Congress: "I must frankly confess that I am a socialist and a republican, and am no believer in kings and princes, or in the order which produces the modern kings of industry, who have greater power over the lives and fortunes of men than even the kings of old, and whose methods are as predatory as those of the old feudal aristocracy."¹

The Punjab Congress had begun in 1929 to prepare for the coming struggle. After the Provincial Political Conference held at Rohtak in March which was attended by major national leaders such as Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, a deputation of

1. Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, general editor, S. Gopal, 15 volumes, New Delhi, 1972-82, Volume 4, p.192.

provincial Congressmen began to tour the rural areas of the province for propaganda and enlistment of members.² Dr. Satyapal's arrest in early May disoriented the touring for a short while, but it was soon resumed.³ In July, the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee (PPCC) appointed a committee to revamp the Congress organisation, try to enrol the provincial quota of roughly 52,000 members, and set up training camps for volunteers.⁴ By the beginning of September, the enrolment had reached 28,000.⁵ Besides this, the Punjab Congress had been very active in the celebration of Bhagat Singh-Dutt days, taking out of jathas and making collections for the Defence Fund for the Conspiracy Case prisoners.⁶ The NJBS, in its turn, was assisting the Congress in its campaign of propaganda through enrolment of members and setting up of Congress Committees.⁷ An index of the cooperation between the two was Jawaharlal Nehru's presence at the Third Provincial NJBS Conference in August.⁸ The holding of the

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2. FR(1) March 1929, FR(2) April 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
 3. FR(1) May 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
 4. FR(1) July 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
 5. FR(1) September 1929, H.P. F.17/1929; AICC Papers, F.P-30(111) of 1929, Supplement to Congress Bulletin, September 27, 1929.
 6. FR(1) and (2) July 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
 7. FR(2) June, FR(2) July, FR(1) October, 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.
 8. FR(1) August 1929, H.P. F.17/1929.

annual session of the Congress in Lahore in December, the preparations that had to be made for it, the excitement generated by its momentous decisions, all contributed to the building up of the tempo for the phase of mass struggle that was about to begin.

I

The decision at Lahore that a mass campaign of civil disobedience would soon be inaugurated immediately resulted in a flurry of activity all over the province. And the rural areas, with which we are concerned here, were soon alive with a whole variety of agitations and mobilisation. 26 January 1930 had been designated by the Congress as the day on which the Independence resolution passed by the Lahore Congress would be read out and repeated at public meetings all over the country; and mobilisation began for making 26 January a success. Meetings asking people to get ready for the coming struggle and come to the Independence Day meetings were held in many part of the province, including in villages. On 26 January, another round of meetings was held and thus the preparations for civil disobedience were set in motion. Jathas of volunteers were soon reported to be roaming the villages.⁹

9. FR(2) January, FR(1) and (2) February, FR(1) and (2) March, and FR(1) April 1929, H.P. F.18/II/1930, 18/III/1930, 18/IV/1930 and 18/V/1930. Also see H.P. F.173/I/1930 which gives the prosecutions launched in this period against individual speakers and newspapers and journals.

The essential message being conveyed through speeches at meetings and articles and poems in the vernacular newspapers was that of preparing for struggle.¹⁰ The importance of organization or jathebandi was emphasized and people's confidence was sought to be built up by constant references to the small number of Englishmen as compared to the vast numbers of Indians. The exploitative nature of British rule was illustrated through a wide variety of examples and the necessity, therefore, of driving out the British brought home. After this common ground was covered, the speakers or the article-writers then put their own ideological stamp on the message. A large section had been obviously influenced by socialist ideas to a greater or lesser degree, as borne out by the constant references to the need to organise workers and peasants and establish their rule.

Among the committed leftists, those belonging to the NJBS were very active in the preparations for the Civil Disobedience Movement (as well as later during the movement). They were unequivocal in extending their support to the Congress in this struggle. Though they naturally did not highlight the aspect of non-violence as did other Congressmen, they nevertheless made it clear that for the present they were working under

10. This para and the next three paras, except when otherwise indicated, are based on the extracts of speeches and articles that formed the basis of prosecutions, which are reproducing along with the statement of prosecutions in H.P. F.173/I/1930.

Congress discipline. They also took great pains to negate the impression that they were anarchists and emphasized that they believed in a socialist order of society.

Members of the Kirti Kisan Party, on the other hand, because of their close connection with the Communist International, found it difficult to flout the sectarian line being advanced at this time, though many, especially those who had come from a Ghadar background such as Karam Singh Chhina and Bhag Singh, continued to work within the Congress throughout the sectarian period. The Kirti activists who participated in the process of mobilisation for the Civil Disobedience Movement also inevitably laid greater emphasis on the need to organize the masses and on popularising the notion of kisan mazdoor raj or workers' and peasants' state.¹¹

However, a common point amongst almost all the propagan-
da effort at this time was the emphasis that civil disobedience meant the non-payment of taxes to the government and that peasants should get ready for this. Another common feature that strikes one sharply is the secular tone of all the pro-
paganda and the absence of any appeals to religious sentiment —

11. For example, at the Kirti Kisan Conference held in Lahore at the end of December 1929, the proceedings were marked by an anti-Congress tone, but in a Kirti Kisan Political Conference at Hissar on 21 and 22 February 1930, participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement was advocated by many speakers. See H.P. F.98/1930 and 173/I/1930. Harkishen Singh Surjeet also testifies to the fact that the Ghadar-based Kirtis continued to work in the Congress through this period. Interview.

and this was true of leftists as well as non-leftists. On the contrary, the necessity of communal amity and of special efforts to get Muslims to participate in the movement was invariably stressed.

Apart from these general preparations for the impending struggle, there was also in the first three months of 1930 a resurgence of activity around some specific agrarian issues. In Amritsar, for example, there was an agitation led by the Amritsar Zamindar Sabha, an organisation comprised of "Sikhs of Congress mentality", against the proposed resettlement of the district. A series of meetings were held in January and soon the Government announced a postponement for five years. Posters announcing meetings were found to have been printed at the Kirti press in Amritsar, thus indicating the Kirti Kisan Party's support to the agitation.¹² What is significant, however, is the fact that though the demand for postponement had been voiced a full six months earlier by the moderate Zamindar Association,¹³ it was only in January 1930 in the new atmosphere generated by the coming struggle that it became an issue around which agitation was organized.

Similarly, in Hissar in the south-east of the province, the agitation against the landlords of the Skinners' Estate was revived in February. A deputation of the Kisan Sabha touring

12. FR(1) January and FR(2) February 1930, H.P. F.18/II/1930, and 18/III/1930.

13. The Tribune, 30 June 1929.

the villages was joined by peasants of other parts of Hissar and also of the neighbouring Faridkot state and contributions poured in from many sources. The Skinners refused to relent or to implement the agreement entered into the previous year by one of them, and instead adopted a threatening posture.¹⁴ The protests continued till early April when the Government began a policy of repression. Arrests and prosecutions of tenants were launched and by 22 April 18 tenants had already been sentenced to a month's imprisonment with fine and another 31 arrested.¹⁵ There was trouble between tenants and landlords also at Daulatpur in Hissar district a little later in April, which included forcible removal of crops by tenants, arrests by the police, clashes between the tenants and the police, etc.¹⁶

In the neighbouring district of Rohtak, which was the biggest Congress stronghold in South-east Punjab, there was trouble between the tenants, who were mostly Ahirs, and the jagirdars, who were Pathans, in a place called Chhuchhakwas in the Jhajjar tehsil. The tenants alleged that the police and local officials were in league with the landlords and

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14. The Tribune, 14 February 1930.
 15. The Tribune, 22 April 1930; Appreciation of situation in Punjab, dated 19 April 1930, from Punjab Government to Government of India, H.P. F.250/I/1930; FR(1) and (2) April 1930, H.P. F.18/V/1930.
 16. Appreciation of situation in Punjab, dated 22 April 1930, from Punjab Government to Government of India, H.P. F.250/I/1930.

therefore had put ten tenants in the police lock-up. They also wanted an impartial inquiry into the murderous assault on a tenant who was now lying in a serious condition in hospital. With all these complaints and demands in mind, 100 tenants marched to Rohtak from Chhuchhakwas on 3 April with the intention of seeing the Governor who was on a visit to the town. They were persuaded by the Deputy Commissioner to leave on the promise of an inquiry, which was, however, never fulfilled. Instead, arrests and prosecutions were launched under the general cover of dealing with the civil disobedience movement.¹⁷

II

With the breaking of the salt law by Gandhiji at Dandi on 6 April 1930, the Civil Disobedience Movement was formally launched. In Punjab as well, attempts were made to sustain a salt satyagraha¹⁸ but the scope for it being limited given the

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17. The Tribune, 2 April 1930. Statement in court of Mangli Ram, Secretary, Tenants' Panchayat, Chhuchhakwas, who was awarded 2 years' rigorous imprisonment along with 2 others in July 1930. He maintained that a false case had been made against him because the D.C. was angry with him for his involvement in the tenants' struggle and because he regularly spoke from the Congress platform as well as wrote in the Haryana Tilak, a Congress newspaper of Rohtak, about the corruption of police and other lower officials. H.P. F.173/IV/1930.
18. FR(2) April 1930, H.P. F.18/V/1930. In Rohtak district, volunteers were sent directly by Gandhiji to assist the movement. Ibid. Ujagar Singh Bilga describes how they organised salt satyagraha in his village Bilga in Jullundur district. Huge crowds would collect and every 4th day a batch of 25 would offer satyagraha. He too was later arrested. Interview.

landlocked nature of the province, concentration soon shifted to the picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops. This programme, especially the boycott of foreign cloth shops, proved popular in the villages as well.¹⁹ By early May, the activity had reached a high pitch as a result of the combined effect of the Peshawar incident, Gandhiji's arrest and the firing at the Sisganj Gurdwara in Delhi. There was a sharp rise in the number of jathas and individual activists going about the rural areas -- some were going to Peshawar to express solidarity with the victims of Martial Law, others protesting the firing at Sisganj, and still others carrying on the rest of the nationalist propaganda.²⁰

On 15 May 1930, the Congress Working Committee gave permission to the Provincial Congress Committees to begin the campaign of non-payment of land revenue wherever they thought fit.²¹ This immediately led in Punjab to an intensification of activity connected with encouraging the non-payment of land

19. FR(2) April 1930, H.P. F.18/1930. Narain Singh Shahbazzpuri, of Amritsar district, a young man at that time, recounts how he used to go around the villages singing songs about Gandhiji and Charkha, organise jathas and go for picketing of foreign cloth shops. Arrests and fines would follow, and the volunteers would then collect money from the villages to pay off the fines. He himself was arrested twice during the course of the movement. Picketing of foreign cloth shops was a very strong movement, he says. Interview.

20. FR(1) and (2) May 1930, H.P. F.18/VI/1930.

21. Resolution of Congress Working Committee, 15 May, 1930. H.P. F.257/III/1930.

revenue.²² By the end of May the situation on this front was serious enough for the Punjab Government to ask for the extension of the ordinance which granted powers to arrest and prosecute those who incited others not to pay taxes.²³ The powers under this ordinance were then freely used by the district authorities to arrest those involved in promoting this campaign.²⁴

22. FR(2) May 1930, H.P. F.18/IV/1930.

23. The Government of Punjab wrote to the Home Department of the Government of India that speakers at meetings had been advocating non-payment of land revenue in Amritsar, Lahore and Sheikhupura rural tracts. Small jathas were also touring the central districts preaching this message. Therefore they wanted to notify Ordinance VI of 1930, known as the Unlawful Instigation Ordinance. The Ordinance was notified on 5 June 1930. See Express letters dated 26/27 May and 12 June 1930 from Punjab Government to Home Department, Government of India, H.P. F.503/II/1930. The fortnightly report for the second half of May had also struck an alarmist note and said that the ordinance was passed at the most opportune time. See FR(2) May 1930, H.P. F.18/VI/1930.

24. For arrests and prosecutions on this count, see, for example, The Tribune, 22 April 1930, for 31 arrests in Hissar; 20 June 1930, for 31 arrests in Rohtak; 21 June 1930, for arrests in Amritsar and Sheikhupura districts; 27 June 1930, for arrests in Amritsar district; 29 June 1930, for arrests in Lahore; 20 July 1930, for arrests in Amritsar; 26 July 1930, for arrests in Sheikhupura; 12 August 1930, for arrests in Amritsar. A few examples of prosecutions for instigation to refuse payment of taxes: Hakim Nur-ud-din, one of the chief organisers of the Congress movement in Lyallpur, sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment; Ghazi Sultan Mahmud, Congress worker, prosecuted for speech advocating non-payment of land revenue at a meeting in village Bhalike in Sheikhupura district on 8 April 1930, H.P. F.173/II/1930. Mangli Ram and two others in Jhajjar, Rohtak district, for speeches advocating non-payment of land revenue; Kishen Singh Akali, for speech at Guru Ka Bagh, Amritsar district, on 13 May, advocating jathebandi and preaching non-payment of land revenue in rural areas of Amritsar district; Mangal Singh Kuka, for speeches in

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In all, 800 persons were prosecuted under the Unlawful Instigation Ordinance alone, of which 737 were actually convicted.²⁵ And these arrests were only of those who were 'instigating' others not to pay the land revenue, i.e., of the cadre or volunteers. In fact, from all accounts, the chances of a no-tax movement taking off were very high till July 1930. In the Legislative Council, for example, members repeatedly warned the Government that the situation in the villages was quite

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Sheikhupura district, demanding reduction of land revenue, on 8 April and 25 May 1930, H.P. F.173/IV/1930. Gian Chana, Superintendent, Congress Volunteer Corps. Sheikhupura, for speeches at Nankana Sahib, Sheikhupura district, on 16 June 1930, asking people not to pay land revenue, H.P. F.173/V/1930. Ram Saran Das Mahajan, for a speech in Rohtak, 25 January 1930, saying do not pay land revenue and that he will repeat it in every village, for which he was sentenced to 3 years rigorous imprisonment, H.P. F.173/I/1930 and 173/II/1930. Giani Kartar Singh, for speech at Lyallpur, saying don't pay revenue to government, pay it to Congress, set up a parallel administration, for which he was given 1 year's rigorous imprisonment; seven speakers at Kirti Kisan Sabha Conference in Hissar district, 21 and 22 February 1930, many of whom advocated non-payment of revenue on same lines as Bardoli in Gujarat and Garhi village in Hissar; Sri Ram Sharma, Mohan Swami and Hari Singh of Jhajjar, Rohtak district, for speeches on 9 February 1930 urging non-payment of revenue, boycott of tahsils and police stations, etc., H.P. F.173/I/1930. Abnash Chandra Bali, active worker of NJBS, organiser of Punjab Students Union, for speeches at Sur Singh, Patti and Kasur in Lahore district on 3, 5 and 9 May 1930, advocating non-payment of land revenue, H.P. F.173/II/1930. Sodhi Pindi Das, well-known NJBS activist, member of Punjab Congress, for saying in a speech at Sheikhupura on 11 June 1930 that he was glad that 63 villages of the district had decided to refuse land revenue, H.P. F.173/III/1930.

25. H.P. F.215/1932; PLCD, Vol.XXII, 7 November 1932.

conducive to such a development.²⁶ The Government's own reports also continued to point to the danger²⁷ and in later assessments as well acknowledged that "a strong agitation" had developed in certain parts against the payment of land revenue.²⁸ The agitation in Sheikhpura in the Virk Sikh villages which threatened to involve about 80 villages was curbed only by the end of July with the help of almost 100 arrests of leading agitators, a major clash being averted only in the nick of time in the village of Varn.²⁹ Besides Sheikhpura, the districts of

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26. See PLCD, Vol.XV, 11 March 1930; Vol.XVI, 23 July 1930; Vol.XVII, 8 November 1930. Even later, remissions of taxes were demanded on the ground that their refusal would lead to civil disobedience and non-payment of taxes. See, for example, PLCD, Vol.XVIII, 24 March 1931; Vol.XX, 1 December 1931.
27. See, for example, FR(2) May 1930, FR(1) and (2) June 1930, FR(1) and (2) July 1930, H.P. F.18/VI/1930, 18/VII/1930, 18/VIII/1930. Also see the 'Report of a Tour by an Army Officer in Lahore district' in June 1930, H.P., F.265/1930.
28. Statement by Sir Henry Craik, Finance Member, during discussion on Punjab Criminal Law Amendment Bill in Punjab Legislative Council on 7 November 1932. H.P. F.215/1932; PLCD, Vol.XXII, 7 November 1932. The Bill was designed to incorporate into law the ordinance on incitement to refuse payment of Government dues which had lapsed, and Sir Henry Craik's argument was that they had needed it in 1930 and could need it again, after the Reforms, if a similar movement developed. He countered objections to the Bill which maintained that the Punjab peasant was not prone to non-payment of revenue by citing the example of the 1930 movement. Ibid.
29. See FR(2) July 1930, H.P. F.18/VIII/1930; The Tribune, 21 June and 26 July 1930; AICC Papers, Correspondence, No.40, 1931.

Amritsar, Lahore, Lyallpur, Rohtak and Hissar were the other centres where the agitation had assumed a serious shape.³⁰

The inclusion of the demand for reduction of land revenue by half in Gandhiji's 11-point charter of demands sent to the Viceroy before commencement of the movement was also used very effectively in the propaganda to make the point that a national government will reduce the land revenue burden.³¹ The fall in prices because of the Depression, which began to be felt strongly around May, also became a part of the raison d'être for the no-revenue campaign.³² The non-payment of revenue was thus urged on both grounds, political and economic, as part of the general civil disobedience campaign to defy the authority of the government and because peasants just could not afford to pay.

The strong and prompt preventive action taken by the Government succeeded in most places in nipping the movement

30. This is evident from the reports of the arrests, prosecutions and other accounts of activities. See f.n.24 above, in this chapter.

31. Volunteers arrested for instigation to refuse land revenue in Tharu village in Amritsar district made this point rather strongly. The Tribune, 12 August 1930. Also see, for example, the speeches for which the following were prosecuted: Hakim Nur-ud-din in Lyallpur said under an Indian government people will pay only half the land revenue, Abnash Chandra Bali made a similar point in Lahore district. H.P. F.173/2/1930.

32. See, for example, report on a tour by a military officer in Lahore district in June 1930, H.P. F.265/1930. Also see H.P. F.173/V/1932. For the impact of the Depression, see Chapter III above.

for non-payment of taxes before it could really get off the ground, i.e., before it reached the stage of mass refusal to pay taxes. This is not surprising, for the experience of other similar movements, such as Bardoli, shows that the success of a movement of this type depends crucially on the sophistication of the organizational set up, and a prolonged period of ideological and organizational preparation. Non-payment of land revenue is in any case not an easy movement to generate since the ultimate penalty involves loss of land,³³ and in a situation where the organizers are removed before they have created the infrastructure for the sustenance of the movement, the chances of its success are very meagre. Nevertheless, there was enough chance of success to seriously worry the Government for some time at least.

In any case, it would be a mistake to use the non-payment of revenue campaign as the only index for judging the impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement on the peasants, for the success of the no-revenue movement can be conditional on a host of factors. What is far more significant is whether the Civil Disobedience Movement produced a general change in attitudes and of this there is sufficient indication. Wherever

33. Chhotu Ram, for example, sought to play up the fear of loss of land in order to persuade peasants to stay away from the no-tax movement. This propaganda he had been carrying on consistently since the Non-Cooperation days. See Prem Chowdhury, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram, pp.145 ff.

the impact of the movement was felt, there was a generalised anti-British sentiment which also spilled over in the form of an anti-loyalist sentiment. This is very well brought out in the report of an army officer who conducted a special tour in the rural areas of the districts of Jhang, Lyallpur, Sheikhpura, Gujranwala, Gurdaspur and Lahore between early May and mid-June, the peak period of the Civil Disobedience Movement:³⁴

A 'salam' is becoming comparatively rare along the main roads. Small collections of people in bus stops, at railway stations and in the outskirts of villages, on seeing isolated military officers, at once chorus 'INKALAB ZINDABAD' -- both old and young.... The fate of the old soldier and other loyalists in many villages is deplorable and elicits my deepest sympathy. They cannot worship except in khaddar clothing. Their fields are garnered with difficulty. Their labourers are cleared off by Congress agents. Their family cannot leave their houses without molestation, even for purposes of nature. They are not allowed to draw water at the village wells, nor will the Congress agents allow the village banias to supply them. They are insulted at every turn and generally life is a burden. Why they remain loyal is a mystery to me. In addition, water does not reach their fields.... In some of the villages, loyal men go armed, with escorts, and are in daily fear of limb or even life. This applies also to certain loyal lumbarbars whose loyalty is strained most unfairly. I do not wish to convey that the above conditions are by any means general. In many villages Congress has failed, but a straw shows the way the wind is blowing.

Another illustration of the new spirit abroad was the refusal of villagers to continue to perform begar and give free supplies to officials -- a refusal which led to serious

34. Notes on the situation in Lahore Brigade Area, dated 16 June 1930, H.P. F.250/I/1930.

clashes in a number of cases. In fact, there were some villages which became famous in this period for the resistance they offered to the authorities, and it would be useful to look at them a little closely in order to discern the actual workings of the movement at the micro-level.

One such heroic village was Jhaman, in the district of Lahore. It was a village with a mixed Hindu, Muslim and Sikh population in which the Congress had been active for the last eight or nine years, carrying on its propaganda for Khadi, liquor boycott, foreign cloth boycott, etc. Occasionally, meetings would also be held in the village. Since April 1930, activities were intensified once it became known that the Government was going to appoint a punitive police post to keep a watch on the village. Regular daily meetings were held to which residents of neighbouring villages also flocked.³⁵

The special police that was despatched to the village faced a total social boycott. The situation came to a head on 18 June when an additional police force was also refused eatables by shopkeepers. Angered by the defiance, the police brutally beat up the villagers, including women, who remained non-violent. More than one hundred were injured. The next day, on 19 June, troops with machineguns were sent to the

35. Report of the Enquiry Committee appointed by the PPCC, The Tribune, 6 August 1930.

village and aeroplanes hovered overhead. The village was completely blockaded and 50 arrests were made. Neighbours wanting to show solidarity were refused permission to go into the village. Goods were then forcibly seized from shopkeepers, houses taken over for stationing the police, and arrested people tortured by tying them to charpoys and making them stand in the hot June sun.³⁶

Despite all this repression, a month later the villagers were still refusing to let the policemen grind their grain at the flour-mill. Another clash soon ensued. A jatha that had come from a neighbouring village to attend a meeting in the village was obstructed and then the police went on to brutally attack the meeting itself. This clash, as had the last one, became the occasion for enquiries by the Congress, publicisation of the enquiry reports, holding of protest meetings in the towns and public condemnation of police terror.³⁷ What is significant is that Jhaman had not even raised the issue

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36. The Tribune, 21 June 1930; Sardar Mangal Singh's report to the Congress War Council after personal enquiry in the village, The Tribune, 22 June 1930; Report of Lala Jagan Nath, Secretary, Congress War Council, Punjab, The Tribune, 24 June 1930; FR(2) June 1930, H.P. 18/VII/1930; Express Letter from Government, Punjab, to Home Department, Government of India, dated 19 June 1930, H.P. F.250/I/1930.
37. Report of Enquiry Committee appointed by PPCC, The Tribune, 6 August 1930; Editorials in The Tribune, 24 June and 6 August 1930; The Tribune, 12 August 1930; FR(2) July 1930, H.P. F.18/VIII/1930.

of non-payment of taxes, or indeed offered any other form of civil disobedience, and yet its participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement was second to none.

A village in Amritsar district, Tharu, presented another interesting example of resistance which still did not involve non-payment of land revenue though the resistance was an outcome of nationalist propaganda that included exhortation to refuse to pay revenue. The story began on 10 June when jathas of Congress volunteers started from Tarn Taran, a nearby town, for carrying on propaganda in the villages, as was common at the time. They reached Tharu after holding a meeting at village Mirdi en route. All of them were arrested. After this, the Congress War Council continued daily to send jathas of volunteers to Tharu, and every day they would be arrested on reaching the village. This continued till 22 June and obviously resulted in whipping up considerable enthusiasm in the area. Non-payment of taxes was a prominent part of the propaganda and the point about reduction of land revenue by half in Gandhiji's 11 points seems to have been brought home rather strongly.³⁸

However, the arrests seemed to be having no effect in dampening the flow of volunteers or in curbing popular enthusiasm -- an eye-witness relates how little boys would run after the jathas, which consisted of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims,

38. Report of an Enquiry Committee appointed by the Amritsar Bar Association to look into police excesses in Tharu and Mirai, Tarn Taran Tahsil, Amritsar District, The Tribune, 12 August 1930.

shouting 'Inqilab Zindabad' and 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai'.³⁹ The Government now changed its policy, first started arresting volunteers before they reached the village and then stopped arresting them at all but blockaded the village and unleashed terror. Witnesses maintained that shops were broken open, sick men, women and children were beaten up brutally - all because they had looked after the satyagrahi jathas coming to the village and refused to supply the police on credit and demanded cash, and despite having paid up the land revenue. Other reports also indicated that police anger was because they were used to getting everything free but satyagrahis had persuaded villagers to refuse to give anything free.⁴⁰

The village of Tharu was again, like Jhaman, symbolic of the spirit of civil disobedience despite no real refusal of revenue by peasants. As the course of events demonstrates, the Congress had just initiated the campaign by the sending of batches of volunteers preaching non-payment of land revenue,

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39. The eye-witness account is by Sohan Singh Narangabadi, a veteran nationalist (and left) leader of Amritsar district, who was studying in Tarn Taran at that time and used to watch the daily jathas going to Tharu. Interview.
40. The Tribune, 21 and 27 June, 2, 4 and 5 July, 12 August 1930; Speech of Amar Singh Chabhal, Director, Amritsar War Council, at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar on 25 June 1930, H.P. F.173/V/1930; FR(1) July 1930, H.P. F.18/VIII/1930.

and the actual implementation could only be once the message had taken root, the resistance built up and the organisational structure at the village level geared up to handle the refusal of land revenue. But before that could come to pass, hard-hitting repression, involving both removal of the cadre who could perform the task of mobilisation and organisation and terrorising of the peasants who had to implement the programme, was launched.

Jhaman and Tharu were not exceptions -- this was the policy adopted in general once the movement appeared to be reaching dangerous proportions during May and June 1930. Special powers were quickly secured through ordinances,⁴¹ district officers given a free hand,⁴² the police and even the army used liberally to threaten and frighten.⁴³ In fact, in certain districts like Hissar and Rohtak, extensive arrests and prose-

41. See, for example, H.P. F.503/II/1930; FR(2) May 1930, H.P. F.18/VI/1930.

42. See FR(2) April 1930, FR(2) May 1930, H.P. F.18/V/1930 and 18/VII/1930.

43. Clashes with police at the time of arrests were frequent. Additional police posts were appointed in a number of villages in Amritsar, Jullundur, Lahore and Rohtak districts. Reports of police excesses of the type unleashed in Tharu and Jhaman came from other villages also such as Jagdev Kalan in Amritsar, and the use of military force was contemplated against other villages, such as Nowshera Punnuan in Amritsar district. In the case of many "unsatisfactory" villages, army officers on tour took armoured cars and infantry in lorries to frighten them. Aeroplanes were used for reconnaissance and for breaking up several Congress meetings. FR(2) April 1930, FR(2) May

cutions had been launched in April itself, and in others such as Amritsar public servants suspected of disloyalty were dismissed to serve as examples to others.⁴⁴ But large scale repression was launched in early June and 2,381 arrests had already been affected between 1 June and 6 July.⁴⁵ Sentences ranging between one to two years of rigorous imprisonment were freely given.⁴⁶ In early June, Congress organisations active in

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1930, FR(2) June 1930, FR(1) and (2) July 1930, H.P. F.18/V/1930, 18/VI/1930, 18/VII/1930, and 18/VIII/1930; Report by Brigadier N.C. Bannatyne, Commanding Lahore Brigade Area, of tour in the villages of Jhang, Lyallpur, Sheikhpura, Gujranwala, Gurdaspur, and Lahore, dated 16 June 1930, H.P. F.250/I/1930; The Tribune, 17 August 1930 and 14 May 1931; Prem Choudhry, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram, p.149ff; Ujagar Singh Bilga, Interview.

44. FR(2) February 1930, FR(1) and (2) April 1930, H.P. F.18/III/1930 and 18/IV/1930. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, the veteran leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), recounts how he was asked to apologize and on refusing made to leave his school in the village because he had helped his father's associates of the Kirti Kisan Party, Baba Karam Singh Chhina and some others, to organize a small meeting in his village in 1930. He was at the time only 12 years old. Interview. In Rohtak, lambardars who joined the Congress were dismissed. Prem Chowdhry, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram, p.150.
45. The Tribune, 10 July 1930; FR(1) and (2) June 1930, FR(1) and (2) July 1930, H.P. F.18/VII/1930, and 18/VIII/1930.
46. See, for example, H.P. F.173/II/1930, 173/III/1930, 173/IV/1930, 173/V/1930. In Rohtak, a youngman of 22 years was given a 3-year sentence for a speech in front of an audience of 200-250 people. See Statement of Prosecution of Ram Saran Das Mahajan, Rohtak, H.P. F.173/I/1930 and 173/I/1930.

directing the struggle such as the Punjab Provincial War Council, Amritsar District War Council, Punjab Provincial Satyagraha Committee as well as the Provincial Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha and its branches were declared unlawful associations.⁴⁷

Along with repression, a vigorous counterpropaganda campaign had also been launched. This propaganda took two forms, 'official' and 'non-official'. 'Official' propaganda was done by using the official machinery in an obvious way. Articles would be sent to newspapers by the Director of the Information Bureau, which would describe the beneficent activities of various departments, and so on. Government officials would talk to people and counter the Congress propaganda on various counts.⁴⁸ Army officers were sent to different areas to tour and meet ex-soldiers and others and counter any signs of disloyalty by listening to grievances, giving assurances, sorting out small problems, etc.⁴⁹

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47. See H.P. F.250/I/1930. Later, in September, the PPCC and all other Congress Committees were declared illegal. FR(1) and (2) September 1930, H.P. 18/X/1930. By mid-October, the number of arrests had reached 5,858. The district-wise breakdown was: Lahore, 1184; Amritsar 894; Gujranwala 460; Sheikhpura 342; Lyallpur 341; Ludhiana 320; Ferozepore 269; Jullundur 232; Rohtak 184; Montgomery 177; Sialkot 168; Jhelum 153; Simla 134; Hissar 126; Hoshiarpur 125; Multan 123; Ambala 118; Rawalpindi 116; rest were under 100. The Tribune, 17 October 1930.
48. Letter from D.J. Boyd, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to D.R. Prentice, Chief Secretary, Bengal, dated 17 May 1930, describing the nature of counter-propaganda in Punjab -- in the Non-Cooperation Movement, in the Akali movement and in the on-going Civil Disobedience Movement, H.P. F.307/1930.
49. See, for example, reports of such tours in H.P. F.250/I/1930, F.265/1930.

But far more important, and effective, was the so-called non-official counter-propaganda in which the role of the Government was to "advise and direct non-officials in their anti-Congress and pro-Government activities."⁵⁰ Non-official writers would be paid by the Government to write articles which would then be placed in various newspapers. District officers were sent guidelines about the way in which they should talk to sympathetic non-officials and guide their activities.⁵¹ For example, a letter was circulated on 14 January 1930 by the Chief Secretary, Punjab, to the Commissioners, Deputy Commissioners, and to the Inspector-General, Deputy Inspectors-General and Superintendents of Police in the Punjab which gave "certain lines of argument against the Congress programme" which may be of use "in suggesting lines of discussion of the Congress programme with non-officials."

Among the "lines of argument" suggested, the most significant was that the communistic and socialistic aspect of the Congress programme should be highlighted, obviously to frighten the "vested interests". To quote:⁵²

50. Letter from D.J. Boyd, Chief Secretary, Punjab to D.R. Prentice, Chief Secretary, Bengal, dated 17 May 1930, H.P. F.307/1930.

51. Ibid.

52. Circular letter dated 14 January 1930 from the Chief Secretary, Punjab, H.P. F.176/1930.

The Congress has not only declared itself the enemy of the Government as at present established, and of the British connection, but also of all stable interests in the country.... Under the guidance of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru the new Congress creed is derived from Moscow.... Pandit Jawaharlal in his address directly attacked the important interests on which the stability of the country depends. He attacked the landed proprietors, and it is clear that the independent India which the Congress has in view will not contain this class. The land is either to be nationalized or divided among the peasants.... Even if it were practicable to carry out this policy, the experience in Russia shows what disastrous effects it would have on production and the general economic condition of the country.... The Congress programme is a direct and real menace to all who own land, and unless they wish to see their interests trampled on, they must combine to oppose it. The wealth of banias and money-lenders will similarly be divided among the have-nots.... The threat to industrial interests is equally definite.... In independent India there will be no room for the successful lawyer, the enterprising merchant, the thrifty shopkeeper, the efficient public servant or the private professional man... Thus the Congress programme inevitably involves the economic and industrial ruin of the country.

Thus, official propaganda was carried out by 'non-official' individuals and organisations, on lines laid down by Government. District Soldiers' Boards, for example, apparently autonomous organisations, were very active in anti-Congress propaganda.⁵³ So was Chhotu Ram through his Zamindar League in his native Rohtak district. Despite his emphasis that "the League was in no sense a Government movement" and that only "in the interests of the zamindars, the folly of civil disobedience and the non-

53. H.P. F.265/1930.

payment of taxes was being disseminated throughout the District by means of lectures in villages," it was clear enough that his links with the administration were very close. In the summer of 1930, the army officer touring the area for counter-propaganda made it a point to interview him, and recorded that he was doing "very good work". He also pointed out that the reason for the Zamindar League and Chhotu Ram remaining 'non-official' was that in "the view of Ch. Chhotu Ram concurred in by the D.C.... their influence might weaken were they to come out as a Government organisation."⁵⁴ In fact, "non-official' loyalist activity during the Civil Disobedience Movement was quite visible, for example in the form of holding of meetings and obstructing Congress meetings and jathas.⁵⁵

The net effect of the official onslaught on the movement, helped by the counter-propaganda effort, the natural exhaustion of the movement and the depletion of funds, was that by the end

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54. Report by an Army Officer of a tour in the Rohtak and Gurgaon districts in the summer of 1930, H.P. F.265/1930. For Chhotu Ram's intimate links with the administration, and his support in the anti-Congress campaign, see Prem Choudhry, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram, pp.143-64. Sir Fazl-i-Husain, the most important leader of the Unionist Party, at this point in the Government, was also advising the Viceroy on how to carry on counter-propaganda against the Congress through non-official agencies. See his Note to the Viceroy, dated 7 March 1930, H.P. F.35/28/1931.
55. See, for example, FR(2) February 1930, FR(1) and (2) March 1930, FR(1) and (2) April 1930, FR(1) and (2) June 1930, FR(1) July 1930, FR(2) August 1930, H.P. F.18/III/1930, 18/IV/1930, 18/V/1930, 18/VII/1930, 18/VIII/1930, 18/IX/1930.

of August there was a marked decline in its tempo.⁵⁶ In September there was a brief flicker of the flame when a powerful movement appeared to develop in the hill district of Kangra in the form of a forest satyagraha or violation of forest laws, but this was quickly snuffed out by the arrests of the prominent agitators.⁵⁷ In October, there was a brief revival in Amritsar and Lahore on the news of the death sentence on Bhagat Singh;⁵⁸ in December the lapse of the Unlawful Instigation and Intimidation Ordinances led to another attempt at revival with meetings being held in the Karnal, Hoshiarpur, Ferozepore, and Amritsar districts but the response was weak;⁵⁹ in January 1931, the release of leaders led to another spurt⁶⁰ -- but there was no going back to the peak reached between May and July 1930.

In October 1930, however, a new development had occurred in the form of the setting up, by the extremist pro-Congress section of the Akalis led by Sardar Mangal Singh, of the Punjab Zamindar Sabha, an organisation that would concentrate specifically on peasant demands. Its immediate focus was to be on the

56. See FR(1) and (2) August 1930, FR(1) and (2) September 1930, H.P. F.18/IX/1930, 18/X/1930.

57. FR(1) and (2) September 1930, H.P. F.18/X/1930.

58. FR(1) October 1930, H.P. F.18/XI/1930.

59. FR(1) December 1930, H.P. F.18/XIII/1930.

60. FR(2) January 1931, H.P. F.18/1931. In village Bilga in Julundur, a 2000-strong demonstration was held against the additional police in the village and there was activity in the Karnal, Lyallpur, Ferozepore and Montgomery districts as well. Ibid.

building up of an agitation for securing a reduction in land revenue and water rates, and if these demands were not conceded, to go over to non-payment of dues. However, more moderate sections of the Akalis succeeded in getting the newly-formed organisation to commit itself, for the time-being at least, to legal and peaceful methods of struggle, thus ruling out any agitation involving non-payment of taxes.⁶¹ This new organisation was not yet visible in the form of any mass activity, but local level miscellaneous peasant organisations began to get vocal around November in demanding reductions in land revenue and water-rates in view of the fall in prices, and also reductions in railway freight rates to port towns for Punjab agricultural products to facilitate exports.⁶² The Zamindar Sabha of Lyallpur held a series of meetings in the villages, demanding that land revenue be collected in kind and not in cash. At some of these meetings, "which were probably inspired by the Akali Dal with the support of the Congress", speakers even advocated non-payment of land revenue. This worried the Government for, in its assessment, given the extremely low prices, which were the only topic of conversation in the villages those days, "any prospect of a reduction in the

61. FR(1) and (2) October 1930, FR(1) and (2) November 1930, H.P. F.18/XI/1930 and 18/XII/1930; Letter from Sir Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Sir Fazl-i-Husain, Member for Education, Health and Lands in the Viceroy's Executive Council, dated 16 April 1931, Fazl-i-Husain Papers, Mss. Eur. E352.

62. FR(1) November 1930, H.P. F.18/XII/1930.

taxes... must necessarily make a powerful appeal"; and it promptly ordered arrest of the activists.⁶³

III

A qualitative change came over the political atmosphere in the province (as in the rest of the country) once the national leaders were released in January and the process of negotiations between the Congress and the Government began. Loyalists were disheartened and nationalists jubilant; these feelings increased once the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed.⁶⁴ The feeling of victory

63. FR(2) November 1930, H.P. F.18/XIII/1930, FR(1) January 1931, H.P. F.18/1931.

64. Military officers touring the rural areas in February had already noted that the reports of the impending rapprochement between the Government and the Congress were worrying the soldiers and other loyalist elements. The Gandhi-Irwin talks made the loyalists unhappy, but "Congress bodies and agitators (were) very pleased and consider it a great victory for the Congress." Report of tours by Military Officers in the Amritsar and Lahore districts in February 1931, H.P. F.112/1931. Once the Gandhi-Irwin Pact came into force, the discomfiture of the officials and loyalists grew while the nationalists were exultant. The necessity for the Pact was exhausted: "weakness of agitation and a desire for peace were the dominating influence in Congress circles", and "all shades of opinion agree(d) that the Congress movement in the Punjab was exhausted." They also knew that this was true outside Punjab as well, as shown by the discussions at a secret meeting of prominent Congressmen held in Lahore on 31 January 1931, where Abdul Qadar Qasuri and Chaudhuri Afzal Haq gave their impressions, after visiting Congress strongholds like Meerut and Bombay, that "weakness and exhaustion were visible even in their strong points while other places have already laid arms and called halt." Their conclusion was that the best that could be done to "keep up appearances" was to maintain "Guerrilla War tactics... in quarters where it is possible, lest the weakness be exposed which might seriously affect

was expressed in the rousing welcomes given to released prisoners.⁶⁵ Under the Pact, repressive laws were also repealed and political organisations could again begin to function openly. Besides, since the Government had entered into an agreement with the Congress, repressive government action came within the scope of the discussions on 'violations' of the Pact that Gandhi was regularly holding with the Home Member,

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the peace negotiation." In this context, the welcome accorded to the Pact was natural enough. The Government noted that "the majority of the rank and file of Congress supporters and those who, though not active in agitation, sympathized with the movement have received the settlement with thankfulness." Supporters of Government were "disturbed by the evidence of the importance which is attached to securing the co-operation of the body with which they have consistently refused to co-operate and which many of them had fought with all their strength. Many district officers express the opinion that these considerations will deprive Government, if and when it finds itself again compelled to fight a hostile movement, of much of the active support it received throughout 1930." Reports of Tours by Military Officers in the Amritsar and Lahore districts in February 1931, H.P. F.112/1931; FR(2) February 1931 and FR(2) March 1931, H.P. F.18/I/1931 and 18/II/1931; Report by the D.S.P., City Kotwali, Lahore, dated 2 February 1931, H.P. F.33/II/1931; FR(1) March 1931, H.P. F.18/II/1931.

65. The atmosphere generated by the release of political prisoners was conveyed by the Governor in the following words: "The moment leaders began to be released, tremendous meetings and processions were organised and are daily still taking place to greet them.... The numbers attending meetings and processions have been very large in Lahore (and to some extent in Amritsar)." Another official report also noted that the release of prisoners has meant that "processions and meetings have been common in many of the large towns and speeches have been made that would not have been tolerated before the settlement, the speakers relying on their immunity from prosecution." Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency to the Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, H.P. F.33/II/1931; FR(1) March 1931, H.P. F.18/II/1931.

and this is itself acted as a restraint.⁶⁶ All told, a certain degree of freedom, a certain political space was now again available which was quickly utilised by all the different political trends, and not just the Congress, to assert themselves.⁶⁷

The Congress first set itself to revamp its organisation, which had been badly mauled by the repression, and to consolidate its hold in the areas where its activity had been most

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66. See, for example, H.P. F.18/II/1931 and K.W., F.33/II/1931, F.33/7/1931, F.33/9/1931, F.33/23/1931, F.33/50/1931 and K.W.
67. In fact, the organisation that took the greatest advantage of the freedom accorded by the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in Punjab was the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha. Meetings welcoming the political prisoners on their release were immediately made the occasion for condemning the Government for its policy of refusing to pardon Bhagat Singh. At many meetings, the Congress and Gandhi also came in for attack for agreeing to a settlement without securing concessions for Bhagat Singh and his comrades. The Kirti Kisan Party was another group that was critical of the Congress but made full use of the 'truce' period to extend its activities. FR(1) and (2) March 1931, FR(1) and (2) April 1931, H.P. F.18/II/1931, 18/III/1931; Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, and letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 15 April 1931, H.P. F.33/II/1931; Speech of Governor, Punjab, on 25 April 1931, in reply to address presented by a deputation of Shahpur zamindars, and letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, H.P. F.33/I/1931 and K.W.

intense.⁶⁸ Reports of jathas of volunteers visiting villages to form Congress Committees began to appear, and very soon rural conferences began to be organized, at which peasants were congratulated for their participation in the movement and told to prepare for the next round.⁶⁹ In some districts of south-eastern Punjab, such as Rohtak, Hissar and Karnal, an attempt was made from mid-April to set up a parallel government of sorts, with Congress Thanedars appointed for each Thana, and to hold public meetings in each large village every Sunday. This had the Government seriously worried for a while, but the move seems to have

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68. This was in accordance with the instructions issued by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress President, to the Punjab PCC on 10 March 1931, immediately after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact: "It is vitally necessary that you should take immediate steps to consolidate the position gained by the Congress during the last year and to strengthen it still further. The immediate action to be taken is to send out our workers, those who have been discharged from jails, and others, to the villages to explain exactly what has been done in Delhi, further to see that there is no harassment or oppression of any kind in the rural areas.... If we now establish firmly definite centres of work and activity in rural areas, we shall strengthen our organisation and prepare the people for any contingency that might arise. I need not tell you that the provisional settlement at Delhi means truce only and no final peace. That peace can only come when we have gained our objective in its entirety." Copy of Intercepted letter by Jawaharlal Nehru sent by the C.I.D., Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, with forwarding letter dated 19 March 1931, H.P. F.33/II/1931.
69. See, for examples, The Tribune, 3 April, 21 May, 28 May, 29 May, 5 June, 10 July, 19 December, 1931, 1 January, 6 January 1932; FR(2) March 1931, FR(2) and (2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, etc., H.P. F.18/II/1931, 18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931, H.P. F.33/I/1931 and K.W. and 33/II/1931.

fizzled out by June.⁷⁰ The Congress was also active in protesting against repressive action taken against its members during this period, as well as against forcible extraction of land revenue from peasants. By the end of the year, more attention began to be focused on the impending struggle that seemed about to break out.⁷¹

But apart from this general activity among the rural masses aimed at the consolidation of ground gained during the last round of struggle and preparation for the next one, the period of the 'truce' created by the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was remarkable for the upsurge witnessed in peasant activity involving a variety of political organisations, including the Congress. The fall in prices as a result of the World Economic Depression had really begun to hit the peasantry hard by now and the opportunity provided by the loosening of the repressive apparatus was quickly seized to voice the unanimous demand that the Government do all it could to mitigate the situation. In this process of large-scale grass roots mobilisation, there was, on the one hand, a mushrooming of peasant organisations at the local level and, on the other, a trend towards their radicalisation. It is to a discussion of these very significant developments in the peasant movement in Punjab that we now turn our attention.

70. See FR(2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, FR(1) June 1931, H.P., F.18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931, 18/V/1931.

71. See, for example, The Tribune, 27, 28 May, 5, 17 June, 10 July, 1, 16 September, 19 December, 1931, 1 January 1932.

Activity among peasants seems to have begun almost as soon as the lid was taken off, for in less than ten days after the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, the Governor of Punjab was already writing in an alarmist vein to the Viceroy:⁷²

Another menacing feature is the economic depression and the low prices of agricultural produce. Everyone is bidding for the favour of the poor cultivator and small peasant proprietor. The Kirti Kisan Party, since the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act was taken off, have come out in great fettle, and are bidding with the Sikh extremist "Zamindar Sabha" for the ear of the rural masses. Both are bitterly anti-Government. There is no doubt the peasants are in a bad way. Some of the land revenue of the last harvest has been paid in rupees dating from early "Victoria" and long out of circulation which shows the small men have had to dig up buried ancestral hoards of silver in order to pay at all.... Altogether, I don't like the look of things.

A month later, on 15 April, the Chief Secretary sent to the Government of India a list of speeches delivered since the beginning of March which included a number of those that discussed the issue of land revenue and encouraged its non-payment.⁷³ On 25 April the Governor made a public statement that "although, under the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, it is expressly laid down that the movement for the non-payment of land revenue and other local

72. Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, H.P. F.33/II/1931.

73. Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 15 April 1931, H.P. F.33/II/1931.

dues will be discontinued, instances have been reported to me from various districts that in the month of April, at meetings and during processions of jathas in various districts, the non-payment of land revenue has been directly advocated."⁷⁴ Two weeks later, on 9 May, the Chief Secretary sent to the Government of India a district-wise list of instances of incitement to refuse land revenue.⁷⁵ On 21 May the Government of Punjab announced remissions amounting to Rs.108½ lakhs in land revenue and water-rates, the biggest in all the years of the depression, and amounting to roughly one-third of the rabi demand for the year.⁷⁶ In less than three months of agitation, the Punjab peasants had secured one of the biggest concessions they had ever got. What was the nature and extent of the agitation and how had it snowballed so rapidly to produce such prompt results?

First, it was apparent that the condition of the peasants, especially the small-holders, was desperate and, this being the second year of the depression, all reserves had been exhausted.⁷⁷

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74. Speech of Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab, in reply to address presented by deputation of zamindars of Shahpur district, at Khushab, on 25 April 1931, H.P. F.33/I/1931 and K.W.
75. Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, H.P. F.33/I/1931 and K.W.
76. H.P. F.33/9/1931; The Tribune, 23 May 1931; FR(2) May 1931, H.P. F.18/IV/1931.
77. For the impact of the depression on agricultural incomes, see Chapter 3 above.

In the summer and winter of 1930, attempts at agitation had been muted with the aid of repression that was justified by Government in the general context of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The next instalment of land revenue payment for the rabi harvest -- which is far more important in Punjab than the kharif since this is the wheat harvest -- was becoming due, and the ability to pay had declined or even disappeared in many cases.⁷⁸ Simultaneously, there was a feeling of victory over the Government because of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, and the perception among the people -- "the ignorant, even the loyal ignorant", as the Governor referred to them -- that Gandhi "has done down Government and that the latter need not now be taken seriously."⁷⁹ In other words, the desperate economic situation in which subsistence itself was threatened provided the moral justification or legitimacy for protest and the political situation -- with the government being perceived as having been weakened -- the opportunity.

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78. The Fortnightly Report for the first half of April noted that though the revenue for the last harvest had been collected without undue difficulty, except in Multan district, where a good deal of water-rates demand was still outstanding, in the current Rabi harvest, "the collections will be difficult, even in the absence of subversive agitation." FR(1) April 1931, H.P. F.18/III/1931. Also see FR(2) April 1931, Ibid.
79. Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, H.P. F.33/II/1931.

The opportunity began to be seized in March itself, with the Congress demonstrating the greatest activity in the south-eastern districts of Rohtak, Karnal and Hissar, and the radical pro-Congress Akali Zamindar Sabha and the Kirti Kisan Party concentrating on the central districts of Amritsar, Lahore, Sheikhupura and Lyallpur. The Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha was naturally more involved at this time with trying first to prevent the execution of Bhagat Singh and then with protests over the execution, though its workers also participated in the movement to some extent.⁸⁰ The Zamindar League led by Chhotu Ram had been pushed by the desperation of the economic situation and the necessity to retain its support-base in competition with the nationalists into taking a much more strident line than it was accustomed to, and Chhotu Ram even agreed to hold a joint session of the Punjab Zamindar League with the Punjab Zamindar Sabha at Raewind in Lahore district on 4 April 1931. This was a development that had very important consequences, for it ended up in the "more or less constitutional Zamindar League...(being) swallowed up by the far more extreme Zamindar Sabha, though keeping its old name." Sardar Mangal Singh, a Congressmen and a radical Akali and the brain behind the Akali Zamindar Sabha, was elected the General Secretary of the League, and in addition,

80. See FR(2) March 1931, FR(1) and (2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, H.P. F.18/II/1931, 18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931; The Tribune, 12, 24 April, 1, 8, 16, 20, 21, 23 May 1931; H.P. F.33/I/1931 and K.W.; F.33/II/1931.

a nationalist-dominated Working Committee was elected. The changed character of the League was evident from the political resolutions passed, mourning the deaths of Motilal Nehru, Mohammad Ali, and Bhagat Singh, urging the boycott of liquor and foreign cloth and demanding the release of political prisoners.⁸¹ The Government was obviously displeased at the new incarnation of the Zamindar League. The Governor of Punjab wrote in a rather exasperated tone to Sir Fazl-i-Husain, now a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council:⁸²

I am not at all happy about the amalgamation between the Provincial Zamindara League and the Provincial Zamindara Sabha. The latter organisation was really started by Mangal Singh in order to get political support for himself by pretending to be very keen on the economic distress of the Sikh zamindars.... I warned Chhotu Ram that I thought the result of this amalgamation would be that his organisation would get dominated by Akali extremists.... This, I am afraid, has come to pass.

With the 'conversion' of the Zamindar League, all the important organisations working among the peasants were now functioning within a broad anti-imperialist ideological framework. Regardless of whether the mobilisation took place through the formal Congress organisation as in the south-east, or whether

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81. FR(1) April 1931, H.P. F.18/III/1931; The Tribune, 9 April 1931; Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, H.P. F.33/I/1931 and K.W.; Ujagar Singh Bilga, Interview.
82. From Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Fazl-i-Husain, Member, Viceroy's Executive Council, Department of Education, Health and Lands, dated 16 April 1931, Fazl-i-Husain Papers, Mss. Eur. E352.

the local organisation went by the name of the Zamindar League or Zamindar Sabha or Kisan Sabha, as in the central districts, the basic thrust of the ideology, the activity and the demands was very similar. The Kirti Kisan Party made a brief attempt to publicise the sectarian anti-Congress line of the Comintern, but hurriedly gave it up at seeing the lack of positive response and went back to functioning within the Congress and to promoting peasant mobilisation through the amorphous local level peasant organisations.⁸³ It appears that the prestige of the nationalists among the people, especially after the recent hard and victorious struggle, was much too great for either the loyalists like Chhotu Ram or the leftist critics to contend with, and this despite the obvious disappointment and even anger, especially among the youth, at Gandhiji's failure to secure a reprieve for Bhagat Singh.

83. Criticism of the Congress as a capitalist organization was voiced at the Kirti Kisan Party meeting in Amritsar on 9 April 1931 as well as in the rural areas of Jullundur in May 1931. See The Tribune, 12 April 1931; and FR(1) May 1931, H.P. F.18/IV/1931. By the second half of May, however, the fortnightly report noted that "in more recent meetings the tendency of speakers has been, while maintaining the communistic theme, to be somewhat more accommodating to other interests and, in particular, to claim that there is no fundamental difference between themselves and the Congress, but only a divergence of view as to present policy. The Commissioner, Jullundur Division, reports that the Ghadr and Kirti-Kisan parties have now joined forces to become office holders in Congress committees and to utilize the Congress organisation to spread Kirti-Kisan propaganda." H.P. F.18/IV/1931.

The tone of the agitation was set by the annual conference of the Zamindar League discussed above, which was attended by 10,000 people in Raewind in Lahore district. Urgent remissions in Government dues, the assessment of land revenue on an income-tax basis, and the abolition of chahi rates (extra charge on wells) was demanded. Sardar Mangal Singh told the audience that the recent Karachi session of the Congress had declared that the Swaraj Government would not collect revenue from those peasants who lived from hand to mouth, and added that the rule of the poor and the labourers and peasants would be established in the country. Other speakers urged the peasants to strengthen their jathabandi and go on hartal if the Government refused to accept their demands. The conference also resolved to set up a Punjab Zamindar Dal -- on the lines of the Akali Dal -- as an agency for rural propaganda since the passing of resolutions for years had had no effect on the Government.⁸⁴ A few days later, Sardar Mangal Singh issued a press statement in which he demanded, on behalf of the League, an immediate remission of 50 per cent in Government dues. He argued that crops had been bad for the last six years, and low prices had added to the misery; peasants were paying Government dues by selling their wives' ornaments and

84. This account of the proceedings of the Zamindar League is based on the following: FR(1) April 1931, H.P. F.18/III/1931; Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, H.P. 33/I/1931 and K.W.; The Tribune, 9 April 1931.

were looking to the Government for relief.⁸⁵

In Amritsar, one of the main centres of the agitation, the lead was taken by the District Zamindar Sabha, which also decided to change its name to Kisan Sabha, setting off a new trend which was subsequently picked up by other organisations. ('Zamindar' being a generic term denoting landowner and 'kisan' having the more specific meaning of cultivator, the use of the term 'kisan' made it possible to distinguish between rentier landlords and cultivating peasants, unlike the term 'zamindar' which in Punjab applied to both.) The demand for reduction of land revenue by half and of water-rates to the pre-1924 level was voiced. A reduction of railway freight-rates, lowering of the exchange rate, and assessment of land revenue on the same basis as income-tax was also demanded. A sub-committee was formed to carry on the agitation; it was also decided to go in deputation to meet the Deputy Commissioner of the district, the Revenue Member of the Punjab Government and the P.S. to the Governor. The Amritsar Kisan Sabha continued through May to reiterate its demands and also collected signatures on a memorial demanding immediate remissions by half. The Kirti Kisan Party was also active in the district holding conferences and meetings urging the organization of workers and peasants, demanding reduction in Government demand by two-thirds, abolition of chahi rates, withdrawal of punitive police posts from villages, and release of prisoners involved in the Meerut and Lahore

85. The Tribune, 1 May 1931.

Conspiracy cases. Some of its workers were even arrested at this stage itself.⁸⁶

Similarly, in Sheikhpura district, where a no-revenue campaign had been averted only in the nick of time in 1930 and where the Congress was again active, in mid-May 1931 the Zamindar League (which only a couple of weeks later was to change its name to Kisan Sabha, thus indicating the change in its political complexion) had set up an enquiry committee to collect data on the capacity of the peasants to pay up land revenue and other Government dues. Within a week, applications had been received from 80 villages, a considerable feat of organisation. On the basis of a preliminary reading of the data, the Zamindar League demanded reduction of two-thirds in the taxes. Their argument was that the total income from one acre of land was Rs.3, whereas the combined demand of land revenue and water-rates was Rs.11 and 8 annas per acre. The Government was also offered the option of taking one-tenth of the produce in lieu of cash payment.⁸⁷

In Jullundur and Hoshiarpur, the Kirti Kisan Sabha "in alliance with retired Sikh emigrants through whom it obtains some help from the Akali Dal" was reported to be

86. The Tribune, 24 April, 8, 10, 16, 21 May 1931.

87. The Tribune, 23 May 1931.

organising tours, holding meetings in villages and distributing "cleverly worded pamphlets of a revolutionary type." Speeches at Kirti Kisan meetings advised the "small agriculturists to agitate for the immediate reduction of land taxation and to secure the predominance of their class in the future administration." Kirti Kisan agitation was also beginning to obtain a foothold in Gurdaspur and Sheikhpura.⁸⁸ And, as stated above, in Rohtak, Karnal and Hissar, Congress workers were very active in rural propaganda advocating non-payment of taxes in view of the desperate economic straits in which this traditionally drought-prone region found itself with the added burden of low prices.⁸⁹ In addition to the activity of these organisations, there were also petitions and demands by moderate local zamindar associations as well as strong appeals in the Punjab Legislative Council for remissions.⁹⁰

Summing up the situation in the central districts towards the end of May, an official report concluded that "there are now several forces at work, the Congress trying to exert its influence by conducting enquiries into the conditions of the cultivator; the Zamindar Sabha, calling itself the Kisan Sabha and

88. FR(1) May 1931, H.P. F.18/IV/1931.

89. FR(1) and (2) April, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, H.P. F.18/III/1931 and 18/IV/1931.

90. The Tribune, 20 May 1931; FR(2) May 1931, H.P. 18/IV/1931; PLCD, Vol.XVIII, 2 March 1931, 24 March 1931, Vol.XIX, 11 May 1931.

only less extreme than the Kirti-Kisan Sabha in that it repudiates communism; the Zamindar League, also advocating extreme views and a number of constitutional and semi-loyalist bodies of agriculturists, holding meetings to pass resolutions about their hard lot."⁹¹

Thus, it was in this context that the Government declared the remissions in land revenue and water-rates on 21 May 1931 and hoped that "the action of Government has seriously undermined the bases of agitation on the economic theme."⁹² The remissions in land revenue were Rs.80 lakhs and in water-rates Rs.28½ lakhs, and applied to all types of land. They amounted to a reduction of 5 annas in a rupee (about 31 per cent) of land revenue, and 3 annas in a rupee (about 19 per cent) of water-rates. In the winter or kharif harvest of 1930, remissions of Rs.33½ lakhs had been given, thus bringing the total in the year 1930-31 to Rs.1 crore 41 lakhs. Some concessions were also given in nazrana, malikana, etc., which were paid by canal colonists. Further, district officials were asked to consider additional relief where necessary, which probably amounted to another five lakhs as indicated by the final figure of remissions of Rs.1 crore 46 lakhs.⁹³

91. FR(2) May 1931, H.P. F.18/IV/1931.

92. Ibid.

93. H.P. F.33/9/1931; The Tribune, 23 May 1931; FR(2) May 1931, H.P. F.18/IV/1931; The Tribune, 9 September 1932.

Contrary to the expectations of the Government, the remissions had little effect on the wave of peasant activity and organisation unleashed since March. Remissions were declared inadequate by all the organisations and the agitation for further reduction continued unabated. The period immediately after the announcement, in fact, saw a significant increase in activity which was then sustained at a somewhat lower pitch till the end of the year. The Punjab Zamindar League had declared the remissions inadequate the moment they were announced and reiterated the demand for 50 per cent remission instead of the 25 per cent the Government had granted.⁹⁴ The Punjab Zamindar Dal declared its intention to organize jathas which would tour the Sargodha and Gujarat districts for a start.⁹⁵ The Amritsar Kisan Sabha in its meeting at Bhakna demanded the complete remission of land revenue.⁹⁶ Other districts followed suit; a closer look at some of them would perhaps yield a better appreciation of the scale and style of activity.

The Zamindar League of Sheikhpura held its annual meeting on May 30 at which it changed its name to Kisan Sabha. The meeting was attended by representatives of 90 branches who

94. The Tribune, 24 May 1931.

95. The Tribune, 2 June 1931.

96. The Tribune, 29 May 1931.

elected Teja Singh Chuharkhana, a prominent nationalist of the district who had cut his teeth in the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, as the President of the Sabha. They also elected a working committee. The report of the Enquiry Committee appointed a fortnight earlier, based on 400 applications from different villages, was also released, and on its basis, the demand for two-thirds reduction in dues was made. It was pointed out that not less than 70 per cent of the people had paid their revenue assessment for the rabi and kharif of 1930-31 by pawning ornaments, cattle or land or by borrowing from moneylenders or banks. A deputation of the Sabha also met the Deputy Commissioner and presented him the 400 applications they had collected; the D.C. promised to do his best but urged them to pay up the present dues at any cost. The Sabha also decided to hold four big public meetings in different centres in the district within the next fortnight to enable peasants to put forward their demands. These meetings were held within the next three weeks and were largely attended with many poor peasants travelling long distances to attend. The meetings reiterated the demand for remissions and also listed other grievances such as harassment including arrests of poor kisans for payment of revenue. The Kisan Sabha also actively countered Government propaganda carried out by zaildars and lambardars. It is not surprising, therefore, that in just one tahsil in Sheikhpura Rs.27 lakhs of land revenue and water-rates were still outstanding at the end of August, and more in other tahsils.⁹⁷

97. The Tribune, 3, 4, 10, 18, 25 June, 1 September 1931.

Lyallpur district was also the centre of a sustained agitation.⁹⁸ A big conference was announced for 20 and 21 June at Lyallpur by the Zamindar League and preparations began in real earnest at the beginning of June itself. A very large number of meetings were held in villages all over the district almost every day at which the demand for more remissions and other grievances and demands were reiterated and peasants asked to come to the Lyallpur Conference in large numbers. An Enquiry Committee was set up which prepared a detailed report -- what the official report termed as "a kind of revised settlement report" -- within a fortnight. As a culmination of all the mobilisation, the Lyallpur All-Bar Zamindar Conference was held which represented Lyallpur as well as the neighbouring districts. Sardar Mangal Singh, General Secretary of the Punjab Zamindar League, was the President. The report of the Enquiry Committee was released, which demonstrated on the basis of detailed statements of production, income and expenses that, in the current rabi harvest of 1931, a peasant cultivating a square of land (about 27 acres) would incur a loss of Rs.153, 10 annas after paying the Government dues with the remissions.

Mangal Singh's Presidential Address to the Conference bears citing at length since it was the most comprehensive and clear statement of all the arguments and demands that were reiterated in one form or another at the peasant meetings and conferences held during this phase. Quoting extensively from

98. This para and the next one on the movement in Lyallpur are based on the following: The Tribune, 7, 13, 18, 23 June, 1931; FR(2) June 1931, H.P. F.18/V/1931.

the report of the Enquiry Committee, he stated that the zamindars of Punjab were passing through hard times due to continued failure of crops for a succession of years, followed by trade depression and fall in prices. A maund of wheat which used to fetch Rs.5, now fetched only Rs.1, 4 annas or at most Rs.1, 6 annas. Thus, the income had been reduced to about 25 per cent of what it was earlier, but expenditure had remained the same. As a result, agriculture did not pay its way. Even after the present slump was over, the prices of wheat and cotton were not expected to rise very much. The Government demand was abnormally heavy in the canal colonies and if it persisted till the next rabi crop, it would be impossible to pay even one-tenth of the demand. He then put forward the following immediate demands to deal with the situation caused by the Depression: (1) 50 per cent general remission in land revenue. (2) Reduction of exchange rate from 1 s. 6 d. to 1 s. 4 d. (3) Substantial reductions in railway freight rates on agricultural products to Karachi, Bombay, Calcutta. (4) Imposition of prohibitive duty on foreign wheat and cotton goods and on all other foreign articles that could be easily produced here with or without state aid. (5) Substantial retrenchment in the expenditure of the Government including reduction in salaries of all government servants above a certain limit. He also reiterated the other continuing demands such as assessment of land revenue on income tax basis and exemption of holdings below 5 acres which, he pointed out, constituted 58 per cent of ownership holdings in the province. Abiana, or water-

rate, should be reduced to the level necessary for covering the working costs and the interest on capital and should not be levied on a commercial basis. Other grievances related to insufficient water supply in canals, thikri pehra, chaukidara tax, kharaba rules, the auction of crown lands and the state price of land in the village sites. The conference also decided to send a deputation to meet the Governor, and the Government acceded to the request for a date.

The Lahore District Zamindar Sabha also protested against the inadequate relief at a series of well-attended meetings in the district. One of these, for example, held at Suraich on 7 June, lasted the whole day and attracted an audience of 1000 men and women from villages in the Chunian and Kasur tahsils. It was addressed by Gopal Singh Quami, a prominent left-wing nationalist who was Kisan Secretary of the PCC, a member of the AICC, an ex-president of the Shiromani Akali Dal and a member of SGPC. He urged the peasants to unite and agitate for reduction in land revenue, to refuse to obey orders and to willingly go to jail. His speech had a strong nationalist content and was replete with references to Ajit Singh, the hero of 1907, and how he was exterminated. He was soon arrested and prosecuted for this speech and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment.⁹⁹ Subsequent meetings of the Zamindar Sabha in Lahore district,

99. Statement of Prosecution of Gopal Singh Quami, H.P. F.27/9/1931.

while demanding concessions for peasants, also protested against his arrest and that of Sardar Bhola Singh, Commander, Punjab Zamindar Dal, and called these arrests an attack on the peasant movement.¹⁰⁰

Another district which was active and in which the foundations of the peasant movement were laid in this period was Ferozepore. Zamindar Sabha leaders and workers, among them Kirti Kisan activists, made a concerted attempt at setting up peasant organisations by holding a series of meetings in different parts of the district at which peasants were asked to come forward and form Zamindar Sabhas. Meetings were held at Rode, Kot Karur, Samalsar, Bhullar and Lopon. Sardar Mohinder Singh, President, Punjab Zamindar League, addressed the one at Samalsar and explained to the audience how the low prices of wheat were the consequence of imports from Australia, Argentina, etc., and not because of Gandhi's policy of restricting imports, as made out by the Government. He then urged the peasants to form jathas, not to pay revenue if they could not afford it, not to sell their daughters for paying the land revenue, to refuse to pay chaukidara tax since chowkidars work for the police and the government officials, to refuse to do thikri pehra (compulsory guard duty) since there was a government notification that they could be

100. The Tribune, 10, 15 July 1931.

asked to do thikri pehra only if there were dacoits. At the end of his speech, he asked those who wanted to join the jathabandi to come forward; 30 people responded.¹⁰¹

One of the significant developments of this phase was the growth in the influence of the Kirti Kisan Sabha, despite its members having to face a number of arrests and prosecutions.¹⁰² Their strategy was to work through the local level kisan and zamindar sabhas, as confirmed by the observation made in a official report that "Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas are spreading, especially in the Central districts, and the communist Kirti-Kisan agitators seem to have abandoned their openly

101. Statements of Prosecutions of Bhola Singh 'Sarlath' for a speech at a diwan on 9 June 1931 at Kot Karur, of Mohindar Singh, President, Punjab Zamindar League for a speech at a Zamindar Sabha meeting on 23 July 1931 at Samalsar, of Phuman Singh 'Ajit' of the Kirti Kisan Party for a speech at Lupon on 2 September 1931, of Santa Singh and Gurdayal Singh of Kirti Kisan Party for speeches at a conference in Bhullar on 19-21 December 1931, H.P. F.27/6/1931, 27/7/1931, 27/12/1932 and F.27/2/1932. Ram Nath, who was one of the cadres of the Kirti Kisan Party who helped to organise the peasant movement in Ferozepore district at this time, also describes how they held four big conferences in different parts of the district. For organising the conferences at the local level, they took the help of the heroes of the Akali movement, and for delivering the speeches they got the Ghadar movement heroes, or Ghadri Babas, as they were affectionately called in Punjab. He himself was arrested in September 1931, and sentenced to three and a half years' imprisonment. He also says that one of their major activities was to explain to the peasant that he was a kisan and not a zamindar. This confirms the trend we noticed earlier of the change in names from Zamindar to Kisan Sabhas. Interview.

102. One figure given was of 17 prosecutions of Kirti Kisan members between 25 April and 31 August 1931. H.P. F.33/23/31.

revolutionary and anti-capitalist preaching in favour of working through these Sabhas to cultivate a spirit of mass organisation...¹⁰ By November, the Punjab Kirti Kisan Sabha was so confident of its position that it issued a communique to all Kisan Sabhas (and also Mazdur Sabhas and Kirti Kisan Parties) in Punjab, Delhi and North-West Frontier Province to affiliate themselves with the Punjab Kirti Kisan Sabha and elect representatives for a conference to be held on 16 November. The Government was clearly worried at this development for, as it noted:¹⁰⁴

...until now the...Kirti Kisan Party...has attained a limited and to some extent localised footing. Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas have existed for nearly a year in many districts. They have agitated... for reduction of rural taxation. They have had no direct connection other than the overlapping of certain individuals with the Kirti-Kisan Sabha. Now we have an open programme for bringing all these Zamindar and Kisan Sabhas under the control and direction of the revolutionary body.... If the combination threatened is allowed to be completed, we shall be faced with an organisation which will have much more strength than the separate limbs have now.

There is no evidence, however, that the desired affiliation actually took place, perhaps because the move was premature or because in a short while the beginning of the second wave of

103. FR(1) June 1931, H.P. F.18/6/1931.

104. Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, dated 9 November 1931, H.P. F.90/1932. Also see Note by the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, H. Williamson, written at the end of 1932 but referring to this period, in H.P. F.31/88/1932.

Civil Disobedience brought another wave of repression which snuffed out all political activity for some time. What is relevant, however, is that the Kirti Kisan Party was able to achieve a significant enhancement of its influence among peasants in some of the central districts of Punjab and had been able to contribute to the process of their organisation and politicization.

This does not mean that it was the sole or even chief organisation working among the peasantry in this period. The Congress was very much in the picture, and was particularly active in the south-east where it was in fact almost the only anti-imperialist force of any consequence, the Kirti Kisans and the NJBS having a very weak presence. The Congress was also active in the central districts, particularly in Jullundur, Sheikhpura, Lahore and Lyallpur. It also gave full support to the demand for remissions at its provincial and regional level political conferences.¹⁰⁵ Further, it is important to remember that the left groups as well as the radical sections of the Akalis continued to function within the Congress throughout this period and therefore it is difficult to differentiate what might be called 'pure' Congress influence from left or radical Akali influence, the

105. The Tribune, 3 April, 21, 27, 28, 29 May, 5, 17, June, 10 July, 1, 16 September, 19 December 1931; 1 and 6 January 1932; H.P. F.33/I/31 and K.W. and 33/II/31; FR(2) March 1931, FR(I) and (2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, FR(1) and (2) June 1931, H.P. F.18/II/1931, 18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931, 18/V/1931.

border lines between them being extremely blurred. The impossibility of pigeon-holing individual political activists into any one slot -- Akali, Congress, Kirti-Kisan, NJBS -- demonstrates this aspect very clearly. Was it possible, for example, to characterise Gopal Singh Quami either as a Congressman, or as an Akali or as a left-winger? He was an ex-President of the Shiromani Akali Dal, a member of the SGPC, a member of AICC, Kisan Secretary of the PCC, and was one of the founders of the Kirti Kisan Party along with Sohan Singh Josh and others in April 1928. Sardar Mangal Singh, Amar Singh Chabbal, etc., were Akalis and Congressmen. Master Tara Singh, the prominent Akali leader, was one of the major leaders of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Principal Chhabil Das was a Congress leader as well as a member of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. This was true of ordinary activists as well. Balwant Singh, alias London Tor Singh, who was prosecuted for a speech at a conference at Bilga, a stronghold of the Congress, in August 1931, was described as an extremist Akali, active in Kirti Kisan Party and the Congress.¹⁰⁶ The examples could be multiplied. We have already seen above how the Kirti Kisan Communists, despite their theoretical line, took to working within the Congress. In large part, this was

106. For Gopal Singh Quami, see Statement of Prosecution for speech at Suraich village in Lahore district on 7 June 1931, H.P. F.27/9/1931. For Balwant Singh alias London Singh, see Statement of Prosecution for speeches at Bilga village in Jullundur district on 12 and 14 August, 1931, H.P. F.27/7/1931. The others are too well-known to require any reference.

a product of the open-endedness of the Congress as a mass anti-imperialist organisation as well as of the fact that any genuine mass movement, whether the national movement or a peasant movement, does not have strict organisational boundaries. In any case, as far as the peasant movement was concerned, there was a basic common ground shared between the Congress, the Kirti-Kisan Party, the NJBS and the radical sections of the Akalis, both in regards to the general anti-imperialist ideological discourse as well as the specific peasant demands taken up for agitation.

IV

The initiation of the second wave of Civil Disobedience on 1 January 1932 and the immediate crackdown by the Government brought to an end the phase of peasant mobilisation and activity facilitated by the Gandhi-Irwin 'truce'. The repression this time was even severer than in 1930, no time was given at all for the building up of the movement, and arrests, prosecutions and severe sentences and fines were freely resorted to. Besides, during the period of the truce as well, selective repression in the form of arrests and prosecutions of the cadre had continued, thus preventing the Congress from building up its organisation in a free manner. In Rohtak, for example, where Congress activity had been particularly prominent in the rural areas, the volunteer camp set up by the Congress Seva Dal was broken up in December itself. In Sheikhpura, another stronghold, Congress leaders and workers had been harassed by false charges of non-payment of revenue. In Karnal, many faced prosecution for

advocating non-payment of revenue.¹⁰⁷ Otherwise as well, a period of reprieve of less than an year, between March and December 1931, was probably not enough to rebuild the reserves necessary for the next round of struggle. The disastrous economic situation contributed its own mite to the depletion of reserves; it was not easy for activists to contemplate long periods in prison nor for villages to shell out huge amounts in fines and punitive police charges when there was not enough even for keeping the revenue collector at bay -- and the Government lost no time in making it clear that long sentences and heavy financial penalties were very much on the cards.¹⁰⁸

In this context, it is hardly surprising that attempts at resistance could not be sustained for long. Despite repression, there were attempts at protest in the districts of Rohtak, Karnal, Jullundur, Lahore, Amritsar and Lyallpur in January 1932. In early February, there was a slight increase in activity in the rural areas which was countered by firm measures including the declaration of Congress Committees as unlawful organisations.

107. For repression against the Congress during the period of the truce, see, for example, H.P. F.33/23/31, 27/6/1931, 27/7/31, 27/8/31, 27/9/1931, 27/1/1932, 27/2/1932, 27/12/1932, 33/1/31 and K.W. 33/II/31; The Tribune, 27, 28 May, 5 June, 16 September 1931, 1 January 1932; FR(1) May 1931, FR(1) and (2) June 1931, H.P. F.18/IV/1931, 18/V/1931; FR(1) January 1932, H.P. F.18/I/1932.

108. See, for example, FR(1) and 2) January 1932, H.P. F.18/I/1932; H.P. F.13/14/1932 and K.W., 27/III/1932, 27/II/1932.

After this, despite the Shiromani Akali Dal bowing to extremist pressure within its own ranks and according permission to members to join the Civil Disobedience in their individual capacity and the Ahrars also pledging support, there were only "spasmodic bursts of energy at a few centres" and "desultory attempts at picketing in a few districts." These, too, were met with firm action, and died down completely by the middle of March; the quiet lasted for two months.¹⁰⁹

In mid-May, the return from jail of some of the "more incorrigible Congressmen" and the prospect of the expiry of the repressive ordinances acted as a spur to the revival of political activity. A District Congress Conference held at Hoshiarpur on 29 May attracted an audience of 900 people and was followed by an attempt at mass picketing which resulted in 13 arrests. Preparations were set afoot for a political conference in Amritsar on 4 June. A considerable amount of publicity literature advertising this conference was discovered by the Government.¹¹⁰

109. FR(1) and (2) January, FR(1) and (2) February, FR(1) and (2) March, FR(1) and (2) April, FR(1) May 1932, H.P. F.18/1/1932, 18/4/1932, 18/5/1932, 18/7/1932, 18/8/1932.

110. FR(2) May 1932, H.P. F.19/8/1932.

In addition to the attempt at the revival of general political activity, there was a concerted move to initiate a campaign of non-payment of land revenue. The Government was first alerted to the possibility of a no-revenue campaign by its recovery towards the end of May of 900 copies of "an obnoxious Gurmukhi pamphlet" advertising the non-payment of land revenue. The pamphlet had apparently already been fairly widely distributed.¹¹¹ Open political activity to promote the campaign soon surfaced in the rural areas of Lahore district, followed by Lyallpur. In Lahore, the initiative was taken by the Congress and, to a lesser extent, the Zamindar Sabha. There were reports of posters and Congress bulletins appearing in the villages which exhorted peasants to refuse payment. Some meetings were also successfully held at which speakers, in one case three women, exhorted peasants to refuse to pay land revenue.¹¹² Given the poor harvests, the continuing low prices, the meagre remissions, and the consequent inability

111. Ibid. The pamphlet, titled 'Mamla na den da Morcha' (A movement for non-payment of revenue), proscribed by the Government on 20 May 1932, extracts from which are given in the files, shows the kind of propaganda being undertaken at the grass-roots level. The pamphlet gave the whole history of movements of non-payment of revenue such as in Bardoli, U.P., in 1907 in Punjab, and how they led to concessions. At the moment, it argued, there was no answer but non-payment of land revenue, because prices were low and were not going any higher. Kirtis and kisans worked the whole day to fill the pockets of the 'Goras' - the white men. Gandhi had started a non-violent war for the sake of the Kirtis, especially the peasants. They should join it and refuse to pay revenue, etc. H.P. F.149/1932.

112. FR(1) June 1932, FR(1) July 1932, H.P. F.18/9/1932 and 18/10/1932; The Tribune, 23 May and 4 July 1932.

of peasants, acknowledged by Government, to pay up their dues, only the knowledge of the severe repercussions prevented them from following these exhortations. In Lyallpur, for example, all the residents of village Sathiala, Chak No.50, decided to follow the resolution passed by the Punjab Zamindara Conference at Lyallpur on 7 July 1932 before an audience of 2000 that peasants should pay only 50 per cent of the revenue. They told the tehsildar to take 50 per cent and remit the rest; as a result, seven of them were promptly arrested.¹¹³

Given this 'firmness' on the part of the authorities in the face of the continued misery of the peasants, there is more than a touch of irony in the note of surprise discernible in the comment of the official report that "collections are, however, coming in satisfactorily in most districts..., this notwithstanding that in the Jhelum and Rawalpindi districts fifty candidates for enlistment appear for every vacancy that occurs in the Police, and many of these candidates are badly nourished, which is an unhappy indication that the effects of economic depression are being severely felt in rural areas."¹¹⁴

The effects of the economic depression were of course there and would remain but the political depression that had set in with the crushing of the Civil Disobedience Movement

113. FR(1) July 1932, H.P. F.18/10/1932; The Tribune, 9, 11, 21 July 1932.

114. FR(1) July 1932, H.P. F.18/10/1932.

increased the pall of gloom. Till almost the middle of 1933, there was hardly any protest visible of any kind and the only political activity in the province was around the Communal Award and associated developments, which on the whole left the peasantry untouched.¹¹⁵ The gains of the struggle during the period spanned by the two Civil Disobedience Movements would become visible only when the chains of repression would begin to loosen and a freer and fresher political wind would blow across the land. A considerable advance had been made at the organisational level, despite the fact that a unified provincial level organisation was still to come. Local level organisations had sprouted up in a number of districts, and some of these had achieved considerable mobilisation at the grass roots level, even though continuous repression made it difficult to attain any continuity in this aspect. A process of radicalisation had also been unleashed, and the influence of loyalist-constitutionalist organisations considerably checked. Most of those who worked among the peasants shared a common ground in a radical nationalist ideological framework, and a firm commitment to the organisation and mobilisation of the peasants with the objective of protecting and furthering their economic interests and ensuring their fuller participation in the ongoing political processes. The economic depression had hit the peasants hard — all sections of them -- and the political workers had rallied

115. See FRs for this period.

to the occasion and assisted in the focusing and organisation of the protest, which was in no small way responsible for whatever concessions were wrung out of an unsympathetic bureaucracy.

The Civil Disobedience Movement, with its emphasis on the defiance of the laws and authority of the state, had undoubtedly furthered and strengthened the process of the building up of self-confidence, dignity and capacity to resist oppression that had been initiated and advanced by earlier mass anti-imperialist movements. That poor villagers could refuse to give free supplies to the police and refuse to perform begar and prefer to get beaten up rather than submit was unthinkable and unheard of a few years earlier. The cool determination with which the Congress volunteers offered arrest and accepted beatings, the careless abandon with which the youth of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha challenged the state and even laid down their lives, the tireless consistency with which Ghadrute-Kirtis who had abandoned the charms of the West for the sake of their motherland propagated the message of mazdoor-kisan raj despite continuous interruption by detentions, internments and confiscations, could not but help to straighten the backs that had been kept bent for long with hard toil, servility and fear.

Slowly and hesitantly, like a convalescent putting a tentative foot forward, political workers began from around mid-1933 the familiar task of slowly piecing together the shattered bits of the organisational frame that had been ruthlessly dismantled by the heavy blows of repression. With Civil Disobedience having, for all practical purposes, come to an end,¹ the Government was now willing to turn a more lenient eye towards political organisation and activity -- till it again reached 'dangerous' levels. As in 1931, when the Gandhi-Irwin Truce had signalled a period of intense agrarian agitation, the undeclared truce following the collapse of the second phase of Civil Disobedience brought with it a fresh new breeze that fanned into flame the smouldering embers of peasant resistance. The failure of agricultural prices to recover from the depths to which they had been pushed by the World Economic Depression more than three years ago had ensued that discontent continued to lurk just beneath the surface, waiting only for a suitable context for expression.

I

Unsurprisingly, Lyallpur was the first district in which the signs of peasant activity appeared. As the premier canal

1. This is evident from all reports. However, for confirmation, one can refer to H.P. F.3/1/1933, which contains weekly telegraphic reports on the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1933.

colony district, its agricultural economy had been sucked the deepest into the vortex of commercialisation and therefore suffered the most from the effects of the Depression.² Simultaneously, the majority of its inhabitants were settlers from the central districts and had been deeply involved in the process of politicization that had been underway since at least the beginning of the century. Lyallpur colonists had contributed their mite to the 1907 agitation, the Akali movement, and to the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements. In 1931 it was one of the chief centres of the agitation for remission of Government dues. In July 1932, when most other areas were quiet, we noted that Lyallpur had continued to agitate for reduction in land revenue.³

And now again, in April 1933, we find an agitation building up, the timing being most likely dictated by the approaching land revenue demand for the rabi or wheat harvest. The main demand was for reduction in the land revenue, the ground offered being that the recent increase in prices came after the wheat had been sold and at a time when peasants were buying their food and seed. In addition, the rains had failed and canals had not supplied enough water. Sugarcane prices were low, there was a scarcity of fodder and the cotton crop had been attacked by boll-worms. In short, a good case existed for the Government

2. See Chapter 3 above.

3. See Chapter 9 above.

foregoing a part of its exactions.⁴

Apart from the securing of a remission in the current demand, Lyallpur peasants were also worried about the recently announced re-settlement of the district. Representative bodies of peasants were quick to express their views on how the settlement should be conducted; and their statements reveal interesting contemporary perceptions of the system of land revenue assessment. For example, Sardar Mangal Singh, the President of the Lyallpur Zamindara Conference, held in mid-April 1933, issued a press statement in which he demanded that in the new assessment the prices of only the last 5 years -- and not of 10 as was the usual practice -- be taken into account as prices were not likely in the future to reach the high levels they had reached earlier. Further, he wanted only harvest prices to be taken as the basis and not the prices of the whole year, as the peasants sold their produce at harvest time when the buying companies operated as a cartel to keep the prices low.⁵ Intervening in this public debate, the Financial Secretary of the Zamindar League advised that the number of years be reduced further, from 5 to 3, as

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4. See, for example, The Tribune, 5, 17 and 19 April for a letter to the Editor from the Secretary of the Zamindara League, Lyallpur and for reports of a Zamindar Conference in Samundari presided over by Sardar Mangal Singh, addressed by Sardar Sampuran Singh, MLC, and attended by over 5,000 Sikh and Muslim zamindars.
 5. The Tribune, 20 April 1933.

only these last three years were representative years. He added that only 10 per cent of net assets be taken as land revenue, and not 25 per cent as laid down in the Land Revenue Act, and the size of the holding, the wealth or indebtedness of the owner, and increased expenses on cattle, etc., should all be considered when fixing the pitch of demand.⁶ Yet others demanded that the principles of income-tax be applied to the re-settlement of the district.⁷ Indeed, the advice to the Government on how to conduct the new settlement was in essence a multi-pronged critique of the whole existing system of land revenue assessment and collection.

It is necessary at this stage to make a slight detour and point out the role that was played by a unique individual, Prof. Brij Narain, in the development and popularisation of the whole critique of the agrarian system in Punjab - a critique which was incorporated into the practical understanding of the movement. This is the right place to make the detour because Prof. Brij Narain played more than an intellectual role in the Lyallpur re-settlement agitation - he participated in the conferences, wrote about the movement in the

6. Ibid., 1 June 1933.

7. Ibid., 7 Oct.1933, contains the report of a big public meeting held in Chak No.62 G.B. in connection with the coming settlement. It was addressed by Giani Kartar Singh, Jathedar Moola Singh and Ch. Ahmad Hasan. Resolutions demanding payment of land revenue in kind and immediate remission in land revenue and water-rate by 66 per cent were also passed.

press, and identified himself totally with its objectives.⁸

Prof. Brij Narain was a teacher of Economics at the Sanatana Dharma College, Lahore, who wrote a number of books on Indian economic problems.⁹ But besides being a serious student in general of Indian economic affairs, he devoted specialised attention to the problems of Punjab agriculture. With the coming of the Depression, his interest in this field assumed a more political aspect and he wrote regularly in the daily press pointing out the terrible distress of the peasants -- but always based his conclusions on detailed statistics. Some of the most potent myths about Punjab agriculture were questioned by him. For example, that land revenue demand in Punjab was very light, that the system worked in favour of the peasant proprietor, that no tenant problem existed in the province, etc.¹⁰ He wrote in the

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8. See, for example, his articles on the Lyallpur agitation in The Tribune, 20 July, 2 Aug., 4 and 6 Oct. 1935. The Government also noted that "Professor Brij Narain took a prominent part". See FR(2) July 1935, H.P. F.18/7/1935.
9. Among his important publications are India Before and Since the Crisis, Volume I and II, The Indian Press Ltd., Allahabad, 1939; Indian Socialism, Atma Ram and Sons, Lahore, 1937; Eighty Years of Punjab Food Prices, 1841-1920, Board of Economic Inquiry, Punjab, Lahore.
10. See, for example, his article on 'Agricultural Income in the Punjab', in The Tribune, 28 Dec. 1932, in which he discusses at length Kartar Singh's Farm Accounts in the Punjab, 1930-31, to show how Depression hits the tenants hardest; his article in The Tribune, 7 June 1934, in which he uses the reports of the Co-operative Societies to show how large a proportion of loans in particular districts was being taken to pay the land revenue, especially in recent years, i.e., because of the Depression; his article in The Tribune, 16 March 1935, criticizing Chhotu Ram for refusing to recognize the distinction between landlords and peasants in Punjab. He cited figures to show that the landlords in Punjab cultivated a large proportion of the land, etc.

daily press, brought out pamphlets in the vernacular, spoke incessantly at public conferences and meetings, conducted innumerable 'Kisan Workers' Training Schools' where he always spoke on the economic problems facing the peasantry. In his political outlook, he was a nationalist and a socialist, though he did not identify exclusively with any specific Communist or Socialist group in Punjab, but was willing to assist all in their work among the peasants. And since we may not have occasion to focus exclusively on him again, let us take his story to its poignant conclusion: so closely had his fate become intertwined with that of the province for which he lived and worked that the tragedy that rent it into two struck him down as well. He was killed trying to reason with a communal mob in 1947 in Lahore.

However, to return to the story of Lyallpur and the debate around its re-settlement: beginning around the middle of 1933 when the process of re-assessment was announced and continuing through 1934 at a steady pace, it came to a head by the middle of 1935 when the settlement reports of different tahsils began to get ready and the essential features of the proposed settlement came to be known.¹¹ By then, the agitation was being

11. For information on the agitation from mid-1933 to mid-1935, see The Tribune, 5, 17, 19, 20 April, 1 June and 7 Oct. 1933, 4 March, 5 May, 5 Aug., and 31 Aug. 1934, 20 May, 1 June, 20 July, 29 July, 30 Aug., 6, 12, 23, and 30 Sept., 3, 4, 6 and 12 Oct. 1935, 19 Feb. 1936; FR(1) Dec. 1933, FR(1) March 1934, FR(2) June 1934, FR(1) and (2) July 1934, FR(2) July 1935, FR(1) Oct. 1935, H.P. F.18/14/1933; 18/3/1934, 18/6/1934, 18/7/1934, 18/7/1935 and 18/10/1935; PLCD, Vol.XXIV, 27 Feb. and 1 March 1934.

conducted by a formally-constituted Bandobast or Settlement Committee.¹² The Zamindar League of Lyallpur was also very active.¹³ The composition of the activists appears to have been fairly broad-based, as there are references to many socialists and 'kisan' workers as well as to more moderate members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly and to well-known Akali leaders. The mobilisation also appears to have cut across lines of religion, as there are sufficient indications to show that both Sikhs and Muslims -- there being very few Hindu peasants -- were participants in the protest.¹⁴

While the agitation to ensure that re-settlement did not mean any enhancement in the old rates and to secure the acceptance of some changes in the method of assessment had been continuing since 1933, it took a new turn in 1935 when it was learnt that the settlement was to be based on a new system of what was called the 'sliding scale'. The essential feature of this system was that land revenue was not fixed but fluctuated with the level

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12. The earliest references to the Lyallpur Bandobast or Settlement Committee are found in FR(1) March 1934, H.P. F.18/3/1934.
13. See The Tribune, 5 April, 1 June 1933, 4 March 1934, 30 Sept., 3 and 6 Oct. 1935; FR(2) July 1935, FR(1) Oct. 1935, H.P. F.18/7/1935, 18/10/1935.
14. See, for example, The Tribune, 17 and 19 April, 1 June, 7 Oct. 1933, 5 Aug. 1934, 20 May, 1 June, 20, 29 July, 30 Sept., 3, 4, 6 Oct. 1935.

of prices. However, as Prof. Brij Narain was quick to point out and the agitators never tried of repeating, the scale had been so designed, the maximum prices and maximum rates of revenue, from which the downward slide would occur, had been fixed in such a manner that even after the downward revision was made to take into account actual prices, the real revenue demand still worked out at many points to be higher than it would at current rates. Besides, every year the Government could, with great benevolence, announce 'remissions', while all it would in reality be doing was announcing the actual revenue demand for the year according to the sliding scale.¹⁵

Thus, from June to October 1935, the agitation in Lyallpur was conducted at a vigorous pace, with signature campaigns,¹⁶ statements to and articles in the press,¹⁷ a very large number of meetings in villages, followed by two big conferences, one in Toba Tek Singh and the other in Lyallpur.¹⁸ The Tribune

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15. For criticism of the new principles of assessment, see The Tribune, 20, 29 July, 12 and 23 Sept., 3, 4, 6 Oct. 1935, and 19 Feb. 1936.
16. A petition signed by several thousand peasants of Lyallpur district was sent to the Government. The Tribune, 20 July 1935.
17. See, for example, The Tribune, 20 July, 2 Aug., 12 and 23 Sept., 4, and 6 Oct. 1935.
18. In preparation for the Kisan conference held at Toba Tek Singh at the end of July, village meetings had started since the beginning of June. Brij Narain and Munshi Ahmad Din, a prominent Socialist leader and orator, participated in many of these. There are specific reports of a meeting in Toba Tek Singh on 7 July and at Kirari, a predominantly Muslim village in Lyallpur district, on

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carried extensive reports, including many written by Prof. Brij Narain himself, who in this case took on the role not only of intellectual adviser but propagandist and reporter as well. Pamphlets in Urdu written by him titled 'Mam'la-i-Zamin aur jadid tariqa-i-tashkhis' and 'Maliana aur Abiana', which explained the new method of land revenue assessment as well as the problems with the water rates, were freely distributed in the district.¹⁹ Interestingly, both the big conferences were chaired by Muslim members of the Legislative Assembly, an obvious attempt to attract Muslim peasants, and one that appears to have succeeded.²⁰

The mixed composition of the leadership of the agitation led to some tension as well, as on the occasion of the second big kisan conference at Lyallpur, when the President, Pir Fazal Hussain, refused to allow the socialist workers to speak, despite

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14 July, at which a demand was made that the Settlement Officer should come and explain the new principles of assessment personally at the Kisan Conference at Toba Tek Singh from July 26-28. See The Tribune, 1 June, 20, 29 July, and 2 Aug. 1935; FR(2) July 1935, H.P. F.18/7/1935. For the Lyallpur Kisan Conference, held from 27-29 Sept., mobilisation began in August itself. By end of August 15 meetings had been held in one tahsil alone -- Jaranwala -- and more were going on in Lyallpur tahsil. A report of 6 September mentioned 25 meetings already held. In between, statements to the Press were issued. The Conference itself attracted 6,000 peasants on the first day. See The Tribune, 30 Aug., 6, 12, 23, 30 Sept., 3, 4, 6 Oct. 1935; FR(1) Oct. 1935, H.P. F.18/10/1935.

19. The Tribune, 20 July, 2 Aug., 4 and 6 Oct. 1935.

20. The first one at Toba Tek Singh was presided over by Rana Ferozedin, and the second one at Lyallpur by Pir Fazal Hussain, The Tribune, 29 July, 30 Sept., and 3 Oct. 1935.

an earlier assurance from the organisers.²¹ It is possible that while the more moderate elements at the local level in the Zamindar League had found the socialists very useful in the mobilisation effort and had therefore assured them of representation at the Conference, the President, being an outsider, had merely expressed the general hostility of the pro-Unionist moderate elements towards the socialists. The Government, too, seemed to be following a policy of singling out the socialist elements among the Lyalpur political activists for arrests and prosecutions while leaving the moderates untouched.²²

This, of course, was in keeping with the general stance of the Punjab administration at this time towards left-wing activists. In September 1934 itself, all left-wing organisations, or organisations suspected of left-wing connections,

21. The Tribune, 30 Sept., 3 and 4 Oct. 1935, FR(1) Oct. 1935, H.P. F.18/10/1935.

22. See The Tribune, 6 and 12 Oct. 1935. Munshi Ahmad Din, the Socialist leader who had taken a prominent part in the agitation, was arrested before the Lyallpur Conference, and a resolution protesting his arrest was passed. The Tribune, 30 Sept. and 3 Oct. 1935. He was prosecuted for the speech he delivered at Lyallpur on 26 July in which he talked about the purse offered to General Dyer in appreciation of his services at Jallianwala Bagh. He was sentenced to two years and six months' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs.100/- or, in default of payment of fine, another 6 months' rigorous imprisonment. H.P. F.36/2/1936.

had been banned. But to place that event in its context, we will now have to leave Lyallpur and return to mid-1933 and pick up the threads of the rest of the story.

II

One of the first indications that left-wing groups were in the process of re-organisation and revival of political activity was in late June 1933 when Karam Singh Mann²³ called a meeting of left-wing workers at Bradlaugh Hall at Lahore and it was decided to meet again at Amritsar at Diwali and meanwhile to carry on rural propaganda in the name of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha.²⁴ Meanwhile, reports of the Kirti Kisan Party's activities among the peasants began to come in. In July, a Kirti Kisan League was formed in the Doaba with headquarters at Hoshiarpur and by September it was reported to have four branches.

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23. Karam Singh Mann was a London-trained barrister whose 'conversion' to Communism had occurred in England at the hands of the well-known Communist leader Saklatvala. He returned to India in 1932 when, according to his testimony, there was no unified Communist movement in India. Only separate groups such as Dange group, Ranadive group, Madras group, etc., existed. There was also a 'London' group, of which he was a part, which consisted of those who had become Communists in London, was spread over many provinces, and existed till 1935 or 1936, when P.C. Joshi finally unified the groups and formed the Party. Interview.
24. FR(1) July 1933, H.P. F.18/8/1933. According to the Government report, three separate meetings were held on the same day, one to form a labour party in the Punjab, and the other two under the aegis of the NJBS and the Mazdur Kisan Sabha. Ibid.

The Kirti Kisan Sabha also held a conference at the annual Chhappar Fair in the district on 3 and 4 September where "there was, as usual, some objectionable speaking, but on the whole the standard of vituperation against Government and capitalists was lower than has been the case on previous occasions at this annual fair." Similarly, in Amritsar, the Kirti Kisan Sabha held a meeting at the Amawas fair at Tarn Taran in August, and got an audience of over a thousand.²⁵ By October, the Government was already issuing orders restricting four leading members of the Ghadar/Kirti Kisan Parties to their villages under the Punjab Criminal Law (Amendment) Act.²⁶

25. FR(1) July 1933, FR(2) Aug. 1933, FR(1) Sept. 1933, H.P. F.18/8/1933, 18/9/1933, 18/10/1933; The Tribune, 7 Oct. 1933.

26. FR(2) Oct. 1933, H.P. F.18/12/1933. By notification of 28 Oct. 1933, Sections 2,3,4, and 5 of the Punjab Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1932 were brought into force in Jullundur "in order to legalise the issue of restraint orders to certain members of a committee of 11 disaffected Sikhs deputed to foment Kirti Kisan propaganda in the districts of Amritsar, Jullundur, etc." Confidential No.16712-S.B. from F.H. Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated Lahore, 11 Nov. 1933, H.P. F.11/12/1933. The reference in the notification cited above is most likely to the Moscow-trained Ghadar party activists who had just arrived in India. Bhagat Singh Bilga recounts how the Ghadar Party gave the second call for return to India in 1930-32. And seventy per cent of those who responded were, like himself, from Argentina. They came to India via Moscow, receiving political training there at the hands of Bolsheviks. Interview. They came in batches, and the reference in Oct. 1933 is obviously to one of the first of these new batches who were returning to India. In fact, the Director of the Intelligence Bureau wrote a note in Nov. 1933 in which he said that if it was not for this batch of "Soviet agents" that had just arrived last month, he would be in favour of releasing

In November 1933, two prominent Communist leaders of the province, Sohan Singh Josh and Abdul Majid, who had been serving their terms in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, were released.²⁷

Josh, who had earlier been a leading organiser of the Communist movement in Punjab and active in the NJBS and the Kirti paper and Kirti group,²⁸ had now emerged as a protagonist of the Communist Party of India (CPI). On his release, he set about organising the left forces of the province behind the CPI, but since this could not be done openly in the name of the CPI since it was banned, he founded the Anti-Imperialist League, which became simply another name for the CPI group of Communists. This process he completed by April 1934 when at a meeting in Amritsar the office-bearers of the Anti-Imperialist League were

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the 6 State prisoners -- Ghulam Mohammed, Fazl Ilahi, Abdul Waris, Harjap Singh, Ehsan Elahi, Karam Singh -- arrested in 1930 on "the Bolshevick-cum-Communist-cum-tinge of terrorist ticket", because there was no danger now as in 1930. But he did not want them to establish contacts with these Soviet agents, therefore he was in favour of postponing their release. See Note by D.I.B., H.W. Williamson, dated 9 Sept. 1933, H.P. F.44/92/1933. Incidentally, Fazl Ilahi and Abdul Waris were released on 20 March 1934 since the leader, Harjap Singh, had weakened and given a statement. Initially, only those two were released in order to watch the effect of their release, and then decide on the release of the others. H.P. F.44/70/1933.

27. The Meerut Conspiracy Case lasted from 1929 to 1933. In August of 1933, the Allahabad High Court delivered its judgement, giving S.S. Josh and Majid one year's rigorous imprisonment each, but as they had already completed the required period, they were set free in November 1933. Communists Challenge Imperialism from the Dock: The Meerut Conspiracy Case 1929-1933, with an Introduction by Muzaffar Ahmad, Calcutta, 1967, p.xiv.

28. See Chapter VIII above.

elected.²⁹ He then tried to bring together various individuals and groups and organisations including kisan organisations within the ambit of the Anti-Imperialist League.³⁰

Simultaneously, the NJBS and the Kirti Kisan Party, the other two major left groups, were trying to sort out their differences and form a combination and also to bring other existing groups into their sphere of influence, and to revive left-wing activity in different parts of the province. In the summer of 1934, in the months of June and July, they combined to send a deputation to tour the province.³¹ Their object, in the words of a Government document, was to study "the economic and political conditions of each district, to acquaint themselves with local grievances, should these exist, and also to unite the scattered forces of district organisations subordinate to the Sabha and the Kirti Kisan Party." Not to be left behind, "the Anti-Imperialist League, which also hoped eventually to secure the control of all Communist activity in the province,

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29. See FR(1) Dec. 1933, FR(1) Jan. 1934, FR(2) April 1934, H.P. F.18/14/1933, 18/1/1934, 18/4/1934. Harkishen Singh Surjeet described how Sohan Singh Josh called a meeting of 18-20 people in a corner of the Jallianwala Bagh in 1934 (the reference is probably to the meeting on 15 April 1934) and formed the Communist Party. Obviously, though for public consumption the organisation was named the Anti-Imperialist League, for the members it was the Communist Party. Interview.
30. FR(1) Jan. 1934, FR(1) July 1934, FR(1) Aug. 1934, H.P. F.18/1/1934, 18/7/1934, 18/8/1934. Also see letter from the Government of Punjab to the Under Secretary of State for India, London, No.12967-34-9(3)-S.B. dated Simla E, 17 Sept. 1934, H.P. F.7/20/1934 and K.W.
31. See FR(1) July 1933, FR(2) Aug. 1933, FR(1) Dec. 1933, FR(1) Jan. 1934, FR(1) Feb. 1934, FR(2) March 1934, FR(1) contd...

despatched a similar deputation in order to consolidate its own position in various important centres."³² The latter, however, ran out of funds and had to abandon its plans half-way.³³ The former completed its tour, and though it was not too successful in strengthening its organization, it did a careful job of studying the situation and of making suggestions for revival of activity. It is another matter that the Government thought that the 'ambitious' programme outlined in the report would be "used to the best effect to extract money from the Third International"³⁴

Along with the process of expansion and revamping of the organisational set-up, the left groups had also, since the beginning of the year, further stepped up the activity among the peasantry. Their activity, in the forms of meetings and conferences, was particularly visible in the districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur, and Hoshiarpur, and to a lesser extent in Lahore, Ludhiana and Sheikhpura. Apart from Lyallpur, which we have discussed separately above, it was the district of Amritsar that

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and (2) April 1934, FR(1) and (2) June 1934, FR(1) July 1934, H.P. F.18/8/1933, 18/9/1933, 18/14/1933, 18/1/1934, 18/2/1934, 18/3/1934, 18/4/1934, 18/6/1934, 18/7/1934.

Also H.P. F.7/20/1934 and K.W.

32. Letter from the Government of Punjab to the Under Secretary of State for India, London, No.12967-34-9(3)-S.B. dated Simla E., 17 Sept. 1934, H.P. F.7/20/1934 and K.W.
33. FR(1) July 1934, H.P. F.18/7/1934.
34. FR(2) July 1934, H.P. F.18/7/1934.

became the centre of a concerted campaign during this period.³⁵ The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha, which was run by the Punjab Kirti Kisan Sabha, had already conducted two propaganda tours through the villages, holding 14 meetings in 14 different villages on 14 successive days, and had published the programme of the third tour, when it was banned on 10 September 1934.³⁶ At these meetings, its activists "sought to exploit the present depression among the peasants by cleverly combining the expression of legitimate grievances with the propagation of Communist doctrines."³⁷ Kisan Sabha workers also spoke at gatherings

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35. For political activity among peasants in Amritsar, see The Tribune, 7 Oct. and 2 Nov. 1933, 5 and 20 Feb., 11 March, 9 April, 25 July and 17 Aug. 1934; and FR(2) Aug. 1933, FR(2) Oct. 1933, FR(2) May 1934, FR(1) and (2) June 1934, FR(1) Aug. 1934, H.P. F.18/9/1933 and 18/12/1933, 18/5/1934, 18/6/1934 and 18/8/1934; and H.P. F.7/20/1934 and K.W.
36. Letter from the Government of Punjab to the Under Secretary of State for India, London, No.12467-34-9(3)-S.B. dated Simla E., 17 Sept. 1934, H.P. F.7/20/1934 and K.W. In this letter, the Punjab Government, informing the Home Government of the reasons for declaring unlawful the various Communist bodies, particularly singled out the Amritsar Kirti Kisan Sabha as being "the most active". It also informed the Home Government that "so dangerous were these activities that Government was compelled to restrict the movements of many of the workers by action under the Punjab Criminal Law (Amendment) Act." Ibid. For repression against Amritsar activists, see FR(2) June 1934, H.P. F.18/6/1934.
37. Ibid.

organised by other parties and groups, especially the Akalis who were quite active among peasants at this time.³⁸ The Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur districts were the venues of important kisan conferences in this period, to which important provincial leaders were invited. Mobilisation also occurred through smaller village level meetings. Attempts at mobilisation extended to Ludhiana.³⁹

In Lahore, as in Lyallpur, left-wing activists were not in a dominating position among the peasants, the leadership being more mixed in its ideological composition. In February

38. See, for example, The Tribune, 7 Oct. 1933, 20 Feb., 11 March and 9 April 1934.

39. In Gurdaspur, for example, in March 1934, the District Kisan Sabha held a meeting at Dera Baba Nanak, while Kirti Kisan Workers voiced the grievances of peasants at many Akali meetings. In July, a Kisan Conference was held at Mouza Khushipur, and a kisan worker was restrained at the same time. Another conference was held at Shahpur in the same month, at which Karam Singh Mann and other leaders were present. At the end of August, a District Kisan Conference was held at Dhariwal at which Communists dominated. See The Tribune, 9 and 11 July and 11 Aug. 1934, and FR(1) March 1934, FR(2) May 1934, FR(1) July 1934, FR(2) Aug. 1934, H.P. F.18/3/1934, 18/5/1934, 18/7/1934, 18/8/1934.

Similarly, in Hoshiarpur, apart from the activity already described above on pp. of this chapter, a District Mazdur Kisan Conference was held at Tanda Umar on 1 June 1934 at which the proceedings were described as very much like those of the Amritsar Kisan Sabha's, i.e., Communist in nature, and more kisan conferences on Communistic lines were reported in July 1934. FR(1) June 1934, FR(1) July 1934, H.P. F.18/6/1934 and 18/7/1934. In Ludhiana, the Kirti Kisan Party held a district conference at village Sahnewal in May 1934 but in September 1934 had to abandon its planned meetings because of local hostility. See The Tribune, 18 Feb. 1934, and FR(1) Sept. 1934, H.P. F.18/9/1934.

and March, two big conferences were held, the first one being dominated by Master Tara Singh and the second one drawing together people as far apart as Ch. Chhotu Ram, Gopal Singh Quami (a left-winger), and Sardar Pratap Singh (a nationalist Akali).⁴⁰ In Sheikhpura, the Zamindar League, the Congress as well as left-wing activists were busy mobilising the peasants.⁴¹

The one common demand in all the districts, irrespective of the political affiliation of the groups that were in the leadership, was for reduction in the Government's appropriation of surplus via land revenue and water-rates. Almost everyone wanted at least a 50 per cent reduction immediately, as the effects of the depression had far from worn off. In addition, as in Amritsar, there was an attempt to ensure that future settlements of land revenue would be lenient and assessment

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40. For these and other meetings in Lahore district in this period, see FR(1) Dec. 1933, FR(1) Feb. 1934, FR(1) July 1934, H.P. F.18/14/1933, 18/2/1934 and 18/7/1934, and The Tribune, 24 March 1934. The first of the 2 conferences mentioned in the text above was held at Kot Radha Kishen, from 6-9 Feb. 1934, and the second at Luliani in the third week of March for 3 days.
41. See FR(1) Nov. 1933, FR(1) March 1934, FR(2) June 1934, H.P. F.18/13/1933, 18/3/1934, 18/6/1934. In Sept. 1933, Government had extended section 7 of Punjab Criminal Law Amendment Act to Sheikhpura because of revival of picketing by the Congress. Confidential No.16712-SHK-S.B., from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to the Home Secretary, Government of India, dated Simla E., 11 Sept. 1933, H.P. F.11/12/1933.

made on the same basis as income-tax. The demand for abolition of all kinds of extra cesses, which were collected as additional charges on the land revenue, such as malba, chaukidara, pancho-tra, and chahi rates, was also gathering force. In addition, at gatherings organized by the left-wing groups, demands for release of political prisoners undergoing imprisonment in the Ghadar Conspiracy Cases of 1914-15 as well as of those detained without trial as state prisoners for a long time were voiced.⁴²

Thus, "rural agitation on Communist lines," as the Government called it, was beginning to establish itself in Central Punjab by the middle of 1934.⁴³ The process of organisational consolidation of the left-wing groups was also proceeding apace. Their intention of bringing under their guidance and control the district level organisations working among the peasants and to extend them to other areas was also clear.⁴⁴

42. This para is based on the reports of all the activity mentioned above and the references have already been given.

43. FR(1) July 1934, H.P. 18/7/1934. This report also referred to "the many Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas which have recently sprung up in the Central Punjab."

44. For example, the Anti-Imperialist League had decided at a meeting in Amritsar on 12 July 1934 to form a Kisan League "with a view to securing control over the many Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas which have recently sprung up in the Central Punjab." Ibid. The Kirtis were already active on the peasant front for the last many years and most of the Kisan Sabhas were under their influence.

In other words, it seemed that a united provincial-level organisation under left control might emerge in the near future. To nip this possibility in the bud, as well as in accordance with the policy of the Government of India enunciated since July of declaring unlawful all Communist organisations in the country, the Punjab Government issued a notification on 10 September 1934 declaring unlawful the following five associations:

- (1) The Anti-Imperialist League, Punjab, its Committees, Sub-Committees and Branches.
- (2) The Punjab Provincial Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha, Lahore, its Committees, Sub-Committees and Branches.
- (3) The Punjab Kirti-Kisan Party, Amritsar, its Committees, Sub-Committees and Branches.
- (4) The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha.
- (5) The Punjab Kisan League.

The notification was followed by searches in the principal offices of each body, as well as of the houses and shops of its prominent members in different cities at which papers and literature were seized. No arrests were effected, and the organisations notified immediately dissolved themselves.⁴⁵

45. For the Government notification, including the reasons for its issue, etc., see H.P. F.7/20/1934 and K.W. This file contains detailed information on the different organisations that were notified as unlawful bodies. Also see FR(1) Sept. 1934, H.P. F.18/9/1934, and The Tribune, 13 and 14 Sept. 1934.

III

As a consequence of the ban, Communists and Socialists now appeared in new incarnations. Sikh Communists had the advantage of being able to continue work through the various Sikh organisations, an opportunity they fully used, especially in Amritsar and Jullundur. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which had been formed at Bombay in October 1934, found some adherents in the province and in November we find the Punjab CSP making an appearance. It was reported to consist mainly of old NJBS members. By December 1934, they had a deputation touring the province to enlist members and establish branches.⁴⁶ However, none of these seemed to be really getting off the ground and it was a completely different organisational form that seems to have made it possible for the left-wing activists to get their act among the peasants really going. The karza or debt relief committees that soon mushroomed all over the Central Punjab represented this new form.

It appears that the idea behind the forming of the karza committees originated from a desire to "assist the peasants to obtain as much benefit as possible from the Relief of Indebtedness Act" and then "to apply the influence thus acquired to the promotion of less laudable movements."⁴⁷ The Punjab Relief

46. See FR(1) Oct. 1934, FR(1) Nov. 1934, FR(1) Dec. 1934, H.P. F.18/10/1934, 18/11/1934, 18/12/1934.

47. FR(1) March 1935, H.P. F.18/3/1935.

of Indebtedness Act, 1934, besides placing an upper limit on the rates of interest, had a provision for the setting up of Debt Conciliation Boards to effect an amicable settlement of debts not exceeding Rs.10,000. It is from this provision that the idea of the karza or debt relief committees obviously stemmed.

There is some confusion, however, about who actually began the process of organisation of karza committees. Ujagar Singh Bilga, a grass roots level Congress activist who was very active in the formation of the karza committees, suggests that it was Congressmen like himself who had started the process, and the Communists joined them a little later after some initial hesitation.⁴⁸ This is supported by the testimony of Bhagat Singh Bilga, a major Ghadar-Kirti leader of Punjab, who had then recently returned from Argentina via Moscow. He says it was the kisan section of the Congress that had started these karza committees, and Communists, especially Karam Singh Mann,

48. Ujagar Singh Bilga recalls that Kirti leaders such as Teja Singh Swatantar had just returned from abroad, and others were also returning, such as Bhagat Singh Bilga, etc. He says that we asked them to take on the job of training our workers. He also says that later these very same karza committees were changed to kisan sabhas. Ujagar Singh Bilga also says that they included Harijans in their propaganda campaign against indebtedness. Interview.

were also active in them.⁴⁹ Karam Singh Mann, who was a major organizer from the Communist side of these karza committees, however, suggests that these were started by the Communists, but not in their own name, and that since they were very few, they also roped in the Akalis. According to him, before the Communists stepped in, these committees, "the leader of whom was Ch. Chhotu Ram", existed only at the district level, there being no village-level organisations. It is quite possible that what he is calling the district level organisations were the Debt Conciliation Boards set up under the Relief of Indebtedness Act, which were closely allied to Chhotu Ram's name because he was not only a member of the committee that had suggested the legislation but was also the main campaigner on the issue.⁵⁰ Harkishen Singh Surjeet, too, maintains that these karza committees were started on the basis of a decision of the Communist Party.⁵¹

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49. Bhagat Singh Bilga says that when he first came back, there were two sections of the Congress - the sahuakar (moneylender) and the kisan section. The kisan section with people like Ujagar Singh Bilga had formed the karza committee. Interview.
50. Karam Singh Mann says that since members of the Communist group were very few, they had to rely on the Akalis. "They had the following, we had the understanding, because of Marxism." They didn't know we were Communists, he says, we were all members of the karza committees. He also mentions that Brij Narain helped in this work. Interview.
51. Karza Committees were formed because the Kisan Committee was banned, says Surjeet, obviously referring to the September 1934 ban on all Communist-connected organisations. Interview.

What is most likely, however, is that none of our witnesses are wrong, but are merely describing different parts of the elephant they had got hold of. In other words, if one puts the story together, then once the district-level Debt Conciliation Boards were initiated under the Act, given the pressing problem of debt, the idea emerged to extend these to the villages and simultaneously build up consciousness on the question of debt. The kisan section of the Congress, as Bhagat Singh Bilga called it, began to form these committees in the areas in which they were active. Communists, too, picked up the idea and, given their capacity for mobilisation and organisation and the fact that these Committees served as a substitute for their own organisation, implemented it with a vigour that others could not boast of, so that soon it began to look as if it was only the Communists who were active.

Regardless of the origins of the idea, however, there is little doubt that the movement to set up the karza committees touched a sympathetic chord in the peasant heart.⁵² The Punjab

52. Bhagat Singh Bilga, for example, says that this movement enabled us to penetrate deep into the peasantry. Interview. Ujagar Singh Bilga puts on record the fact that they rapidly recruited members. Interview. Karam Singh Mann feels that this movement must have had a role in getting Chhotu Ram to pass the Debt legislation (later, in the period of the Unionist Ministry). Interview. Surjeet too feels that they succeeded in pushing the Government into passing legislation. Interview.

Kisan Qarza Committee, with 52 members, was set up by Communists on the 3rd of March 1935 in Amritsar.⁵³ The evidence is that Kirtis and CPI-affiliated Communists all combined together in the karza committees. The idea was to build up an organisation and an agitation on the issue of cancellation of rural debts. The time was opportune as the peasants were heavily burdened with debt as a result of the Depression.⁵⁴ Nor is it surprising that the main success of the movement was in the Jullundur area, which was much more heavily indebted because of the small size of its holdings than, say, Amritsar.⁵⁵

The pattern of activity was to go into the villages and to explain to the people that they could never get free of the

53. See FR(1) March 1935, H.P. F.18/3/1935.

54. Karam Singh Mann, one of the main organizers of this movement, says that they concentrated on karza committees because indebtedness was the main problem facing the peasantry and their emphasis on this issue attracted the peasantry towards them. Because of the Depression, even families like his own, which owned 4 squares (over 100 acres) of land, had to sell off their women's ornaments. Interview. Surjeet recalls that the problem of indebtedness was very acute, peasants were losing land, and the issue appealed to all sections of peasants. Interview.

55. Sohan Singh Narangabadi, who belongs to Amritsar but had worked in the Jullundur area as well, points out that this was the reason for the slower rate of emigration from Amritsar as compared to Jullundur. The land-holdings were much smaller in the latter, therefore their debt was much more. Karza Committees, too, were for the same reason found in Jullundur, and not in Amritsar. Interview.

burden of debt unless it was cancelled. Karam Singh Mann, the major Communist leader of this phase, had written a pamphlet in which he had graphically described the burden by saying that if they had a line of camels, and loaded each camel with one maund of rupees, the line of camels would extend to Calcutta -- such was the burden of debt. This pamphlet was used with great effect to explain the point. After explaining the problem, the peasants would be asked to join the karza committee with a membership fee of one anna, and the village karza committee would be formed. As Ujagar Singh Bilga, the grass-roots level organizer, describes it: they first went to the smaller villages and formed the committees and then came to the bigger ones, which were the centres of political parties, and held meetings there. Obviously, the political message was also carried through these meetings which, in the words of the Government report, combined "agrarian agitation with communist propaganda."⁵⁶

The culmination of this campaign came with the holding of the Doaba Rural Uplift Conference, "a communist organisation with an innocent name", at Patara in Jullundur district

56. See FR(1) Oct. 1935, H.P. F.18/10/1935, and Interviews with Ujagar Singh Bilga, Karam Singh Mann, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

in the middle of October 1935. Sohan Singh Josh presided, was given a rousing welcome at the Bulana railway station, and taken in a procession, in which red flags were very prominent, to the pandal. Master Kabul Singh, veteran peasant leader of the area, was chairman of the reception committee. Along with the cancellation of debts and the establishment of village karza committees, the Conference also passed resolutions on the other accepted peasant demands such as land revenue on income-tax basis. Repression against left-wing workers was condemned, and release of political prisoners demanded. The Conference, according to the Government's estimate, attracted an audience of 4,000.⁵⁷

While the chief form of the movement was agitation through meetings and conferences,⁵⁸ Harkishen Singh Surjeet maintains that it also led on occasion to refusal to pay debts. He cites the case of village Cheema, in which the usurers were prevented from occupying land that had passed into their hands in lieu of debt.⁵⁹ However, it is likely that this was the exception rather than the norm, as Cheema was a political village and a Communist

57. FR(1) Oct. 1935, H.P. F.18/10/1935, and The Tribune, 12 and 16 Oct. 1935.

58. See FR(1) March 1935, FR(1) Oct. 1935, H.P. F.18/3/1935 and 18/10/1935; and Interviews with Ujagar Singh Bilga, Karam Singh Mann and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

59. Interview.

stronghold, being the home of Baba Karam Singh Cheema, the Ghadar/Kirti leader. We do not get any other evidence of the movement actually resulting in the non-payment of loans.

The story of the karza committees essentially takes us through to the next important stage which began in 1936 with the coming into force of the new United Front line of the Comintern. In the last quarter of 1934 and in 1935, besides the Lyallpur anti-resettlement agitation which we have discussed earlier, there was very little activity except for the karza committee movement in the Jullundur area. In Amritsar district, the Akalis had shown some energy in organizing a couple of conferences,⁶⁰ and also in Lahore, where the usual resolutions on peasant demands had been passed.⁶¹ Sheikhpura had held a zamindar conference,⁶² but there was little else. If we draw up a balance-sheet for the years 1933-35, the Lyallpur, Amritsar and Jullundur districts stand out as centres of fairly sustained activity, followed by Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur, Lahore, Sheikhpura and Ludhiana. (Interestingly, the first three retain their lead in the next phase from 1936-39.)

60. See FR(1) Dec. 1934, FR(1) Feb. 1935, H.P. F.18/12/1934, 18/2/1935.

61. See The Tribune, 4 Oct., 28 Nov. and 8 Dec. 1935.

62. See The Tribune, 4 Oct. 1935.

IV

The Seventh Congress of the Comintern held in 1935 had reversed the sectarian line of its Sixth Congress and enunciated a policy of 'United Fronts' which in colonial countries enjoined Communists to participate actively in "the mass anti-imperialist movements headed by the nationalists-reformists" and to seek joint action with them on the basis of an "anti-imperialist platform". Indian Communists were to strive for the establishment of "a united anti-imperialist front... both from within and without the National Congress." Anticipating a change in the Indian Communists' attitude towards itself as a result of the Seventh Congress line, the Congress Socialist Party, which had earlier barred Communists from membership in the party, reversed its policy at the meeting of its Executive in Meerut in January 1936, and invited Indian Communists to join the party on an individual basis. Indian Communists were initially hesitant, as old habits of sectarianism engendered by the Sixth Congress line died hard, but by April 1936 had begun to enter the CSP, while maintaining their own secret separate organisational identity.⁶³

63. John Patrick Haithcox, Communism and Nationalism in India, Princeton, 1971, pp.212-3.

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In Punjab, this enabled the CPI-affiliated group to join up with the Congress Socialists and declare the goal of a United Peoples' Front of all anti-imperialist forces. It also enabled them to enter the Congress. The Ghadar-Kirti group, which was much the more important component, on the other hand, it appears, did not join the CSP. The reason for this was probably that given the CPI/Kirti differences, they would not want to be in the same organisation as the CPI. But they certainly adopted the new United Front Line, as in any case it was more in keeping with their own understanding which had a strong nationalist orientation. So they readily entered the Congress. Therefore, from 1936 onwards, when we talk of Communists and Socialists organising the peasantry, we must remember that they were simultaneously Congressmen: people knew them as Congressmen, and in many areas it was they who took the Congress name to the villages for the first time.

The change in the Comintern line coincided in India with a new phase of political activity. The Congress had emerged out of the slump following the Civil Disobedience Movement and was getting ready to fight the elections under the Government of India Act of 1935. The franchise had been significantly widened, and a massive mobilisation effort was on the cards to convert its support into electoral strength. At the national level, the main campaigner turned out to be Jawaharlal Nehru, also the Congress President for the year, who had recently

declared himself a believer in "socialism... in the scientific, economic sense" from the Congress platform.⁶⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru turned his election campaign into a propaganda tour for 'socialism', according to the concept a legitimacy it had never before had in popular consciousness, and lending it the weight of the prestige of the Congress President and of himself personally. As a consequence, a whole new space -- political and ideological -- was created for the popularisation of the socialist ideal and for the functioning of those who were committed to that ideal. It is not for us here to follow his trail as he trudged thousands of miles across the sub-continent, we shall only witness the whirlwind he created in Punjab.

Nehru made two visits to Punjab in 1936, one from 29 May to 3 June and the second from 28 July to 3 August; in the course of which he almost covered the whole province. The 'rural' part of his tour, however, was concentrated in the central districts of Amritsar, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Ferozepur and Lahore. On his first trip, apart from making brief visits to the 'notorious' villages of Jhaman and Khalra in Lahore district, where he congratulated the villagers for their bravery and talked socialism, the most significant event was his two addresses on the same day to the Sarhali Punjab Rajnaitik (political) conference. The crowds that appeared at Sarhali,

64. Jawaharlal Nehru, Selected Works, Vol.7, pp.180-1.

a village in Amritsar district, to see and hear the Congress President broke all previous records in the province - one lakh people were reported to have come, some of them having walked 50 miles on foot. Baba Wasakha Singh, one of the most revered Ghadri heroes, presided; Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, another Ghadri hero, unfurled the red flag in front of the Congress Socialist camp. The best horse in the area was secured for Jawaharlal Nehru and he was then taken in procession. Socialists, Kirtis, Riasti Praja Mandal, all presented addresses to him. In his second visit, at the end of July, the Mahilpur Doaba Dehati (rural) Political Conference in Hoshiarpur district was the high point, where again the crowds reportedly reached the one lakh figure. Smaller conferences he addressed at Bundala in Jullundur with Gopal Singh Quami as President and at Khanna with Karam Singh Mann in the chair. He also visited Ferozepore and Moga where he met many Ghadar/Kirti leaders and Socialist workers.⁶⁵

The Chief Secretary of Punjab summed up the message that Nehru delivered in the following words:⁶⁶

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65. This factual account of Nehru's two tours is compiled from the following: File on Appreciation of J.L. Nehru's Punjab speeches, H.P. F.4/14/1936; FR(2) May 1936, FR(1) June 1936, FR(1) Aug. 1936, H.P. F.18/5/1936, 18/6/1936, 18/8/1936; The Tribune, 31 May 1936, 1 Aug. 1936; Interviews with Master Hari Singh, Ujagar Singh Bilga, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ram Nath, H.S. Surjeet.
66. Letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to Hallett, Home Secretary, Government of India, Conf.No.J-54-s-S.B., dated Simla, 16 June 1936, in which a full appreciation of Nehru's visit is given. H.P. F.4/14/1936.

Practically all his speeches were variations on the following theme:

'The basic trouble in India is poverty with its attendant trouble of unemployment, indebtedness and distress. The only cure I know for these troubles is socialism, but as long as British imperialism is dominant in India socialism is impossible. Therefore the first step is the attainment of independence from British influence. Once you are free, everything can be done.'

The speech generally ended up with the claim that Congress is the only organization in India which is able to fight the British Government, and that therefore the Congress candidates should be supported at the coming elections.... In his first speech at Sarhali, he confined himself to explaining how every great thing, in which he included revolution, could be brought about only by the masses. Again at Jahman and Khalra, where he made very simple speeches, he attempted to explain the form of Government for which he was striving; it was to be a 'Panchayati Raj', in which all powers would be in the hands of the poor, and those who were at present members e.g. Police and other officials, would be the servants of the people.

We are concerned here not with the general effect on the election of Nehru's tours but on their impact on the peasants and the peasant movement. There is a rare unanimity among all our sources, ranging from the participant peasant leaders and contemporary government spokesmen, that Jawaharlal's tours, apart from furthering anti-imperialist consciousness, helped to foster a general climate in favour of the idea of socialism, created a vague discontent with the existing order, and gave a stimulus to socialist and communist activists.⁶⁷ It became

67. For the Government assessment, see H.P. F.4/14/1936; FR(2) May 1936, FR(1) June 1936, FR(1) Aug. 1936, H.P. F.18/5/1936, 18/6/1936, 18/8/1936.

much easier for left-wing activists to talk about socialism among the peasants than it had been earlier, and this for various reasons. One, socialism could now be urged as the ideology that was being propagated by the Congress President, by Jawaharlal Nehru, the great patriot, and could not be dismissed as the brainchild of some small extremist groups. Two, the opponents of socialism had a tougher time ahead of them, since they would now have to argue with the Congress President. For example, in the controversy that was currently prevailing over the flying of the red flag at Congress meetings in which the right wing was taking a strident position, Nehru deliberately and publicly tipped the scales in favour of the left wing by speaking under the red flag on three occasions in Punjab, including at Khanna under the presidentship of Karam Singh Mann, the well-known Communist leader. He thus helped to counter, says Surjeet, the anti-Communist feelings that had developed among certain sections of the Punjab Congress.⁶⁸ Three, Jawaharlal Nehru talked of socialism in a deliberately vague way, without identifying it with any party or specific variety of canon, unlike the general left practice of asserting

68. Surjeet says Acharya Kripalani had issued a circular about the red flag not being allowed at Congress meetings. They therefore approached Nehru and he took a very positive attitude and came and addressed meetings under the red flag. Interview.

their own brand as the only pure one. This enabled all sections of the left to take advantage of and build on the atmosphere created by him, depending of course on their own capacity to do so. In other words, Jawaharlal's role, while widening the overall nationalist political space, was to give the whole of it a general socialist orientation or colour, so that the whole of the widened political space became potentially available to left wing political, ideological and organisational activity. In Surjeet's words, "Nehru had the capacity to address the sections that were not approachable by us."⁶⁹

The Government had prepared detailed assessments of his visits, and we quote below a few interesting extracts:

The appeal which Jawaharlal has so far made to the peasant has been vague, probably deliberately so... It is noteworthy that he never attempts to explain what he means by socialism.

69. Interview. Surjeet expanded on this point by explaining that while they already had a revolutionary tradition -- the Ghadar Party, the Babbar Akalis, etc. -- Nehru's propaganda about socialism did contribute to the widening of the space and helped to fight anti-Communist feelings. Even amongst the peasantry, he said, if the Congress President extended support, it naturally added to our strength. He then gave the example of the States' Peoples' movement, saying that while it was true that Communists like Jagir Singh Joga, etc., were already in the forefront, but when Nehru came and addressed the Ludhiana conference in 1938 (AISPC session), "it came to have a wider support and cities also came into the movement and this added to our strength." "It must be understood in this relation: The basic strength is ours, (of) the traditions of struggle that we carried, but Nehru's visits and advocacy of the ideas of socialism and against feudal principles added to our strength. This is the real and proper understanding." Interview.

He is content to stir up discontent against the existing regime.... He is not aiming at immediate direct action, but the object of his rural tours is to create a suitable preliminary atmosphere for action. Indeed the interest which his speeches aroused indicates that the crude idea of socialism as a sort of universal cure is perhaps more widely spread than there seemed reason to believe.... His visit has proved the existence among the rural classes of interest in such questions as socialism and independence, and has stimulated this interest. It will undoubtedly encourage the numerous socialist and communist bodies which are attempting to spread their propaganda in rural areas.70

Nehru's visits to the Punjab cause unrest, give undue prominence to grievances, real or imaginary and give subversive organizations an excellent chance of advertising themselves and pushing their doctrines. Jawaharlal himself has summed up the situation well. At Ferozepore he said "wherever I have gone in the Punjab large crowds of people have assembled: some come to see the fun, some to see me, while others are attracted by something. It seems that they are in search of something and come to find it. They have all got troubles and they come in the hope of being told a solution of them.71

Even those officials who tended to favour the usual explanation for big crowds at political gatherings -- that Indians

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70. Letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Hallett, Home Secretary, Government of India, Conf.No.J-54-s-S.B., dated Simla, 16 June 1936, in which a full appreciation and account of Nehru's first tour is given. H.P. F.4/14/1936.
71. Letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Hallett, Home Secretary, Government of India, D.O.NO.J-54, dated Simla, 1/3 Sept. 1936, which contains an assessment of the after-effects of the first visit and the effects of the second one. H.P. F.4/14/1936.

liked nothing better than a mela and "that if you arrange a three days mela with free food, loudspeakers and a well-known figure head, you will naturally get a large audience of peasants for whom any gathering, which provides a diversion from their everyday humdrum life, has a very great appeal"⁷² -- could not but note that the effect was "to arouse a feeling of dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs and a desire for change", and that "socialist propaganda ...is likely to enlist adherents unless it is checked."⁷³ More concrete dangers were also apprehended -- such as opposition to the settlements that were in progress in Lyallpur and Lahore and the one about to start in Amritsar in the autumn.⁷⁴ Already, in Sarhali village, after Nehru's visit, difficulty had been experienced in collecting the chaukidara tax from the menials and, in Sarhali circle, in collecting revenue from the landowners.⁷⁵

There is evidence indeed that the left wing activists were quick to seize the opportunity to launch a major propaganda

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72. These were the views expressed by the Deputy Commissioner of Hoshiarpur. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Letter from Puckle to Hallett, dated 16 June 1936, op. cit., H.P. F.4/14/1936. In Amritsar, in fact, a Bandobast Thukrao Committee had already come into existence. See FR(1) June 1936, H.P. F.18/6/1936.
75. Letter from Puckle to Hallett, dated 1/3 Sept. 1936, op. cit., H.P. F.4/14/1936.

and organizational effort. For the Sarhali conference, for example, both the Ghadar/Kirti group and Ahmad Din's Socialist group were in the forefront of the campaign. The Socialist group for many days prior to the conference toured the villages in the Amritsar district, and the Ghadar/Kirtis mobilized many of the old Ghadar workers who had taken no part in politics for many years.⁷⁶ After the conference as well, the momentum was sought to be kept up through conferences and meetings,⁷⁷ the most important of which was the one held at Cheema Kalan in Jullundur district in the third week of June.

Village-level mobilization for the Cheema Kalan Mazdur Kisan Conference began in early June, with daily meetings being held by a deputation of local workers. A jatha of 50 marched from Seron village in Amritsar district all the 50 miles to Cheema Kalan asking peasants on the way to come to the Conference. Activists were busy in other neighbouring tahsils as well.⁷⁸

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76. FR(1) June 1936, H.P. F.18/6/1936. Dalip Singh Jauhal, now a CPI(M) leader of Punjab, who was a young activist at the time, describes how they toured the area in squads and made collections and did propaganda for the conference. The conference was also used to distribute underground Communist literature. Interview.
77. FR(1) June 1936, H.P. F.18/6/1936.
78. For preparations for Cheema Kalan conference, see The Tribune, 9, 13 and 14 June 1936. The Fortnightly Report noted that these preliminary propaganda meetings have now become a regular feature of Communist activity and organisation. FR(2) June 1936, H.P. F.18/6/1936.

The Conference was presided over by Munshi Ahmad Din, the prominent Socialist leader, whose speech, for which he was later prosecuted, contained a sharp attack on Imperialism in general and British Imperialism in particular, and was lavish in its praise of the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ Among the many familiar resolutions passed at the heavily-attended conference, were some new and unfamiliar ones such as the one declaring the willingness of all debt relief, i.e., karza, committees to affiliate themselves to the Congress, and the one which demanded that all workers' and peasants' organisations be affiliated to the Congress in order to make it a mass anti-imperialist organisation.⁸⁰

79. A translation of the speech made by Ahmad Din, who was reputed to be an excellent orator, is attached along with the letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to the Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 13 July 1936, informing him that Ahmad Din Qassab and Abdul Aziz were being prosecuted under Section 124-A, I.P.C. for delivering seditious speeches at the Mazdoor Kisan Conference at Cheema Kalan, Jullundur district, on 20-22 June, 1936. The letter also noted that "both Abdul Aziz and Ahmad Din are the moving spirits of the Punjab Socialist Party and have been taking an active part in inculcating the doctrines of socialism among labourers and peasants." H.P. F.36/2/1936.

80. Other resolutions relating more specifically to economic demands of peasants were also passed. One of the more important ones related to measures for the relief of indebtedness, it being pointed out that they were inadequate and that land of small peasants was being bought up by big landlords. Suitable amendments should be made in the Land Alienation Act and land revenue should be placed on an income-tax basis. Further, Inam and Jagirdari land should be distributed to poor peasants and begar should be abolished. Workers and peasants were the only ones capable of fighting Imperialism, Fascism and the next world war, and therefore they should organize themselves. The Tribune, 23 and 24 June 1936.

The Cheema Kalan Conference was followed by numerous arrests of activists but this does not seem to have dampened the enthusiasm for Jawaharlal's second visit which came at the end of July. The Government obviously tried hard to make things difficult the second time. On its own admission, the Conference at Khanna that was addressed by Nehru was obstructed by arrests of and restrictions on activists.⁸¹ Harkishen Singh Surjeet recalls that the Government refused permission to hold the Conference scheduled for Bundala, which was his own village, on the village common land, as was the general practice. So Surjeet ordered that the standing maize crop from four acres of his own land be cut down to make place for the Conference! The crop was cut and the conference held, Gopal Singh Quami presiding and Jawaharlal Nehru the star attraction.⁸²

The rest of the year was taken up with the election campaign. Peasant activists were also fully immersed in the campaign, on the side of the Congress.⁸³ Some specifically

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81. See Puckle to Hallett, dated 1/3 Sept. 1936, op. cit., H.P. F.4/14/1936. Also see FR(1) July 1936, H.P. F.4/14/1936. At Mahilpur, it was reported that the campaign of arrests had increased the enthusiasm of the people for the Conference. The Tribune, 1 Aug. 1936.
82. Interview.
83. This is clear from the accounts of the election campaign contained in the interviews of many of the peasant leaders -- Karam Singh Mann categorically said that they were working not only for Socialist or Communist candidates but for all Congress candidates, and along with other Congressmen. See Interviews with Karam Singh Mann, H.S. Surjeet, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Ram Singh Majitha, Joginder Singh Chhina.

peasant conferences were also held,⁸⁴ but it was clear that the concentration was on mobilisation for the elections due in January 1937. Seven Communists had got nominated on the Congress list -- Sohan Singh Josh, Teja Singh Swatantar, Master Kabul Singh, Harjap Singh, Bibi Raghbir Kaur, Mange Ram Vats and Baba Rur Singh. Their election campaigns were conducted with the active help of all the peasant activists. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, for example, managed Master Kabul Singh's election campaign.⁸⁵ Karam Singh Mann was very active in Mian Iftikhar-ud-din's campaign.⁸⁶ In the villages of district Rohtak, the Congress conducted a vigorous campaign for Sri Ram Sharma.⁸⁷ In fact, the election campaign was itself a tremendous mobilising force for the peasantry. As the Governor, H.W. Emerson, acutely observed at the time in a letter to the Viceroy, Lord

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84. See, for example, FR(2) Sept. 1936, FR(1) Oct. 1936, H.P. F.18/9/1936, 18/10/1936; The Tribune, 12 and 15 Sept. and 6 Oct. 1936.
85. He describes how they spent only Rs.2000 and that too had been collected from people in amounts of 2 and 4 annas. He also says that in Sohan Singh Josh's election, which he was contesting against one of the biggest landlords of the province, Sardar Raghbir Singh, they even saved Rs.3000 from what people gave. The whole campaign was conducted on bicycle. Interview.
86. Karam Singh Mann describes the campaign of Iftikhar-ud-din against Mirza Hamidullah Beg, who had been the Speaker of the Punjab Legislative Council for many years. He also recounts that in Josh's election, they saved money because people, when they came to vote, would leave 1 anna or 1 rupee along with the vote. Interview.
87. See FR(1) Dec. 1936, H.P. 18/12/1936.

Linlithgow: 88

I doubt whether any village in the Province has not been included in the election campaign by one party or another, and most villages have had a constant succession of visits from canvassers. There has certainly been a great stirring of the political consciousness of the masses.... This has been specially marked in Sikh constituencies, and I was told the other day that with many of the smaller voters there was a definite prejudice against any one who could be described as pro-Government.
(Emphasis added)

If indeed it was true that, if not all, a large number of villages in the province had been touched by the politicizing effects of the election campaign, the effects of this campaign are to be counted as more profound than that of any local peasant struggle on any specific economic issue, however militant. The "stirring of the political consciousness", without

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88. Emerson to Linlithgow, dated 21 Jan. 1937, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/112, India Office Library and Records. This was part of the series of letters from the Governors of Provinces to the Viceroy that was initiated by Lord Linlithgow in order to supplement the Fortnightly Reports, once there was the possibility of popular ministries coming to power under the 1935 Act, as the Fortnightly Reports, which would be seen by Indian, especially Congress, Ministers could no longer be as frank as they used to be. For Punjab, it was even arranged that a separate memorandum on Congress activities would be prepared, so that the Fortnightly Reports, which would be read by other provinces also, could contain only colourless reports on Congress activities. This memorandum would be seen by the Premier, i.e., Sikandar Hayat Khan, and the Governor and a copy would be attached to the Fortnightly Reports sent to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State, but not to other provinces. No references were to be made to this memorandum, except in personal communication to the Governor. The Unionist Premier fully concurred in this arrangement. See Letter from Emerson, Governor, Punjab to Linlithgow, Viceroy, India, dated 31 July 1937, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/113.

which no long-term movement for change can sustain itself, was an achievement that would prove invaluable in creating new possibilities for political action in the future. The election campaign had, after all, crystallized the issues in terms of pro-British and anti-British. The Unionists were to be opposed because they were loyalists, pro-British. The Congress candidates were to be supported because they stood for independence, for anti-imperialism, for struggle against oppression.⁸⁹ After independence would be people's rule or panchayati raj. Without independence first, there could be no socialism. All these ideas had been taken to corners where they had never been heard before, not even during the phases of mass anti-British struggle. The logic of the electoral process -- that all areas are included in its ambit -- pushed political parties to go into areas they would never dare or care to go into in normal times. For a struggle, you tend to mobilize only those whom

89. Karam Singh Mann, one of the major Communist leaders at this time, recalls that the dominant issue was anti-British: We have to not allow the Unionists to come to power, that was our aim. The Sikh masses, he says, were anti-imperialist by that time. Sohan Singh Narangabadi, an active worker in the Amritsar area, who campaigned for Baba Gurdit Singh, of Komagatamaru fame, as the unofficial Congress candidate against Sardar Partap Singh Kairon, the Akali candidate who was officially supported by Gopi Chand Bhargava's group in the Congress, says that our election propaganda was: support the Congress because it is fighting against the British. If you vote for Congress and strengthen its hands, it will throw out the British quickly. Then, after independence, there will be prosperity. Interviews.

you can count on, whom you have worked on earlier, since at that point it is their strength that you need. In elections, you cannot win without winning over even those whom you may not know at all -- hence the drive to extend yourself becomes inevitable.

In other words, the election campaign of 1936-7 had contributed significantly to the general ongoing process of politicization of the peasantry, and also to that process taking an anti-imperialist direction in many quarters. This undoubtedly strengthened the foundations on which an organized, united kisan movement was sought to be built by the first province-wide peasant organisation that not only constituted itself but also succeeded in establishing itself as the leader of the Punjab peasants, namely, the Punjab Kisan Sabha. The setting up of this organisation was, after all, a matter of time once the All India Kisan Sabha had established itself at Lucknow in April 1936.⁹⁰ Punjab was well-represented on the All-India Kisan Committee from the very beginning -- Karam Singh Mann (Convenor), Sohan Singh Josh, Munshi Ahmad Din, Ujagar Singh, Gurcharan Singh, Prof. Brij Narain, Dev Raj Sethi, Ram Singh Johar, and Kabul Singh Govindpuri were members of the first organising committee formed at the Meerut Kisan

90. M.A. Rasul, A History of the All India Kisan Sabha, Calcutta, 1974, p.3.

Conference in January 1936.⁹¹ The first All India Kisan Congress (later Sabha) session was held along with the Lucknow session of the Congress in April 1936, and Bhan Singh Josh and Munshi Ahmad Din were delegates from Punjab. The Lucknow Kisan Congress had also charged the delegates from the provinces to organise branches of the all-India body in their provinces.⁹² The Punjab Kisan Committee was thus organised on 7 March 1937 as the provincial branch of the All India Kisan Sabha. A meeting of Kisan delegates from 13 districts was held at the Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore, and a Committee of 15 members set up. Four representatives of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal which organised the popular struggles in the Princely States in Punjab were also taken on the Committee, as were representatives of all the left groups in the province, the Kirtis, the CSP, the CPI, etc. Baba Jwala Singh, an old Ghadrite of remarkable energy and commitment was the President, B.P.L. Bedi, the prominent Socialist leader, was the General Secretary and Kartar Singh Gill, a Moscow-trained Ghadar/Kirti activist, the Secretary.⁹³ The significance of the formation of the Punjab Kisan Sabha is not to be under-estimated, especially if we recall that the

91. Congress Socialist, 25 April 1936.

92. Rasul, All India Kisan Sabha, pp.4 and 7.

93. Rasul, All India Kisan Sabha, p.24; Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle (Volume Two), 1984, p.205; Bhagat Singh Bilga, Interview.

first attempt to make a provincial level organisation was in 1925,⁹⁴ and 12 years and many attempts later, the first viable provincial organisation was formed, which actually went on to hold organisational elections, elect delegates, have fairly regular annual meetings and was also able to co-ordinate the activity in different areas, extend to new areas and sections, bring the combined weight of the movement to bear on any one issue or locality, and maintain links with the national level organisations. All these achievements of the Punjab Kisan Sabha will unfold before us as we follow the story of the peasant movement in Punjab through its 'classical' phase, spanning the years 1937-39.

V

It is imperative, however, to interrupt our tale at this point and take another detour, this time to remind ourselves that this 'classical' phase was played out with the backdrop being the Unionist Ministry in power. The elections had yielded 95 seats to the Unionists in a house of 175, thus giving them a clear majority.⁹⁵ They were also supported by the Khalsa

94. See Chapter VIII above.

95. Election Returns for 1937, L/P&J/8/472, IOR, The Unionist Party did not fight the elections on the basis of a fixed list of candidates, etc., but at times there were 2 or 3 'Unionist' candidates in one constituency, and the winning candidate was finally declared the 'official' Unionist candidate. The candidates were supposed to rely on their local standing and influence, most of them coming from big landlord and Pir (religious head) families of the province, than on the Unionist Party's mobilisation and influence. In fact, compared to the others, the Unionists hardly did any canvassing, relying on their traditional
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National Party (loyalist Sikhs) and the National Progressive Party (mainly a party of moderate Hindu communalists) and the Muslim League. The opposition included the Congress and the Akalis, who had seat adjustments with each other and later functioned as one party in the Assembly, and a few Independents and the Ahrars, making up a total of about 44. Sikandar Hayat Khan who hailed from one of the biggest landlord families of the province, and had earlier served as Revenue Member in Punjab and a Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, became the Premier or Chief Minister. Chhotu Ram, also of the Unionist Party, was Minister for Development, Khizar Hyat Khan Tiwana and Mian Abdul Haye were the other two Unionists who were Ministers, bringing the total strength of Unionists to 4 in a Cabinet of 6. Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, Revenue Minister, and Mr. Manohar Lal, Finance Minister, represented the Khalsa National Party and the National Progressive Party respectively. This Ministry lasted from April 1937 to December

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influence to get into the Assembly and into power. They had effectively mobilized the religious influence of the Pirs behind them. In fact, such a large number of candidates went on changing or deciding their party affiliation that Unionist strength went up from 90 after the elections to 95 by April 1937 and 100 by July 1938. See FR(2) Feb. 1937, H.P. 18/2/1937; L/P&J/8/472, IOR; Ian Talbot, Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947, New Delhi, 1988, pp.101-14; David Gilmartin, 'Religious Leadership and the Pakistan Movement in the Punjab', Modern Asian Studies, Vol.13, No.3, 1979, p.504.

1942.⁹⁶

The general political stance of the Unionist Ministry may be summed up in the words of the Governor, H.D. Craik, who, after an experience of almost one and a half years of the Ministry's functioning, wrote to the Viceroy on 10 September 1938 describing Sikandar Hayat Khan as "the most genuine and influential friend that Britain has in India."⁹⁷ Craik was obviously overly pleased by Sikandar's recent support in the efforts being made to curb anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda⁹⁸ as well as by his assurance of delivering 'sixteen annas loyal and reliable' men to the Army in the coming war⁹⁹ -- but even otherwise the British had little or nothing to complain of by way of the Unionists' handling of power. The previous Governor, H.W. Emerson, in his assessment given after the Ministry had completed a year in office, had struck an equally

96. Returns of 1937 Elections, L/P&J/8/472, IOR; FR(1) and (2) Feb. 1937, H.P. 18/2/1937; Ian Talbot, Punjab and the Raj, pp.101-4.

97. Craik to Brabourne, Acting Viceroy, 10 Sept. 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/87, IOL.

98. Craik reported to Brabourne, the Acting Viceroy, that it was Sikandar who had pushed Jinnah to support the Dissuasion from Recruitment Bill in the Central Assembly on the grounds that Punjab wants it, and that if Jinnah wants Punjab's support, he better support the Bill. Craik to Brabourne, 24 Aug. 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/1987, IOL.

99. Craik to Brabourne, 10 Sept. 1938, ibid.

contented note:¹⁰⁰

My own relations with the Ministry as a whole, with the Premier and individual Ministers, could not have been better. They have gone out of their way to consult me and have almost invariably accepted my advice.... The relations between the Ministry and officers and between individual Ministers and Secretaries have been excellent. There is no apprehension among Government servants, who are serving the new Government loyally and well.

Even earlier, the Governor had noted with approval the Unionists' tough policy towards law and order, and especially towards Communists. Sikandar Hayat Khan was in charge of law and order, and his relations with the Police and the C.I.D. were excellent and he had supported their proposals. One example of his 'correct' policy was his refusal to release Teja Singh Swatantar, the very important Kirti leader, who had been declared elected in a bye-election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly. He had also refused to reverse orders of restraint served on many other Communists and was quite willing to take action against others as well.¹⁰¹ When trouble broke out in the Indian State of Kalsia in October 1938, Sikandar readily agreed to notify the Indian States (Protection) Act in a number of Punjab districts which prevented them from being used as bases of agitation against the State. He even made the

100. Emerson to Linlithgow, 5 April 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86, IOL.

101. Emerson to Linlithgow, 3 July 1937, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F/125/113, IOL.

rather original suggestion "that the best form of countering Congress agitation against the States would be for the States to retaliate by sending paid agitators into the province concerned with instructions to do everything possible to embarrass the Ministry."¹⁰² Once again, the Governor had occasion to assure the Viceroy that not only their interests, but that of their friends as well, were safe in Unionist hands;¹⁰³

As regards practical suggestions for protecting States from agitation fomented and controlled in British India, I think that so long as the Punjab has a Ministry of the same political complexion as the present Ministry, the Provincial Government would certainly be prepared to co-operate in a sympathetic spirit with the State authorities concerned. But I fully realise that in Congress provinces the same co-operation cannot be expected....

Chhotu Ram, the other most important member of the Cabinet as far as peasants were concerned, despite his supposed pro-peasant image, was no less hostile to nationalist and left mobilisation of the peasantry. In fact, he saw them as his major competitors since, unlike the big Muslim landlord members of the Unionist Party, he had to maintain a populist stance to survive as the leader of the Hindu Jat peasants of Eastern Punjab. Therefore, he had a highly populist political style, and carried on a public campaign against the Congress and the

102. Craik to Brabourne, 17 Oct. and 22 Oct. 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/87, IOL.

103. Craik to Brabourne, 17 Oct. 1938, Ibid.

left wing.¹⁰⁴ Besides, the inveterate opportunist that he was, he quickly retreated from the favourable stand he had been taking on the question of reduction of land revenue and its assessment on the same basis as income-tax when he was out of power (1927-37), and began to readily mouth the old official arguments about land revenue reduction and development being contradictory goals.¹⁰⁵ His role in the debt relief and other agrarian legislation is more controversial and we shall discuss it at length later when we deal with the whole controversy on the issue. In other words, Chhotu Ram was no friend of the peasant movement but an adversary, and a formidable one at that, as we shall soon see.

As is apparent, the point we wish to make here is that the peasant movement in Punjab had to function in a hostile political context in the crucial years from 1937 to 1939, years in which, otherwise, a particular constellation of forces had formed that was ideally suited for the 'take-off' of the Indian peasant movement. The formation of the CSP and the adoption

104. For an excellent study of Chhotu Ram's politics, see Prem Chowdhry, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram, New Delhi, 1984. In Chapter 8 of this book, titled 'Chhotu Ram's Ideology and Propaganda', she shows at length how he manipulated to acquire his pro-peasant, radical, even anti-Government image and how the reality was quite sordid in terms of his willingness to collude with British officialdom, his basically loyalist approach, his opposition to tenant rights, his refusal to do anything to actually reduce the burden of land revenue, etc., when in power.

105. See Emerson to Linlithgow, 22 May 1937, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/113.

of the United Front line by the Communists had enabled the left forces to come together, however temporarily, and work unitedly within the Congress; this in turn had resulted in the formation of an all-India organisation of peasants, the AIKS, as well as of its provincial branches such as the one in Punjab; the election campaign had presented a unique opportunity for popular mobilisation -- an opportunity used by Nehru to spread the idea of socialism; the elections had resulted in the formation of Congress Ministries in seven provinces, an event that created a new political atmosphere in the country and gave a tremendous fillip to popular political activity, especially among the peasants, and not the least because the increase in civil liberties enabled a freedom of expression, of movement, of association, that Indians had never known before. While the Punjab was one with the rest of the country in most of these respects, the one star missing from the constellation in the Punjab sky was the one representing the Congress Ministry. Thus, when we compare the peasant movement in Punjab in these years with its counterpart in Bihar or U.P. or Andhra or Kerala, we must not forget that it had to function in a basically hostile environment, whereas in these regions, regardless of tensions and even quarrels between the right wing and the left wing, kisan workers and zealous administrators, the fact of 'our own government being in power' meant that the atmosphere was basically congenial. For one Soli

Batlivala in Madras Presidency, whose prosecution by Rajaji's government became a cause celebre for the Indian left, there were many such as Bhagat Singh Bilga, who was hounded and interned in his village, Teja Singh Swatantar, who was detained as a State prisoner under Regulation III of 1818, one of the most draconian laws, and Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who was externed from the Province and had to live in Saharanpur in Congress-ruled U.P., and hundreds of others who faced arrest, internment, prosecution, interrogation and torture under Unionist rule. The Kirti magazine was forced to migrate to Meerut, again in Congress-ruled U.P., and emerge as the Kirti Lehar. Whatever be the achievements or the failings of the peasant movement in Punjab, they have to be understood in the context of the Unionist Ministry's continuation of the traditional British policy of handling disaffection among the Punjabi peasants--who-were-potential-soldiers with a mailed fist. To organize an open, non-violent, mass-based movement -- which requires a certain amount of democratic political space to blossom -- in a situation where your cadre is being constantly whisked away, your leaders silenced, and your masses alternately bribed and threatened, was no child's play.

VI

The momentum generated by the election campaign was not only maintained but increased after it was over. In fact, the year 1937 may be said to mark the real beginning of the most vigorous phase of the peasant movement in pre-independence Punjab. In 1937 one can begin to get the feel of the intensity of the political activity that characterised the years till the outbreak

of the Second World War. Even though there were no specific 'struggles' in this year, no 'morchas' or 'satyagrahas', the movement in fact reached a very high level, with consistent village-level campaigns culminating in a series of big conferences in September and October. Further, there was ample evidence that the unity of different political strands - Congress, Socialist, Communist and also some Akali groups - was actually working on the ground. A brief profile of the year follows.

In the first quarter, the districts of Amritsar, Jullundur, Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur witnessed a great deal of political activity among the kisans.¹⁰⁶ In Jullundur, the District Mazdur Kisan Dal was busy organizing village meetings and conferences.¹⁰⁷ In Amritsar the District Bando-bast Committee, formed a year ago in June to resist the new settlement, was sending its workers on tours of villages and

106. FR(2) March 1937, H.P. F.18/3/1937.

107. The District Kisan Mazdoor Dal was the name of the Kirti Kisan Organisation. In Jullundur, we find this name being used for quite some time for organisational purposes, till it came to be substituted by the Congress Committees and Kisan Sabhas in 1938. The District Mazdoor Kisan Dal organised a number of meetings, including one at Gharial in Adampur Doaba police station area addressed by Master Mota Singh Anandpuri, a prominent socialist leader, another at Chima Kalan, and yet another at Kartarpur. See The Tribune, 13 Jan., 4 and 28 March 1937.

attempting to form branch committees in the villages.¹⁰⁸ At Srigobindpur in Gurdaspur a Kisan Conference was held, and the everyday activity reached such a pitch that the Deputy Commissioner wanted to take action.¹⁰⁹ The Congress had given a call for observing the 1st of April as anti-Constitution Day and mobilisation in the villages had been going on to make it a success. Reports showed that 8 villages in Ludhiana district and 22 out of 33 villages of the Khaira sub-station of Lahore district had observed the strike and it is likely that there were others as well which went unreported.¹¹⁰

The pace quickened in the second quarter, with kisan conferences in Ludhiana, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar and Lyallpur.¹¹¹ There were terrible hailstorms in April in many districts, and Communist Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)

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108. The Amritsar Bandobast Committee, for example, had planned to hold daily village meetings from 3-13 March. FR(2) Feb. 1937 and F.R. (1) April 1937, H.P. F.18/2/1937 and 18/4/1937.
109. FR(2) Feb. 1937, FR(1) and (2) March 1937, FR(1) April 1937, H.P. F.18/2/1937, 18/3/1937, 18/4/1937.
110. The Tribune, 28 March 1937 carried reports of village level mobilisation for the hartal in Jullundur district. Also see FR(1) and (2) April 1937, H.P. F.18/4/1937.
111. See The Tribune, 6, 18, 27 May 1937, FR(1) and (2) April 1937, FR(1) June 1937, H.P. F.18/4/1937 and 18/6/1937.

toured the villages on bicycles assessing the damage.¹¹² Peasants themselves were quick to demand relief: in Hoshiarpur they held meetings criticizing the false reports sent by the Tahsildar¹¹³ and in Amritsar a deputation representing three tahsils marched to meet the Deputy Commissioner.¹¹⁴ Jullundur peasants were honoured with a visit by Prof. N.G. Ranga who toured extensively, accompanied by the socialist leaders, B.P.L. Bedi and Freda Bedi, and was very impressed by the level of organisation and by the degree of left influence.¹¹⁵ Some peasants from Amritsar district, "drawn from the disaffected areas where Ghadar and Kirti leaders reside", it seems, took a great deal of interest in a number of left wing conferences held in Amritsar city in June. The fortnightly report noted that though "much of the talk was beyond the comprehension of these simple audiences", yet they "will no doubt on their return home discuss events and thus help to create an impression of the growing strength of Socialism

112. FR(2) April 1937, H.P. F.18/4/1937.

113. The Tribune, 6 and 18 May 1937, reports meetings in villages in Hoshiarpur.

114. The Tribune, 25 April 1937.

115. The Tribune, 1 and 7 April 1937. Ranga made another tour of Jullundur in September in which he visited a very large number of villages. Ibid., 12 Sept. 1937.

and Communism."¹¹⁶

There was also a significant growth in Congress activity in the rural areas. The south-eastern districts of Rohtak and Gurgaon, and Lyallpur and Sheikhupura in the central part of the province were the special targets of Congress attention.¹¹⁷ In Gurgaon, there was some news of Congress activity among the tenants of the Ingram or Skinners' Estate, whom we might remember from their agitation in 1929-30, but it soon died down.¹¹⁸ A vigorous Muslim mass contact campaign was launched in Hoshiarpur villages by the Congress¹¹⁹; and enrolment of members was pushed hard in all areas where they had a base.¹²⁰

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116. The conferences held were: The Punjab Congress Socialist Conference, Indian Progressive Writers Association Conference, Civil Liberties Conference, Political Prisoners Defence Conference and Riasti Praja Mandal Conference. FR(1) June 1937, H.P. F.18/6/1937.
117. See The Tribune, 18 and 27 May 1937; FR(1) and (2) May 1937, FR(1) June 1937, H.P. F.18/5/1937 and 18/6/1937.
118. FR(1) May 1937 and FR(1) June 1937, H.P. F.18/5/1937 and 18/6/1937. Also see Emerson to Linlithgow, 24 April and 19 June 1937. Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/113. The Government had clearly got very worried with the initial reports of Congress trying to hold an inquiry into tenant grievances and the reported interest of Nehru in the whole affair. It was considerably relieved when "the indirect efforts" of the Unionist Ministry and the substitution of the Indian Deputy Commissioner by a European succeeded in averting the trouble apprehended. Ibid.
119. FR(1) June 1937, H.P. F.18/6/1937.
120. The Tribune, 27 May 1937; FRs for May and June 1937, H.P. F.18/5/1937 and 18/6/1937.

To add to the colour, Chhotu Ram toured the central districts in May, criticizing the Congress in public meetings held in the countryside. He specially chose for his attention the districts of Hoshiarpur, Jullundur and Ludhiana, where the Congress and Communists had been most active.¹²¹

The second half of the year was dominated by the big conferences that were to be held in September and October - preparations for some of these at least began as early as in June.¹²² The kind of conference that we first witnessed as part of Nehru's election tour -- where thousands of peasants would collect, the President-elect would be taken in a huge procession, a free langar (kitchen) would be run for 3 days, and a galaxy of national and provincial-level leaders would collect -- was to become the staple of the peasant movement in the province. They served as big shows of strength of peasants to the outside world, and of their own movement to the peasants. When peasants came to these gatherings and saw thousands more like themselves, when they heard important people from the city, whose names they had perhaps heard from some fellow-peasant who had travelled more widely in the world, criticising the Government and the police

121. Emerson to Linlithgow, 22 May 1937, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/113.

122. The preparations for the Barapind Kisan Conference began very early - in June itself. For this and other conferences see The Tribune, 30 June and 15 July 1937, and FR(2) July 1937, FR(1) and (2) Aug. 1937, FR(1) Sept. 1937, H.P. F.18/7/1937, 18/8/1937, and 18/9/1937. Jwala Singh Barapind, a grass roots level worker of village Barapind, gives a very interesting account of the preparations for the Barapind Conference. Interview.

in no uncertain terms, when they saw their own local leaders who came to mobilise them in their villages mixing with the bigger leaders from outside, when they saw on the stage the Ghadri Babas whose sacrifices and heroism had endowed them with an almost super-human aura, when all these galaxies were even joined by Jawaharlal Nehru, the son of the rich father whose clothes used to be washed in Paris but who had sacrificed everything for the country, and who was close to the Mahatma himself, then some of the sense of isolation -- on which is founded the fear of authority, the reluctance to resist, the tendency to accept in silence rather than fight back -- began to fall away and a slow but growing consciousness of their own strength began to take its place.

The spate of conferences started in the third week of September. At Barapind in Phillaur tahsil in Jullundur district, Swami Sahajanand, General Secretary of the AIKS, was the guest of honour. He was taken in a procession of 2,000 men wearing red shirts, carrying sickles and red flags, all the way from the railway station to the site of the conference. Photographs of Lenin and Stalin were prominently displayed on the stage. Government reports put the size of the audience at 10,000 whereas the organisers claimed 50,000. The Conference lasted from 21 to 24 September.¹²³

123. The Tribune, 23 Sept. 1937; FR(2) Sept. 1937, H.P. F.18/9/1937; and Congress Socialist, 2 Oct. 1937.

In Ferozepore district, too, preparations had been going on for a long time for the conference held at Daudhar from 18-20 September. Baba Rur Singh, now an MLA, Bibi Raghbir Kaur, another MLA, and Mubarak Sagar, the Socialist leader, were the prominent personalities at the conference.¹²⁴ At Nowshera Punnuan in Amritsar district, a big Kisan Bandobast Conference was held on 29 and 30 September, where Jayaprakash Narayan, the CSP leader, was the chief guest and Munshi Ahmad Din also spoke.¹²⁵ In Gujranwala, Sohan Singh Josh attended the peasant conference at village Kingranwali in the third week of September.¹²⁶ In Lyallpur, two conferences were held around this time, one at Pakka Jandiala and another at Chak No.301 G.B.¹²⁷ In Sargodha, a Fauji Lawaris Conference was organised which Nehru also attended.¹²⁸

124. See FR(2) Sept. 1937, H.P. F.18/9/1937.

125. See FR(1) Oct. 1937, H.P. F.18/10/1937; The Tribune, 1 Oct. 1937; Congress Socialist, 16 Oct. 1937.

126. The Tribune, 23 Sept. 1937.

127. FR(2) Sept. 1937, H.P. F.18/9/1937; The Tribune, 24 Sept. 1937.

128. FR(1) Oct. 1937, H.P. F.18/10/1937; and Congress Socialist, 30 Oct. 1937. This was meant to highlight the grievances of disinherited sons of colonists who were given land on primogeniture terms. 'Lawaris' means disinherited, and 'fauji' means a soldier. The grants were possibly given only to ex-soldiers.

As if this was not enough, a mammoth conference was held at Garhdiwala in Hoshiarpur district from 9 to 10 October. This was organised in the name of the Congress as the Provincial Political Conference. The procession of the President-elect, Sardul Singh Caveeshar, reached 20,000, according to the Government estimates, and the audience at the first session was 30,000. This went up to 50,000 according to the Government estimate, and one lakh according to the organizers, on the third day when Jawaharlal Nehru came to address the gathering. As had become usual those days, the main conference was accompanied by a number of meetings by allied or subsidiary organisations. The Kirti Mazdur Dal held a poetical symposium attended by 10,000; the Mazdur Kisan Conference attracted 25,000 and was addressed by Jayaprakash Narayan and Sohan Singh Josh; the Riasti Praja Mandal Conference was attended by 18000 and presided over by Lala Sham Lal, the Congress leader; the Political Prisoners' Release Conference was presided over by Gopi Chand Bhargava and attracted 30-40,000 people.¹²⁹ (The estimates given above were all made by the Government.) Another important conference was held in Jind State on 16 October. B.P.L. Bedi chaired and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati attended this first ever Kisan conference in a Princely State organised by the Punjab Kisan Sabha.¹³⁰

129. FR(1) Oct. 1937, H.P. F.18/10/1937; Congress Socialist, 30 Oct. 1937.

130. Congress Socialist, 16 Oct. 1937.

The conference-organising capacity of the activists had yet not been exhausted as these were followed up by other conferences, though not so massive. In Gurgaon, Lyallpur, Amritsar, Sheikhpura, Lahore, Hoshiarpur, and Jullundur, village tours and meetings, conferences, enrolment of members of Kisan Sabha and Congress had continued uninterrupted till the end of the year.¹³¹ While the non-left section of the Congress had been particularly active in the south-eastern districts of Rohtak and Gurgaon (in the latter even advocating non-payment of land revenue at one stage¹³²), as well as in Lyallpur, Sheikhpura, Hoshiarpur and Lahore, the Communists and Socialists (also in the Congress at this time) were more active in Jullundur, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Ferozepore and Ludhiana.

The fact that the political organisations could organise such a large number of conferences in such a concentrated period

131. FR(1) and (2) July 1937, FR(1) and (2) Aug. 1937, FR(1) and (2) Sept. 1937, FR(1) and (2) Oct. 1937, FR(2) Nov. 1937, FR(1) Dec. 1937, H.P. F.18/7/1937, 18/8/1937, 18/9/1937, 18/10/1937, 18/11/1937, 18/12/1937, The Tribune, 15 July, 12 Sept., 29 Oct., 5 Nov., 11 Nov. and 16 Dec. 1937 and 24 April 1938 (for annual report on CSP activities in Lahore district); Congress Socialist, 4 Sept. 1937, 27 Nov. 1937. Congress membership had increased to 1,28,855, of which 94,772 were from rural areas, as compared to a total of 26,511 in the last year. FR(2) Nov. 1937, H.P. F.18/11/1937.

132. See FR(2) Sept. 1937, H.P. F.18/9/1937.

showed that they had acquired a sufficiently large number of cadre as well as adherents to sustain such a massive effort. Since these conferences were also financed largely by collections of grain and money made by activists from surrounding villages, it also showed that a certain amount of sympathy and support had been created. The large size of the audience testified to the growing interest in political affairs, which could not but lead to an enlargement of political consciousness. One could roughly estimate that the kind of meeting or conference that would attract roughly 1-2,000 people a couple of years ago, would now draw about 5-10,000 and where there would be 5 or 6,000 people earlier, now there would be 20-30,000.

It is significant that this qualitative growth in the organisational, ideological, and political strength of the peasant movement had been achieved without any accretion to the list of economic demands and without any 'struggles' being fought. The economic demands remained more or less the same -- land revenue assessment on income-tax basis, cancellation of debts, no increase in land revenue at new settlements, remissions when crops failed or were damaged, abolition of extra cesses such as chahi, chaukidara, malba, etc., and of thikri pehra and begar. However, the demand for release of political prisoners of all varieties was beginning to be pushed with greater vehemence. Criticism of the Unionist Ministry by comparing it with the Congress Ministries was very common,

and went hand in hand with a general tendency to sharply attack the Government, the police, the zaildars, etc. Of course, anti-imperialism continued to remain an essential part of the ideology and politics of the peasant movement.¹³³

The burgeoning forth of the anti-government movement in the rural areas clearly had the administration worried. In October, a conference was called of officials of the Hoshiarpur, Jullundur and Ludhiana districts which included the Commissioner and the Deputy Inspector-General of Police of Jullundur division, the Superintendents of Police and Deputy Commissioners of the three districts, and the Premier and the Governor, to discuss the general situation in these three districts where there had been "much Communist and Congress activity during the past three months." It emerged from the discussions that because the officials had been instructed that once Provincial Autonomy was in force they were to maintain a distance from party politics, they had generally allowed things to drift. It was now made clear to them that Communism "is a subversive movement opposed to Government as such," and has to be fought.¹³⁴ Yet, even later, the Governor continued

133. This list of demands is compiled from a reading of all the sources, and these have already been cited above in one form or another, therefore we are not repeating them.

134. Emerson to Linlithgow, 8 Oct. 1937, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/113.

to be worried that the Unionists and their supporters were not doing enough to counter the anti-government propaganda:¹³⁵

There have been very few meetings indeed organised or addressed by supporters of the Government other than the Ministers, and there is no comparison between the number of meetings organised by the Congress or Communists and those organised in support of Government. District officers frequently comment on this, and unless the ministerial party wakes up, it is likely to lose ground. Similarly, nothing tangible has yet resulted from efforts made a few months ago to start a pro-Government newspaper.

Thus, by the time the year 1937 drew to a close, the anti-imperialist political forces seemed to have gained a distinct edge in the battle for the mind and heart of the Punjabi peasant.

135. Emerson to Linlithgow, 13 Dec. 1937, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/113.

If the peasant movement in Punjab can be said to have made a qualitative leap forward in the period extending from mid-1936 till the end of 1937, then in the years 1938 and 1939 it reached its most mature phase of the pre-independence years. The movement blossomed forth in many directions: new areas, new issues, new demands were introduced and the older bases were fortified further. Any number of specific struggles -- or morchas as they were popularly called -- developed in these years, and, while it would be impossible to deal at length with all of them, I shall attempt to bring to the reader something of the flavour of the different varieties of real-life dramatic performances staged by the Punjab peasants. I shall try to keep within a rough chronological structure, though it will not be possible to adhere to it strictly as many movements overlap with each other.

I begin the story of these climactic years of the movement with the tenants of the canal colonies of Nili Bar, Montgomery and Multan, and this for two reasons. One, chronologically they have the first right to attention. Second, their movement is a good example of the new phase of the peasant movement represented by the formation of the Punjab Kisan Committee in March 1937, a united provincial level organisation which could plan and extend the movement to new areas, which could send trained activists from Jullundur or Amritsar to work in Montgomery or Multan as part of a

concerted plan to extend the movement to the backward areas, to areas where tenants-at-will dominated, and which could use the strength of the strong areas to build up the strength of the weak ones. In the words of Bhagat Singh Bilga, one of the most perceptive participant observers of the peasant movement of our period, and one who, as one of the most trusted members of the Ghadar/Kirti Party, was privy to the decision-making within this group from which the vast majority of the active workers of the Punjab peasant movement were drawn:¹

The peasant movement in Punjab was not a spontaneous one -- it was fully planned.... After the formation of the Kisan Committee, we decided that we were not going to allow any longer an uneven development of the movement in Punjab. In Central Punjab -- in Lahore, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Jullundur, Ludhiana and Ferozepore, Kisan Sabhas were already in existence, and a political movement was also there. But there was no movement in the West - in Rawalpindi, Multan, Montgomery, and in the East in the Indian States. The Praja Mandal movement was there, but it was not so strong.... There were two big stalwarts of the Punjab Kisan Movement, Baba Jwala Singh and Baba Rur Singh Chuharchak. Baba Jwala Singh said: 'Where nobody goes, I will go; I will go to Patiala, to Nabha, to Kalsia, which are the strongholds of reaction'. They were the best

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1. Bhagat Singh Bilga was a Moscow-trained leader of the Ghadar/Kirti Party. He became General Secretary of the Punjab Kisan Sabha at its first regular session held on the basis of delegates elected by primary members at Lyallpur in October 1938. Immediately thereafter he was interned in his village. In fact in the ten years that he spent in India after his return, between 1935 and 1945, he was a completely free man for only one year, the other nine he spent either interned in his village, or in jail, or underground. Interview.

organizers from the Ghadar Party.... So we planned that the best workers would be sent to plough the barren fields.... In West Punjab, beyond Lahore, the muzara (tenant) belt started. They had no rights worth the name. Baba Jwala Singh went there, along with Prof. Jalwant Singh and Ram Singh Ghalamala.... In the muzara belt, we sent our best organizers, such as Naina Singh Dhoot, Boojha Singh, Ujagar Singh Bilga.

I

The problems faced by tenants (or more properly share-croppers) in Punjab we need not repeat, except to remind ourselves that tenants in Punjab had no occupancy rights, no security of tenure, they were tenants-at-will, with no legal curbs on rent enhancement.² But the tenants we are about to meet were not even strictly speaking tenants, but sub-tenants of lease-holding companies who leased large chunks of colony land from the Government. How this system operated and how it came into being is best described in the words of the Governor:³

Large areas of land on (the Sutlej Valley) Project are leased by Government on temporary leases for three, four or five years pending their allotment to permanent settlers. This system has been in force for some years, because it is for obvious reasons uneconomical to put a large area on the market simultaneously. These temporary leases are allotted on a system of calling for tenders and in some cases are taken up by capitalists who

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2. For a discussion of the tenancy problem in the Punjab, see Chapter 4 above.
 3. Craik to Linlithgow, 22 November 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/87.

secure very large areas. The lessees put in their own sub-tenants and naturally enough are anxious to make as much profit as they can out of the land in the comparatively short period available. There is no doubt that in many cases they more or less rack-rent the sub-tenants, who usually pay in kind. The commonest form of rent is half the produce, calculated after considerable deductions in favour of the landlord have been made from the common heap, and the sub-tenant has to pay all the canal dues. In these days of low prices this is a very severe rent and it is a fact that the sub-tenants have a substantial grievance in this respect.

Many lease-holding companies even had their own currency in leather and their own shops in the market which sold against this leather currency -- tenants thus being forced to buy from these shops when they were paid in this leather currency. Moreover, if land was transferred from one leaseholder to another, the currency became useless. There was also evidence of the agents of companies behaving just like the other big landlords of the area and exacting begar, or free labour, goods and services from the villagers. Particularly obnoxious to the tenants was the practice of having to carry the company's share to their godowns free of charge, and at times being forced to store their own produce in company godowns. Produce was divided into two equal shares only after, as the Governor described it, "considerable deductions in favour of the landlord have been made from the common heap." These 'considerable deductions' were considerable indeed if we accept the estimate that as much as 16 seers were taken out of one maund (40 seers) of the common heap. The remaining 24 were divided into two, but this left the tenant with only 12 out of 40, i.e., 30 per cent of the gross produce instead of 50 per cent as might appear from a super-

ficial glance at the rent-rate. In addition, the tenants paid the entire water-rate, which in the colonies was a heavy burden, equal to or even more than the land revenue. In other words, the leasing companies were no different from the big landlords of the surrounding villages who levied all manner of cesses on their tenants in addition to the already high half-share rent.

Though the movement began in the area of the leasing companies (for specific reasons as we shall see presently), it did spread later, especially in the post-war years, to the proper landlord areas of the districts of Montgomery and Multan. Therefore, it would be in order to discuss these big landlords as well, some of whom had got thousands of acres of land. They reportedly indulged in all kinds of feudal oppression and exploitation, for example, begar, cesses of all kinds, cash payments by tenants on occasions of marriage and death in their own or the landlord's family. The tenants were generally so frightened that they would even refuse to give evidence in court cases against landlords for fear of retaliation. Caste oppression was added to the economic as the tenants generally belonged to the castes lower down in the caste hierarchy such as Odes, Rai-Sikhs, Kambohs or Kambojs, Baurias, etc., whereas the landlords were generally of the upper castes, whether Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh.⁴

4. The account in this and the preceding para is based on Interviews with Wadhawa Ram and Chhaju Mal Vaid, and on Chhaju Mal Vaid's chapter on the 'Tenant Movement in Punjab' in Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom
contd...

In addition to the landlords or the lease-holders and their agents, the poor tenants had to bear the exactions of the lower rungs of the bureaucracy as well. Wadhawa Ram, a major leader of the area, himself a patwari before he resigned and joined the movement in 1939, recounts the manner in which the revenue and other officials expected to be and were looked after on their tours - free supplies by shopkeepers, free labour from the kamins, and bribes from the others. If a girl got married, the family had to pay Rs.50 as a gift to the officials. If anybody dared to defy, then the strict colony regulations about ventilators in houses and clean streets would be brought into play and false complaints filed on these counts. In fact, when Wadhawa Ram refused to comply with this general practice, he quickly got marked as a 'Congress' patwari.⁵

Clearly, there was no dearth of issues on which protest might emerge. Surprisingly, what triggered off the protest, however, was rivalry between the leasing companies in the Nili Bar Canal colony. In 1937, one of the big leasing companies,

contd...

Struggle, as well as on FR(2) Feb. 1938, H.P. F.18/2/1938, and the letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 22 Nov. 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss Eur. F.125/87.

5. Interview with Wadhawa Ram.

the British Cotton Growers' Association, popularly referred to as BCG Company, lost out in the competition for better land as other companies bid with higher tenders and got the leases. An enterprising agent of the BCG, Kali Dass, realizing that his only chance of securing good land for his company was to somehow get the tenders cancelled, went around the tenant villages and told them that if land was transferred to the new lessees, they would have to pay higher rents, etc. He convinced the tenants sufficiently to organise a deputation of 40 tenants led by Tikaya Ram to hold a demonstration before the residence of the Revenue Minister, Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, in Lahore. The Minister heard their grievances, and asked the Commissioner of Multan division to visit Burewala and investigate on the spot.

Meanwhile, it appears, the Punjab Kisan Committee came to hear of the goings-on in the Nili Bar Colony; and Baba Jwala Singh, the President of the PKC, accompanied by Comrades Ram Singh Ghalamala and Waryam Singh, reached Burewala on 18 May 1937, two days before the scheduled visit of the Commissioner, and contacted Baba Jalwant Singh, an old comrade now running an arattia's or commission agent's shop in Arifwala to earn his living. Accompanied by him, they went to the affected villages and on the 19th of May held a representative tenant meeting in which the demands to be placed before the Commissioner were formulated. When the Commissioner came on the following day, there was a good turn-out of tenants, especially as Kali Dass had continued his mobilization of

tenants asking them to come to see the Commissioner and hear the Kisan Sabha leaders who were coming from Lahore. The demands presented to the Commissioner — division of the crop on a 50:50 basis on the field, no illegal levies, fodder price to be paid by tenants not to exceed Rs.3, 2 annas per kanal - were accepted by him. At this, the representatives of the other companies expressed their inability to pay up the lease amounts and asked their pattas to be cancelled and the lands re-auctioned. In the re-auction, Kali Dass was able to secure the land of his choice for his company.⁶

The necessary catalyst had been provided for the expression of tenant discontent, no matter that the catalytic agent was the agent of one of the companies that exploited the tenants. As Marxists would say, sometimes the contradictions within the ruling classes can be used in favour of the exploited. The Punjab Kisan Committee had succeeded in gaining an entry-point into the muzara or tenant belt of West Punjab, and they were quick to push home the advantage.⁷

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6. This and the preceding para are based on Interviews with Wadhawa Ram and Chhaju Mal Vaid, and on Chhaju Mal Vaid's chapter on the 'Tenant Movement in Punjab' in Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle.
 7. The Tribune, 16 December, 1937 carried a report that Baba Jwala Singh and Comrade Mangal Singh Chahal are going to Montgomery Ilaqa to establish kisan committees, as part of the plan of socialist workers to tour the province.

Early in 1938, there was again trouble when particularly high tenders were reported to have been made and the Government was examining their probable effects. It appears that the Kisan Sabha activists got wind of this and mobilized many tenants who were to be evicted by the lessees to announce that they would refuse to deliver possession of land to new tenants.⁸ There were reports that a large number of tenants, 40,000 according to one estimate, were on strike, and a deputation came to meet the Revenue Minister on 25 February.⁹ The Government acted with alacrity. It announced the fixation of maximum rents to be taken from tenants and the cancellation of tenders received, and also that it was calling for fresh tenders. Leases still current were to be dealt with on the same lines so far as maximum rent was concerned, the lease money being reduced by Government accordingly. This would entail a considerable loss to provincial revenue.¹⁰ In other words, after this government announcement, legally, the leasing companies in Nili Bar could no longer claim any rent higher than 50 per cent. This was a very significant victory for tenants, as we shall see soon, for the struggle now became one for implementation and extension of this concession to other areas.

8. FR(2) Feb. 1938, H.P. F.18/2/1938.

9. The Tribune, 25 Feb. 1938.

10. FR(2) Feb. 1938, H.P. F.18/2/1938.

Following this victory, a number of conferences were organised in the area in the next few months to claim credit for the struggle and its gains, and urge the tenants to join Kisan committees.¹¹ Along with this, the work of organisation was being carried on in the villages as well. A report in May, for example, said that Comrade Ram Singh Ghalamala and Hazura Singh had succeeded in setting up 600 kisan sabhas in Nili Bar Colony.¹² By June, another round of protest appeared to be in the making; this time other tenants in Montgomery district wanted the extension of the concessions given to the tenants in Nili Bar. The PKC activists, Ram Singh Ghalamala, Prof. Jalwant Singh, and Mangal Singh were in the forefront again; and there were strikes by the tenants.¹³ Unrest continued intermittently in the whole area,¹⁴ and came to a head again in October, this time in Khanewal sub-division of Multan district, where the targets of attack, ironically,

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11. Conferences of which reports are available were held at Burewala on 6 March, at Harappa in district Montgomery on 14-15 March, at Montgomery on 17-18 April, at Haveli sometime at the end of May, and at Multan around the end of May. FR(1) March 1938, H.P. F.18/3/1938; The Tribune, 11 March 1938; FR(2) April 1938, H.P. F.18/4/1938; The Tribune, 17 May, 1 June and 3 July 1938.
 12. The Tribune, 17 May 1938; FR(2) May 1938, H.P. F.18/5/1938.
 13. FR(2) June 1938, H.P. F.18/6/1938; The Tribune, 3 July and 29 July 1938.
 14. FR(2) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1934.

included Kali Dass's BCG company. Tenants of 15 chaks refused, under the leadership of the District Congress Committee and the District Kisan Committee, to pick cotton or sow the wheat crop. Their representatives went to Amritsar as well, and mobilisation through conferences continued apace.¹⁵

During this phase, Kali Dass was once picked up and locked in a house when he tried to intervene in some dispute in a village, but the village elders took pity on him when the youth had gone out to work in the fields and let him go!¹⁶

There were also reports of strikes on the land of some absentee landlords in Khanewal; there was another strike involving 25,000 tenants against tender-holders in the Vihari Ilaqa in Multan district which was settled only after the intervention of the Colonization Officer.¹⁷

It had obviously become clear to the Government by now that once it had conceded the principle of half-share as maximum

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15. FR(1) and (2) October 1938, FR(1) and (2) Nov. 1938, H.P. F.18/10/1938 and 18/11/1938; The Tribune, 10 and 13 October 1938; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 22 November 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/87.
 16. Chapter on 'Tenant Movement in Punjab' by Chhaju Mal Vaid in Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, pp.283-84.
 17. The Tribune, 14 Nov. and 2 Dec. 1938. In the dispute in the Vihari Ilaqa, the settlement reportedly occurred on terms very favourable to the tenants: (1) the charge of Rs.6 per kanal of fodder was reduced to Rs.3-2-0; (2) all extra cesses were stopped; (3) the picked cotton would be divided in the field itself.

legal rent in one colony, and there was a popular demand for its extension, it could not but extend it to other areas. Nor could it intervene on the side of the lessees to secure them more than the legal rent in case the tenants refused to pay. Of course, it did not want to create the impression that it was succumbing to pressure from the Congress and the Communists, and this made it hesitate for some time; but once it saw that there was no way out, it took the necessary action.¹⁸ Lessees were told to grant sub-tenants substantial reductions and corresponding reductions were made in rent charged by Government from lessees. Any lessee who did not accept the new conditions would have to relinquish his lease. Further, the whole system of temporary leases was reviewed and found uneconomical "as the land has not only to support the sub-tenant (who in present conditions makes a bare subsistence), but also to provide the rent due to government and the middle man, lessee's, profits." The Government decided, therefore, "to bring this system gradually to a close and, in spite of the present low value of the land, to dispose of considerably larger areas than hitherto either by auction or by settlement of permanent peasant colonists. In the meantime, such temporary leases as continue to be granted will be subject to a comparatively restricted maximum area in the case of each individual lessee."¹⁹

18. FR(1) November 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1938; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 22 Nov. 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/87.

19. Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 22 Nov. 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/87.

Inevitably, despite the wishes of the Government, the concessions announced were "generally regarded as a triumph for the Congressmen who promoted the agitation."²⁰ The announcement of the concessions, therefore, after perhaps a temporary lull, led to an intensification of activity early in 1939. There were reports of a deputation of tenants reaching Lahore and seeking an interview with the Premier, which he refused despite pressure from senior Congressmen.²¹ There were reports that 'rumours' were being spread that tenants would acquire occupancy rights if they stayed on the same plot for 6 years²² - which was the system prevalent in other provinces where tenants-at-will automatically became occupancy tenants after the lapse of a specified number of years (unless they were evicted before that). Some landlords of Suchan village who heard the 'rumour', decided to evade the new law by exchanging the plots of their tenants. For the tenants, the

20. Letter from Crak to Linlithgow, 23/24 Dec. 1938, Ibid.

21. The Tribune, 8, 14, 15, 16 Jan. 1939; FR(1) Jan. 1939, H.P. F.18/1/1939. It is possible that this deputation came to seek clarifications about the provision in the Government announcement which said that some of the colony land meant for temporary cultivation would be split into small lots "to suit lessees of slender means." It seems the Kisan Committee opposed this, though no satisfactory reason is given for its opposition in the official report, which only gives as the reason the fear that it would remove the grievance of the tenants. See FR(2) Feb. 1939, H.P. F.18/2/1939. Perhaps, this was a ploy to divide the tenants by offering the lure of direct lease to some of them and the Kisan Committee was able to see through this ploy. This impression is strengthened by the reference in the report on the deputation that one of their demands was for loans from the government. The loans could most likely be for paying the instalments for the lease of the land. See The Tribune, 14, 15 and 16 Jan. 1939.

22. According to the official report, the rumours were spread by the Kisan Committee. FR(2) Feb. 1939, H.P. F.18/2/1939.
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landlords' action acted as the final proof of the truth of the rumour - why else would they shift them to new plots? This led to resistance on the part of the tenants and a retaliatory attack by the landlords and their goondas resulting in the death of one tenant and injuries to many others. This happened in the second half of February 1939.²³

Predictably, this incident created a lot of feeling of anger and discontent, to which the kisan activists contributed, it seems, by advising the tenants to resist evictions with force. There were reports throughout March of disputes between tenants and lessees, attacks by landlords on tenants, conferences and accusations of assault, and on several occasions the police had to be sent out to the villages to prevent clashes.²⁴ Matters came to a head on 12 April when the Colonization Officer called in the police to assist him in the eviction of old tenants from certain land recently released

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Wadhawa Ram, however, in his interview, merely refers to the prevalence of such rumours.

23. FR(2) Feb. 1939, H.P. F.18/2/1939; Interview with Wadhawa Ram; Chhaju Mal Vaid's chapter on 'Tenant Movement in Punjab' in Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, p.284. Also see The Tribune, 7 Feb. 1939.
24. FR(1) March 1939, H.P. F.18/3/1939; The Tribune, 2 March 1939. There was also a Kisan Conference at Burewala on 25 and 26 March, at which reportedly several speakers indulged in abuse of the Premier. FR(2) March 1939, H.P. F.18/3/1939. Unrest continued in early April. FR(1) April 1939, H.P. F.18/4/1939.

to a new lessee in Chak No.451. One of these tenants was Tikaya Ram, a tenant leader and General Secretary of the Nili Bar Kisan Committee, which makes one wonder whether the choice of this village for the show of force by the authorities was entirely a coincidence. The tenants resisted, and 16 were arrested for obstruction. The next day, 100 tenants reached the land and began to plough it. They were declared an unlawful assembly and dispersed. Eighteen 'ring leaders' were arrested. This was followed by a satyagraha till the 24th of April in which daily parties of 5 came to court arrest. After the 24th of April, it appears, overt resistance came to an end.²⁵ According to available evidence, the movement was then resumed only after the War.

The Government succeeded in stamping out the resistance for the time being because it took extremely harsh measures. All the prominent activists were dealt with through arrests and internments and externments. Among these were Ram Singh Ghalamala, Prof. Jalwant Singh, Jogender Singh Bhamber and Bachan Singh Gholia. The tenants arrested in the incidents described above were also given harsh sentences, at times of two and a half years rigorous imprisonment.²⁶ Besides, through its prompt and firm action, the Government made it clear that

25. FR(2) April 1939, H.P. F.18/4/1939; The Tribune, 20 April 1939.

26. FR(1) and (2) April 1939, H.P. F.18/4/1939; Chhaju Mal Vaid's chapter on 'Tenant Movement in Punjab' in Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, p.284.

it was not yielding on the question of ejection and, unlike in the case of the refusal to pay extra levies and do begar, etc., the tenants had no legal leg to stand upon, since the Punjab tenurial law did not grant occupancy right on the basis of length of possession. Only recently, the Assembly had thrown out a bill introduced by the Congress leader Mian Iftikhar-ud-din which sought to introduce security of tenure for tenants-at-will.²⁷

The question then arises: why was the Unionist Government so firmly against any concession on the issue of security of tenure to tenants when it had rather easily conceded the principle of a limitation on rent in the case of lease-holders? The answer may be found in the difference between landlords and lease-holders. While the Unionist Ministry could by no means go against the interests of the very class that it represented and was in fact comprised of - for that is what acceptance of security of tenure for tenants would mean - it could

27. The Bill he introduced to amend the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1887 wanted to give security of tenure to tenants-at-will, those in occupancy for 6 years on 1 October 1938 were to get occupancy rights, rents were to be restricted to half the produce, land revenue and abiana to be paid by the landlord, no exactions to be levied on tenants except legitimate expenses directly relating to cultivation. Tenancy to be normally guaranteed for 4 years, and, in case of non-cultivation or non-payment of rent, to two years. The Bill was refused permission for introduction by 87 to 47 votes. The Tribune, 2 Dec. 1938. Given the timing of the Bill, it is possible that it was the cause of the rumour about the six-year occupancy leading to occupancy rights. Some activists or others may have mentioned the attempt to make a law on these lines and this might then have got transformed into an actual law.

afford to place controls and curbs on and even gradually do away with the lease-holding companies, for its very political existence did not depend on them. Besides, these companies were legally tenants of the Government and their terms of tenancy could be changed by an order of the Government whereas if Government^{was to}/to regulate the relations between landlords and tenants, it would have to bring about legislation for the purpose, which itself was a prolonged political process during which all kinds of interests expressed themselves in a variety of ways. In the case of the leasing companies, the only loss the Government had to suffer was a monetary one. Many of these companies, besides, it seemed, were foreign-owned, and it is unlikely that any foreign company could afford to make much of a public noise by that time without raising a nationalist outcry.

Once the Government had conceded the principle of limitation of rent in Nili Bar, it could not resist its extension to other colonies, once the demand arose. Simultaneously, once the tenants of the colonies knew that the Government had conceded the legal principle in one case, it became easy to organize them to demand its extension to their areas. The legal status endowed on the demand gave it a legitimacy in popular consciousness and also the confidence that it was capable of being won. In other words, two essential ingredients of a successful struggle had been provided: belief in its legitimacy and the confidence that it had a reasonable

chance of success. No doubt, the rapid spread of the movement across the colony area was also due to the fact that unlike the traditional landlords of Western Punjab, who kept their tenants under control with the aid of kinship and religion and political and economic backwardness, the leasing companies had no such ties with their tenants. Therefore, the movement did not have to break down the initial wall of resistance normally built by traditional notions of loyalty to the person and family and kin of the landlord. Besides, these were all newly-settled colony areas, and even in the landlord-owned pockets, the tenants would be new settlers and would not have the kind of traditional linkages with their landlords that we are familiar with in the old landlord areas. Besides, when traditional landlords demanded and got extra levies on the occasion of marriages, deaths, births, etc., or otherwise, there was at least the notion of reciprocity involved, whereas in the case of the leasing companies, when their agents exacted begar or increased the share of produce, it was entirely one-sided and blatant and visible exploitation. All these factors made it possible to build, in rather a short period of time, a pretty extensive and powerful movement among the tenants of the colony areas. Once this firm base was established, the task of extending it to the landlord areas, which was performed after the War, became easier.

The Nili Bar-Montgomery-Multan tenants' struggle also brings out clearly the role of the activists of the Punjab Kisan Sabha and the Congress. Almost the entire task of

organisation and mobilisation, of leadership, was performed by workers specially sent for the purpose from central Punjab.²⁸ In other words, the movement in the colonies became possible only because the strength of the movement in central Punjab could be harnessed for its purposes. To accept this fact neither minimizes the role of the tenants themselves or of activists who gradually emerged from among the tenants such as Wadhawa Ram and Tikaya Ram, nor does it reduce the role of the other factors that we have discussed above in the building up of the movement. For cadre to emerge from within such a rack-rented and backward group is no easy process; while that process takes its course the movement can only be continued by the already-conscious and trained elements who are inevitably 'outsiders'.

The relative ease of the spread of the movement is also explained by the fact that the tenants of these areas were mostly Rai Sikh and Kamboh settlers from the Central districts who had some acquaintance with and felt the impact of the political movements of their home districts. They were quite different from the typical Muslim tenant of western Punjab who had been carefully protected from any outside influence.

28. Interviews with Bhagat Singh Bilga, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, and Dalip Singh Jauhal. Surjeet says that after the formation of the PKC, "we realised that you can't spread the movement unless you take up issues affecting the poor. It was then that we began to take special cadre and allot them from central Punjab to west Punjab, especially Montgomery and Multan areas."

To mobilise them into political action was therefore not so difficult as it would have been if the tenants were Muslim. The significance of this fact is recognised by all the Kisan leaders familiar with the movement.²⁹

II

The district of Amritsar occupied an enviable position in the annals of the struggle for freedom in Punjab. Jallian-wala Bagh had already immortalized it in 1919. The Akali Movement, too, fought many of its biggest battles within its borders, both in Amritsar city and in the dehat. Both city and countryside had participated fully in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Kisan activists had made the area a major base, with the Kirtis and the CPI group, as well as the Socialists, all represented in good measure. It was the home district of Ghadri Babas, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Jwala Singh, of Sohan Singh Josh, Munshi Ahmad Din, Dr. Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal, Udham Singh Nagoke, and Pratap Singh Kairon. Thus, the Congress, the Akalis, the Communists (CPI and Kirtis) and Socialists all had a significant political presence in the district. As a consequence, it was a highly politicized area with a strong anti-imperialist tradition.³⁰

29. For example, Interviews with Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, Chhaju Mal Vaid, Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

30. This revolutionary tradition was very much a part of the consciousness of the political activists. For example, Interview with Jagbir Singh Chhina, a nephew of Achhar Singh Chhina, who was a very young activist in the late 1930s and 1940s. The pride with which he recounts the anti-imperialist tradition of his district is striking indeed.

Little wonder, then, that the movement that I am about to describe was a joint effort by all the different political groups and was able to arouse an unprecedented (for the Kisan movement) degree of popular support from non-peasant sections of the population. I am referring, of course, to the Amritsar Kisan Morcha or Amritsar Bandobast Morcha or Uche Pul da Morcha or Bhandari Pul da Morcha, as it was variously described, which was launched on 20 July 1938. But, before I begin the story of the Morcha, a little dip into the previous few months to chart the build-up to the grand event.

In January, a vigorous campaign for release of political prisoners was launched in Punjab, along with the rest of the country. Amritsar district was in the forefront of the campaign, with any number of village meetings and collection of thousands of signatures on petitions demanding the release. Political prisoners in Punjab jails, including the Andaman repatriates, were on hunger-strike and there was considerable anxiety about their condition. In Jullundur district, in Ferozepore and Amritsar, public meetings and rallies demanding release were held. On the 24th of January a huge public meeting was held in Lahore in the morning, which was joined by students who left their classes en masse; another one was held in the afternoon, and then a procession half a mile long wound its way to the Assembly Chamber. On being stopped by the police, the processionists sat down, shouted slogans and performed 'siapa' or mock mourning. This was reported to be witnessed by about 50,000 people. At 6.30 p.m. when

the Assembly session was over, the procession was allowed to proceed to the Assembly Chamber. It then returned to the city and ended in another big public meeting. Congress Socialists, Ghadarites, and Communists were the most active in the organisation and mobilisation of this movement. In early February, big processions were taken out in Amritsar and Jullundur as well. Amritsar peasants had been active participants in this campaign by way of contributing signatures, participating in public meetings and sending jathas to the big demonstrations.³¹

The next important 'happening' was a violent clash in Fatehwal.³² It seems that for some time there had been attempts by pro-Government elements instigated by the police to disrupt meetings held by the Congress in Ajnala tahsil. Attempts were being made to use the local Muslim inhabitants in this game. Villagers who gave facilities to nationalists were being intimidated. One such incident had occurred in Fatehwal village where a Congress meeting being addressed by

31. See The Tribune, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25 and 26 Jan., 5, 8 and 18 Feb. 1938; FR(2) Jan. 1938, H.P. F.18/1/1938.

32. The account of the Fatehwal incident in this and the next two paras is put together from the following sources:

FR(1) April 1938, H.P. F.18/4/1938; Letters from H.W. Emerson, Governor, Punjab to Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy, India, dated 17 March and 5 April 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86; Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Joginder Singh Chhina, Dalip Singh Jauhal, all kisan activists of that period in Amritsar who were present on the spot, and with Karam Singh Mann, who was deeply involved in the legal defence of the accused.

Gopi Chand Bhargava, a senior Gandhian Congress leader, was disrupted and Bhargava insulted. The political workers of the area, it appears, decided that they must go back to Fatehwal and hold a meeting there, otherwise the pro-Government elements would get a big boost and would continue to disrupt meetings. They sought the help of Achhar Singh Chhina, the famous Communist leader, who had just been released from internment in his village Harsha Chhina. The Congressmen then went in large numbers to the proposed meeting at Fatehwal. The opponents were also well-prepared and the meeting was surrounded by badmashes, who reportedly planned to cut the ropes of the pandal and let it collapse on the meeting. The Congress workers decided to defend themselves, and in the melee, two men of the opponents got killed.

Joginder Singh Chhina, one of the young Kirti workers who was given a life sentence for his alleged role in this incident, maintained in his interview to the author given 47 years after the event that they had absolutely no intention of attacking, let alone killing, the disruptors since they were very conscious that if any such thing happened they would be rounded up and their political work would suffer. They had collected sticks, but only to defend themselves. Nevertheless, the fact that two of the pro-Government men were killed, gave the police an opportunity to order a general round up of political workers. 39 people were arrested. The Congress immediately moved an adjournment motion in the Assembly. The Fatehwal case carried on for three years; Jawaharlal Nehru was

President of the Defence Committee, and Dr. Kitchlew, the Congress leader, and Karam Singh Mann, who belonged to the CPI group, both lawyers, were actively involved in the defence. Achhar Singh Chhina, one of the accused, went underground and escaped to Russia. Joginder Singh Chhina too was caught only after he had been underground for two years. The Defence Committee fought the case till the High Court and succeeded in getting everyone released in 1941.

The Fatehwal case remained in the headlines for months to come and contributed to the general anti-Government atmosphere in a big way. "The attention of the whole of the Punjab was riveted on this case," recalls Karam Singh Mann, who spent three years almost entirely on this case. He also points out that it cemented relations between the Communists and the Congress, since all were in it together, and the Congressmen involved in the case stood firm like a rock, thus earning the respect of the left wing.

For a few weeks, before the Morcha occupied the lime-light, there was also a vigorous agitation on two issues -- malba and re-modelling of canal outlets on the Rayya distributary. The malba agitation was part of a wider Congress-led agitation which involved other districts as well, especially Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana.³³ Opposition to malba — which was a cess collected on the land revenue in order to supposedly

33. FR(1) July 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938.

defray the common village expenses but which had degenerated into an expense account for visiting Government officials -- had been there for a long time; almost all meetings of peasants passed resolutions urging its abolition. It came to a head now because in the general anti-government atmosphere peasants were loath to pay for the expenses of those they saw as their oppressors. Besides, technically, malba had always been a voluntary charge, only collected along with the land revenue for convenience, and recently the Revenue Minister had made a public announcement in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, no doubt in response to the persistent agitation, that malba was not a legal charge, only a village common fund, and that its collection along with land revenue was not obligatory.³⁴ Taking their stand on this, Kisan Sabha workers in Amritsar district had gone around the villages holding numerous meetings at which they pointed out that collection of malba was illegal, and that it was spent on the entertainment of official visitors and revenue and police officers while it was shown in the accounts as "charity to lepers."³⁵

Peasants began to refuse malba, and four of them were arrested for non-payment in village Lalpura. On this peasants from several villages in Tarn Taran tahsil wrote to the tahsildar of Tarn Taran that they were ready to pay land

34. The Tribune, 9 July 1938.

35. Ibid., 8 and 9 July 1938.

revenue but under no circumstances would they pay malba which was a voluntary tax. Udham Singh Nagoke interviewed the tahsil-dar and explained to him that malba was not a legal charge. A vigorous agitation was reported to be continuing on this issue in July.³⁶

The other issue was that of the re-modelling of canal outlets. The Government maintained that the narrowing of outlets was necessary in order to reach more water to villages at the tail of the distributary whose supply had dwindled considerably.³⁷ Peasants argued that there was no reduction in the water-rate, no increase in time for which water was given, only a reduction in the size of the outlets.³⁸ The agitation in Amritsar coincided with the protest in Lyallpur district on the same issue, which had been going on since May. I shall stop and briefly describe the situation in Lyallpur since it really became a joint agitation towards the end.

Peasants in various villages of Toba Tek Singh tahsil had started refusing to take canal water as a protest against

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36. FR(1) July 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938; The Tribune, 8 and 9 July 1938.
37. For the Government stand, see Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, 8 July 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86; 'Official Communique' published in The Tribune, 27 July 1938.
38. The Tribune, 9 July 1938.

the re-modelling and decrease in the size of outlets which, on Government's own admission, now meant that water reached only 17 out of the 25 acres in a square of land. The protest was helped along by a strong Congress intervention by way of a big public meeting addressed by Virendra, the Managing Editor of the Daily Pratap, and Nawabzada Mahmud Ali, the Congressman who was a nephew of the Premier, and Giani Kartar Singh, the Akali leader, by village meetings by the District Congress Committee, and by a deputation of nationalist members of the District Board of the Deputy Commissioner to intercede on behalf of the peasants. A big demonstration was held at the district headquarters on 10 June, to which 6 jathas ranging in size from 60 to 550 marched from different parts, the final gathering reaching 15,000, according to the usually conservative Government estimate. Negotiations with the authorities ensued, but broke down.³⁹

At the end of June, this agitation also spread to Amritsar district, and from both districts came reports of organised and persistent refusal to take canal water. Lyallpur District Congress Committee gave a call for observing 15 July as Anti-canal Day throughout the district; and the message was

39. FR(2) May 1938 and FR(1) June 1938, H.P. F.18/5/1938 and 18/6/1938; Letters from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab, to Viceroy, dated 24 June and 8 July 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86; and The Tribune, 5, 8, 21, 25 and 27 May, 2, 16, 17 and 22 June 1938. The Governor in his letters cited above admitted the justice of the peasants' complaint.

popularised through conferences and meetings, including one which Abdul Majid, the Communist leader, and Bibi Fatima came to address from Lahore and which was specially targeted at Muslim peasants. The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha gave a call for peasants in Amritsar to follow suit and thus 15 July 1938 was observed as an Anti-canal day on which no canal water was to be taken by anyone. The Government reported that 50 villages in Lyallpur actually refused water on that day, but it also admitted that there was a huge bandobast on the day by the police and canal staff, and arrests were also made. The Congress moved an adjournment motion in the Assembly.⁴⁰

In Amritsar, the agitation over malba and the remodeling of canal outlets flowed straight into the Amritsar Kisan Morcha started on July 20. Though this Morcha was launched by the Amritsar Bandobast (Settlement) Committee, it was not meant as a protest only against the reported increase in revenue at the settlement. The Gurumukhi poster that appeared in Amritsar on 12 July announcing the demonstration in fact clearly listed among the grievances the fact that "the canal outlets of a number of villages had been reduced and that the peasants were groaning under the burden of malba, chowkidara, chahi and local rates." Of course, it also alleged that the

40. FR(2) June 1938, FR(1) July 1938, H.P. F.18/6/1938, and 18/7/1938; Letters from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 22 July and 9 August 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86; The Tribune, 3 and 19 July 1938 for Lyallpur, and 5, 8 and 9 July 1938 for Amritsar.

Settlement Officer had announced an addition of Rupees four lakhs per annum to the land revenue of the district.⁴¹ In other words the demonstration on 20 July called by the

Conference at Nowshera Punnuan in late September 1937, to which Jayaprakash Narayan had been invited.⁴⁴ From the beginning of 1938 as well, there were reports that the Bandobast Committee was active in organizing conferences and meetings. Around February, there appears to have been some sort of split between the Akalis and the Communists, and the Akalis had formed a separate Bandobast Committee. The Akalis, it seems, were perturbed about the effects of the Communist attitude to religion on the Sikh masses.⁴⁵ However, this does not seem to have led to any very serious rift as all of them were able to come together again for the conduct of the Morcha in July 1938.

The Bandobast Committee had called for a huge demonstration on 20 July at Amritsar in the Civil Lines outside the Canal and Settlement Offices and the houses of the Revenue Minister and Deputy Commissioner.⁴⁶ The District Kisan

44. See Chapter 10 above.

45. FR(2) Feb. 1938, FR(2) March 1938, FR(1) June 1938; H.P. F.18/2/1938, 18/3/1938, 18/6/1938; The Tribune 4 and 10 March 1938.

46. The account of the demonstration and the lathi-charge, etc. in this and the next para is based on the following:

Reports filed by the Correspondents of the Tribune and the Associated Press on the incident in The Tribune, 21 July 1938; Statement of Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, M.L.A., General Secretary of Amritsar Bandobast Committee, published in The Tribune, 22 July 1938; FR(2) July 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938; Interviews with Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ram Singh Majitha, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, Balwant Singh Azad, Dalip Singh Tapiala, all participants in the event; and the Enclosure with letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, dated 22 July 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86.

Committee and the District Congress Committee had supported the call and on 20 July thousands of peasants began to pour into Amritsar. By the afternoon, a mammoth meeting was in progress in Jallianwala Bagh, which all anti-imperialist forces in Punjab had helped to make into a living memorial to nationalism by making it the venue of an unending stream of political gatherings. Meanwhile, on the 19th, the administration had brought Section 144 into force in the area of the city north of the Lahore-Delhi railway line in which the Civil Lines lay. The demonstration in the Civil Lines was thus made impossible. At the meeting, therefore, a call was given for volunteers to defy the ban and about 300 men representing the Bandobast Committee and the Kisan Committee and drawn from different villages were formed into a jatha. This jatha, led by Udham Singh Nagoke, the nationalist Akali leader who had been most active among the peasants of Amritsar, and accompanied by other leaders such as Harnam Singh Kasel, Sohan Singh Josh and Bibi Raghbir Kaur, as well as a crowd of at least 5 to 6 thousand peasants and several thousand other sympathisers, marched through the Hall Bazaar amid scenes of tremendous enthusiasm on the part of the spectators. The jatha carried flags with the hammer and sickle, Congress flags and revolutionary placards as well as an effigy of 'malba', which was later burnt. It also shouted slogans against the Unionist Ministry.

When the jatha reached the railway overbridge which led into the prohibited area, about half the jatha was allowed to cross over before the District Magistrate's warning was read out. Udham Singh Nagoke replied that they were only going to present their grievances since other attempts had proved useless. The jatha continued to move forward. The City Magistrate, Mr. Muhammad Shafi, then ordered a lathi-charge, at which about 100 police constables fell upon the crowd with their lathis. The processionists immediately sat down on the ground and then lay on each other, exposing their backs to the lathis of the police. The police then proceeded to drag and push them to get them out of the way. The lathi-charge, which was generally described as very severe, and the use of mounted police to push back the crowd led to several older members of the jatha falling unconscious and Udham Singh Nagoke himself was badly injured in the eye and lay bleeding. In all, about 300 people were seriously injured. While a few were arrested, the rest, including many of the injured, were either taken and dumped at far-off places in police vans and lorries, or left to be cared for by Seva Samiti volunteers.

The next day, the Congress MLAs created such a furore in the Punjab Legislative Assembly at Simla that the Premier had to promise to inquire into the lathi-charge. The adjournment motion was moved by Sardar Harjap Singh, the well-known Communist, now a Congress MLA. Impassioned speeches were made by Sohan Singh Josh, Bibi Raghbir Kaur, and Pratap Singh Kairon who gave eye-witness accounts of the lathi-charge and produced

broken iron-shod pieces of lathis as proof of their charges.⁴⁷

The people of Amritsar responded as if the challenge had been thrown to all of them. As the newspapers pointed out, the spot at which the lathi-charge took place was the very same at which the crowd that was going to demand the release of Drs. Satyapal and Kitchlew in April 1919 was fired upon⁴⁸ — the incident which triggered off the chain of events leading to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In fact, something of the spirit of 1919 and of the Akali jathas appears to have come alive in those days in the city. The same evening as the lathi-charge on the jatha, a huge public meeting was held at Jallianwala Bagh, which was attended by 6000 people according to the Government estimate, and at which 'violent' speeches were made.⁴⁹ The next day, two public meetings were held in the same hallowed surroundings, one in the afternoon addressed by the Congress stalwart of Amritsar, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew, and another one again in the evening. That day, on the 21st, the entire bazaar went on hartal, including Katra Ahluwalia, comprising the various cloth markets, Guru Bazaar, Nimak Mandi, the grain and bullion markets, as also the two satta chambers. In the evening, a huge crowd of thousands assembled to support the jatha sent by the War Council to defy Section 144. It

47. The Tribune, 22 July 1938.

48. Report by the Tribune Correspondent on the demonstration of 20 July, The Tribune, 21 July 1938.

49. FR(2) July 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938.

got restive and suffered a number of lathi-charges.⁵⁰ On July 23rd, 11 Congress members of the City Municipal Committee walked out when the President did not allow an adjournment motion on the subject. Workers' organisations offered to contribute a jatha to the satyagraha.⁵¹

Public meetings continued to be held at brief intervals. One was held on the 22nd - a joint one by the City and District Congress Committees, the District Kisan and Socialist parties and the Hosiery Workmen's Association in Mandi Kesarganj. The meeting was preceded by a procession.⁵² Another one was held at the Jallianwala Bagh on the 28th, addressed by Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, MLA and Secretary of the Bandobast Committee, and Sohan Singh Josh.⁵³ More meetings were held at Jallianwala Bagh on 29th July and 2nd August, 4th August, two on the 5th of August - one at Jallianwala Bagh and the other at Nimak Mandi Chowk.⁵⁴ It is very possible that our list is incomplete.

Outside the city as well, support was forthcoming. Meetings were held in many villages and many Ilaqas sent their jathas to participate in the daily programme of courting of arrest that continued till the 9th of August. From Jullundur and Lahore came offers of jathas.⁵⁵ Swami Sahajanand and N.G.

50. The Tribune, 22 July 1938.

51. The Tribune, 24 July and 30 July 1938.

52. The Tribune, 23 July 1938.

53. The Tribune, 29 July 1938.

54. The Tribune, 30 July, 3, 5 and 6 August 1938.

55. The Tribune, 28 July, 31 July, 2, 3 and 5 Aug. 1938.

Ranga issued statements of support.⁵⁶ The Tribune wrote an editorial condemning the lathi-charge as unnecessarily severe, questioning the right of the Unionist government to be called either a 'zamindar' government or a 'popular' government.⁵⁷ The Akali Dal Executive Committee, of which Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon was a member, condemned the lathi-charge and expressed sympathy with the peasants in their demands.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the organisers of the Morcha had immediately formed themselves into a War Council which was re-cast after a couple of days to include the Kisan Committee, i.e., the left wing activists. This War Council decided to continue to send daily jathas of roughly 25 men to defy the prohibitory orders. Everyday, a jatha would go, and usually the leader would be arrested and the rest dumped many miles away from the city. Soon jathas representing different rural Ilaqas began coming in to offer arrest. After a few days, the Government began to arrest the organizers - the War Council was then dissolved and a dictator appointed. More arrests and raids followed: in Jallianwala Bagh, at the Punjab Kisan Committee and District Kisan Committee offices, and of Comrade Yog Raj in his village in Lahore district for a speech at Jallianwala Bagh. Many of the leaders who were arrested in the jathas were brought to trial and asked to give bail which

56. FR(2) July 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938; The Tribune, 24 July and 6 Aug. 1938.

57. The Tribune, 22 July 1938.

58. The Tribune, 6 Aug. 1938.

they refused, preferring to serve their sentences. At one time, in between, there were also reports of negotiations with the officials, and a jatha of red-flag waving students was even allowed to go to the Deputy Commissioner's residence, followed some days later by a jatha of peasants; but nothing came of these moves.⁵⁹

On the 9th and 10th of August, the Premier and Chhotu Ram were visiting the district. On the 9th morning, a jatha of 62 men was permitted to cross over into the Civil Lines area. They selected 10 representatives who then met the Deputy Commissioner and presented their grievances, which he promised to look into. They were also told the Premier would meet them the next day. According to the pre-arranged plan, the Deputy Commissioner handed them a copy of his order cancelling the imposition of Section 144 in the area. This was a result of the negotiations that had been carried on to be able to present a solution before the Premier's visit. The Morcha was then withdrawn.⁶⁰

59. FR(2) July and FR(1) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938 and 18/8/1938; The Tribune, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 and 31 July, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9 Aug. 1938; Interviews with Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ram Singh Majitha, and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

60. The Tribune, 10 Aug. 1938 and FR(1) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1938.

It appears that release of political prisoners was not part of the agreement, because most of them were released after serving their full sentences. Udham Singh Nagoke and Darshan Singh Pheruman, for example, were released only in February 1939, when the High Court reduced their sentence from one year to 6 months. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna and Baba Karam Singh Cheema were also released only in March 1939; and Santa Singh Gandiwind, another major leader, was asking for bail as late as April 1939.⁶¹

On the face of it, it can be argued that the Morcha did not achieve anything. The Government did not concede any of its demands; it did not even release the prisoners. It only withdrew Section 144. To accept this line of argument would be to ignore the politicizing impact the Morcha had on the peasants and other sections of the society who participated in, sympathised with, or even just observed its course. It also means ignoring the fact that movements are about more than their immediate demands. The basic objective of political movements of the time we are studying was to create and promote and advance a generalised political awareness and support which would secure the achievement of their political objectives in the long run, and not merely the satisfaction of some immediate, short-term demands. Their impact, too, therefore, has to be judged by these criteria. Gandhiji announced Swaraj in one year in 1920. It was not achieved till 1947. Does that mean that

61. For release of participants, see The Tribune, 28 Aug., 7 Nov. 1938, 1 and 4 March and 23 April 1939.

Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India were failures? In fact, it seems to us that the Amritsar Bando-bast Morcha succeeded in garnering a degree of popular support from other sections of society which no other peasant struggle of the time succeeded in getting in the province. This was true even in comparison with the Lahore Kisan Morcha in 1939 in which 5000 went to jail whereas in the Amritsar Morcha only 145 were arrested.

Of course, much of the explanation for the large success and impact of the Morcha lies in the fact that it was supported by all the anti-imperialist forces - the Akalis, the Congress, Socialists and Communists. It was a good example of what a genuine united front, or unified struggle could achieve. Obviously, it was not possible to get the whole of the Amritsar market to down its shutters unless the support of the Congress, which commanded the allegiance of the Hindu merchants, was there. Again, the Amritsar Morcha was special in this respect for this kind of united action was not to be found in the Lahore Morcha or in the colony tenants' struggle. In Montgomery and Multan, the Kisan Committee activists were able to use some Congress contacts, and also the Congress name, because whether they said so or not, the people thought that since they were anti-government they must be Congressmen. But neither Congress nor Akalis had any significant base in the area which could bring to the movement the kind of benefits united action brought in Amritsar. Communists might at times be tempted to believe that the real strength behind the Morcha was theirs since it is probably true that

after the initial few days much of the organisational control, the bringing of jathas for arrest, etc., was in their hands. But it would be difficult to deny that the Morcha could not have got the attention it did - in the Press, in the Assembly, among the non-left sections of the public (who were the majority)⁶² - if it was a purely Communist affair.

The form of struggle employed by the Morcha - non-violent resistance to repression by stoically bearing violence - was the same as that employed by the Akali jathas in the Gurdwara Reform Movement and by the national movement as a whole. Its continuing effectiveness was shown by the manner in which the use of force on an unarmed, non-violent, non-resisting crowd aroused popular anger and sympathy. The thousands of citizens of Amritsar who poured out in the first few days to accompany the jathas, to attend the public meetings, even bear lathi-charges, were no doubt showing their solidarity with the victims and anger at their oppressors.

The Morcha also undoubtedly lowered the prestige of the Unionist Ministry and brought into question its image as a pro-peasant government. A government that ordered such a brutal lathi-charge on and arrested peasants and their leaders (who merely wanted to present their grievances to the authorities) without even the excuse of provocation by way of violence on their part: this was the image its opponents would now be able to build up with some credibility. The Unionists were

62. Ram Singh Majitha, Secretary of the Amritsar District Kisan Committee at that time, recounts in his Interview that his old father, a veteran of Guru ka Bagh Morcha

no doubt conscious of this, therefore the agreement with the Morcha leaders was made to coincide with the visit of the Premier and Chhotu Ram to the district, so that the damage could be restored. That this dent in their image occurred at a time when otherwise they were riding high on the basis of the passing of the agrarian legislation (as we shall soon discover) was important in itself.

One might add that it appears also that the leaders of the agitation were able to secure the successful termination of the Morcha with a formal settlement before its strength and public interest began to perceptibly wane. This was very important because, as was shown by the case of the Lahore Kisan Morcha later, unless a proper occasion was found for its termination, a morcha could go on and on meaninglessly and then just fizzle out. Perhaps Sohan Singh Josh and Pratap Singh Kairon, the two leaders who appear to have been deeply involved in the negotiations with the authorities,⁶³ were able to see that the Premier's proposed visit presented an opportunity for settlement which might not come their way again in a hurry, and they were able to conclude an honourable truce. The parallel from the national movement

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who served a jail sentence in that struggle, came to the 20 July demonstration and was even injured in the lathi-charge. Would he have come if the Akalis had not given the call?

63. See FR(1) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1938.

that comes to mind is the negotiations between the nationalists and the Government in December 1921 when the Government was keen to ensure a proper atmosphere for the Prince of Wales' visit. The negotiations failed, however, and after this Gandhiji could not secure any settlement and had to therefore unilaterally withdraw the movement on the ground of violence in Chauri Chaura.

III

Before we resume the saga of 'morchas' and 'jathas' and 'jathebandi', we need to turn our attention to some important developments which, though not strictly a part of the story of peasant resistance, had a profound impact on it. We are referring to the massive controversy that erupted when the Unionist Ministry brought forth a whole series of legislative measures, designed to bring about debt relief, in the summer of 1938. Four bills were introduced in June and three of them were passed by the Punjab Legislative Assembly in July 1938 within a matter of days. Appeals by some members that the bills be circulated for opinion were brushed aside and they were rushed through select committees and passed within a month of their introduction.⁶⁴ The manner and speed of their passage

64. FR(2) June 1938, FR(1) and (2) July 1938, H.P. F.18/6/1938, 18/7/1938; Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 7 June, 8 July and 22 July 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86; The Tribune, 19, 23, 26 June, 7 July 1938.

indicated the political mileage the Unionists expected to derive from them — an expectation that was not without basis, as shown by later events.

First, a few words about the legislation itself. The Restitution of Mortgaged Lands Bill made provision for return to the debtors of all land mortgaged before 1901, when the Land Alienation Act came into force. The Alienation of Land (Further Amendment) Bill declared null and void all benami transactions where members of non-agriculturist castes bought the land of their debtors in the name of their 'agriculturist' friends. The Registration of Moneylenders Bill was intended to make restrictions on moneylending business stricter still by restoring some provisions of an earlier bill that had been knocked down by the courts. The Agricultural Produce Markets Bill sought to regulate conditions in markets and reduce the middleman's profits and secure higher prices to the agriculturists. The consideration of this last bill was postponed to a future date.⁶⁵ The great political advantage of all these pieces of legislation was that they could be used to establish the pro-peasant credentials of the Unionist Ministry without in any way hurting the interests of the class whose interests the Ministry represented: the big landlords as well as the rich peasants-cum-agriculturist moneylenders. It is necessary to point out here that tenancy legislation of even the most

65. Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 7 June 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86.

rudimentary kind was never conceived of by the Unionist Ministry, and attempts by others to do so were defeated.⁶⁶ Unionists were very fond of comparing their legislation to that undertaken by their contemporary Congress Ministries, but they forgot that Congress Ministries for the most part brought forth legislation which attacked the rights and privileges of both moneylenders and landlords.⁶⁷

The merits of the legislative measures need not detain us here, except to say that while undoubtedly they left untouched the agriculturist moneylenders and did not even remotely concern the system of landlordism based on rack-renting, etc., they did look as if they were going to be of some benefit to the ordinary peasant cultivator by protecting him from the rapacity of the non-agriculturist moneylender. Again, it is another matter that later enquiries showed that their implementation was tardy indeed and that credit was severely restricted as a result and that it was only the intervention of the War and accompanying high prices that led to a widespread redemption of mortgages by people re-mortgaging smaller pieces of land for the same amount.⁶⁸ The fact of the matter is that

66. See f.n.27 of this chapter for the Congress leader Mian Iftikhar-ud-din's attempt to introduce a Tenancy Bill later in the year, which was defeated by majority vote.

67. Kishori Mohan Patra, 'The First Congress Ministries: Problems and Prospects (1937-39)', in A Centenary History of the Indian National Congress, 3 Vols, B.N. Pande, general editor, New Delhi, 1985, Vol.III.

68. See Chapter 2 above.

even if one peasant in a village were to get back his mortgaged land because of a piece of legislation, the political effect of that on the entire village would be tremendous.

The introduction of these legislative measures by the Unionist Ministry put the Congress in a serious bind. For a number of reasons, it found itself hesitant to support the bills. One, it was politically opposed to the Unionist Ministry because it was a loyalist, pro-British Ministry. Two, it had many genuine criticisms of the bills, such as the exclusion of agriculturist moneylenders from their scope, their harmful effect on credit, etc. Three, and this became the most important, a very large proportion of Congress MLAs were elected from urban areas and, given the way the system of separate electorates worked, their constituents were primarily non-agriculturist or urban Hindus who were the main targets of this legislation. As Harkishen Singh Surjeet explained to us in his interview, the Congress leaders hesitated to support the legislation not because they themselves were usurers but because they came from constituencies dominated by the trading community; they did not want to lose their votes. The proof of this, he said, was that "they never stopped us (rural-based Congressmen) from raising the issue of indebtedness", "they did not mind us going to our voters with these issues - but they did not want to take a stand which would put them in the wrong in their own constituencies."

69. Also Interviews with Karam Singh Mann, Master Hari Singh, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, contd...

Nevertheless, despite this strong resistance from the Punjab Congress Party to the bills, the Congress High Command, perceiving that there was no way they could be seen to be against the bills, virtually ordered the Punjab Congress Legislature Party to vote for the bills. Mahmud Ali and Harkishen Singh Surjeet were among the group of radical Congressmen who went to Maulana Azad and brought a letter carrying these instructions.⁷⁰ There were also reports of telegraphic orders.⁷¹ In the end, the Congress divided on the issue. The rural-based MLAs, who were ver few, voted for the bills, and the urban-based MLAs remained neutral. The only exception, it seems, was Sri Ram

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Balwant Singh Azad, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Sri Ram Sharma; The Tribune, 13, 29, 30 July, 13 Aug., 7 Sept. 1938; Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 8 July 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86.

70. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, Interview. Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, p.234.
71. The Governor reported to the Viceroy that an Intelligence Department official had told him that Dr. Gopi Chand had received a telegram from Abul Kalam Azad saying, "Hope you have decided to vote for Bills according to my instructions." To which the reply had been sent: "Your orders will be obeyed. Permit me to resign from the Assembly. Cannot lead the Party." Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, 22 July 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86. Also see Supplement to FR(1) July 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938, which says that the All India Congress Working Committee directed Punjab Congress Parliamentary Party to support agrarian legislation in pursuance of the policy of supporting all pro-people measures.

Sharma, who officially represented South-eastern towns, but had a solid peasant base in the Rohtak area, who voted for the bills.⁷²

Meanwhile, there were strong public protests against the bills by the non-agriculturists who formed themselves into associations for the purpose and collected money, threatened satyagraha and held hartals in town after town.⁷³ The Congress stand of neutrality, of qualified support, also tended to get completely submerged by and identified with the non-agriculturist opposition, even though the Congress Party had given strict instructions that no Congressmen should support any agitation against the bills.⁷⁴ In the shrill tones of public debate, there was no room for ambiguity or subtlety. The Unionists called them Golden Bills. The non-agriculturists called them Black Bills. Few were willing to listen to those who said they were neither golden nor black, but copper.⁷⁵

72. Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 8 July 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/86; FR(2) July 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938; Interviews with Sri Ram Sharma, Chhaju Mal Vaid, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, Master Hari Singh.

73. The protests were too numerous to list here. See The Tribune, 9, 10, 13, 31 July, 2 Aug. 1938; FR(1) July 1938, FR(1) Aug. 1938, FR(1) Sept. 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938, 18/8/1938, 18/9/1938.

74. See reports of the meeting of the Punjab Congress Working Council in The Tribune, 13 Aug. 1938, and FR(1) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1938.

75. This is Bhagat Singh Bilga's formulation. Interview.

Having succeeded in putting the Congress on the defensive, Sikandar and Chhotu Ram took the battle from the legislative chamber to the public platform. The propaganda offensive that ensued was unprecedented in Unionist history. Even the Governor, as we saw above, had been complaining that Unionist Ministers didn't do enough by way of counter-propaganda to the mobilization by the Congress and the Communists. Even in the elections of 1936-37, the Unionists, barring Chhotu Ram, were generally conspicuous by their low profile. However, persistent pressure from the Governor and also Chhotu Ram had obviously done its job and Sikandar and several other Ministers and MLAs set out with enthusiasm to publicly back the winning horse of agrarian legislation.

The reports speak for themselves: Chhotu Ram addressed audiences of 5,000 and 10,000 each in Nili Bar, while Zamindar Associations and Military Unions presented addresses.⁷⁶ Sikandar Hayat Khan addressed a crowd of 50,000 in Khalchian in Amritsar district, sat on a manji (string cot) with peasants, said he was the embodiment of political revolution, defended ^{the} bills, was greeted by shouts of Inqilab Zindabad. He held another meeting at Tarn Taran.⁷⁷ Sikandar and Chhotu Ram spoke to a 25,000 strong crowd in Ajnala in Amritsar district; criticized the demands of the Amritsar Bandobast Morcha; defended the

76. The Tribune, 5 Aug. 1938.

77. The Tribune, 11 Aug. 1938.

the bills. Chhotu Ram shouted 'Inqilab Zindabad' and 'Zamindar Raj Zindabad' and the audience shouted with him.⁷⁸

The high point in the drama that surrounded the whole affair was the holding of simultaneous conferences in Lyallpur at the beginning of September by the Unionists and the Congress.⁷⁹ The Unionists were represented in full strength at the Zamindara Conference, with Sikandar and Chhotu Ram in the lead. The Congress had called all the provincial luminaries to its Kisan Conference, but had added on Bhulabhai Desai, the leader of the Congress in the Central Legislative Assembly, for extra measure. The Zamindara Conference had the full support of the official machinery, was a grand affair, with a huge colourfully-decorated pandal, whereas the Kisan Conference in contrast was a study in simplicity. Sikandar was welcomed with the fluttering of Union Jacks, the Congress procession had the Tricolour at its head. The Unionists attacked the Congress for betraying its own election manifesto, the Congress called the Unionists pro-imperialist and pro-feudal. This time it was Chhotu Ram who said 'I am Inqilab personified', and called the Congress conference a

78. The Tribune, 12 Aug. 1938.

79. The account of these two conferences in this and the next para is based on the following: Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 6 Sept. and a report by J.R. Scott, D.I.G., Police, dated 5 Sept. sent as an enclosure with a letter from Craik to Viceroy, 8 Sept., Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/87; FR(1) Sept. 1938, H.P. F.18/9/1938; and The Tribune, 2, 4 and 5 Sept. 1938.

'Baniani Conference' (conference of banias or traders). Sikandar declared the agrarian bills as the first step towards Inqilab. The Kisan Conference criticized the Unionists for not doing anything for the tenants. The Zamindara Conference accordingly passed a resolution asking the government and the zamindars to remove all the legitimate grievances of tenants, kamins and scheduled castes. The Kisan Conference declared the bills as inadequate and as not satisfying the needs of the poor peasants, and also introducing a measure of discrimination towards non-agriculturists. It passed resolutions of no-confidence in the Unionist Ministry, declaring that it had done nothing to reform the land revenue system to make it less harsh on the ordinary peasant. The Zamindara Conference also passed a resolution asking for the taxation of rural incomes on the same basis as non-agriculturists were taxed. Unlike the Kisan Conference, it expressed full confidence in the Unionist Ministry.

According to official estimates, the peasants showed their preference clearly by flocking to the Zamindara Conference in unprecedented numbers, at one stage reaching one and a half lakhs, whereas only 10-15 thousand went to the Kisan Conference. The Tribune, on the other hand, described the Kisan Conference procession as a huge one with 50,000 people. Allowing for prejudice on both sides, it seems the Unionists had a decided edge.

In October, Sikandar and Chhotu Ram carried out a tour of 12 districts in 3 weeks, which included the south-east,

central and northern districts. According to reports, the turn-out was substantial at all the public gatherings. In this tour, the emphasis shifted from simply defending the bills to warnings against attempts to create dissensions between landlords and tenants and against those who were doing anti-recruitment propoganda, to appeals to form Zamindar Leagues, and references to other benefits bestowed by Unionists such as 60 per cent reservation for zamindars in subordinate judicial services. The tour was also used to announce remissions of land revenue and abiana, and make offers of tagavi loans in the south-east where the rains had failed.⁸⁰

The Governor was exultant about the impact of these tours, as he had been about the ones in August and September. He reported to the Viceroy that "Sikandar told me that at every single place they had an extraordinarily enthusiastic reception.... There is no doubt that the prestige of the Ministry at the moment stands extremely high throughout the Province. This is largely, of course, due to their recent agrarian legislation and also in part to the very generous measures of relief taken to deal with the famine in Hissar and the neighbouring districts.... It is also, I think, largely due to the fact that the Ministers are now devoting a great deal more of their time and energy to these propoganda tours, where they address huge audiences and find it comparatively

80. FR(1) and (2) Oct. 1938, H.P. F.18/10/1938; The Tribune, 7 Oct. 1938, for conference in Karnal, 8 Oct. for Panipat and Rewari, 9 Oct., for Rohtak, 12 Oct. for Hoshiarpur, 25 Oct. for Sialkot, etc.

easy to work up enthusiasm. Ever since I took over as Governor I have been impressing on them the necessity for more propaganda of this kind.... The prestige of the Congress, on the other hand, is still at an extremely low ebb."⁸¹

The peasant leaders whom we interviewed readily acknowledge the popularity of the agrarian legislation among peasants and the impact of the propaganda effort that went with it. Chain Singh Chain, the Secretary of the Jullundur District Kisan Committee around that time, says clearly: "The debt legislation was popular amongst the kisans.... Peasants felt that the legislation was good. As Congressmen, we criticized the political role of the Unionist Party. Peasants said, 'that may be so, but they have done this one good thing'." Karam Singh Mann said in the same refrain: "The people were not convinced that these were Black Bills. Our criticism was that these bills do not go far enough.... It was a wrong move on our part because it cut no ice with the people.... Chhotu Ram forced Sikandar to attend meetings. Chhotu Ram was a brave man. He would challenge us in our own stronghold of Jullundur. In Rurka Kalan he gave a speech and convinced even our own people. They started saying 'What is wrong with what he is saying?'" Dalip Singh Tapiala describes Chhotu Ram's style and how he got the people to listen to him. "His method of

81. Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, 26 Oct. 1938, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. 125/87.

presentation was very strange. He would say: 'Our country is being looted by banias. One bania has come from 7000 miles away'. And the Deputy Commissioner would be sitting next to him. 'And a new bania has been born in India as well who is looting the kisans even more than the other bania.' And he would really be hitting at the Congress." Harkishen Singh Surjeet's description of Chhotu Ram confirms the above: "Chhotu Ram had come to open a co-operative bank in Goraya and we had led a red flag demonstration against him. Chhotu Ram, however, at least for a while, succeeded in turning the crowd against us by saying that he was not afraid of the red flag. He shouted the slogan 'Inqilab Zindabad' and made the officials do the same. He said, 'I am against the banias, and I will be very happy if Russia comes and does away with these banias. These banias, i.e., Congress, have turned the Communists against me, otherwise they are my brothers. They are raising the same slogan that I am raising: indebtedness of the peasantry'."82

We do not intend to suggest that with the agrarian legislation and the accompanying propaganda blitz the Unionists had successfully eroded the influence of the Congress and the left wing from among the peasants who were their supporters. What we are suggesting is that the Congress and the left wing activists were not able to easily convince

82. For a thorough treatment of Chhotu Ram's politics and political style, see Prem Chowdhry, Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram.

even their supporters that the legislation was grossly inadequate, and explain their own ambiguous position on the subject. Their arguments were too complicated to be an effective reply to the Unionist onslaught. The continuation of opposition to the bills in public even after they had been passed was particularly unwise, but then the Congress MLAs were under tremendous pressure from their constituents. The peasants' position was that the bills were beneficial to some extent, and to that extent they were a good thing. That did not mean, as the peasant leaders clearly point out, that peasants who were anti-imperialist in their own political convictions now began to support the Unionists. They continued to remain opposed to them for political reasons, for their loyalism, for their stand on political prisoners, for their stand on the anti-recruitment bill. But it did mean that the rapid and smooth process of expansion of the peasant movement that was underway in 1938 was somewhat obstructed. A lot of attention now had to be given and was given to countering the propaganda of the Unionists, with meetings being held all along the route of the Ministers' tours and usually around the same time.⁸³ In other words, the Unionist counter-offensive, for that is what it was, succeeded in throwing the anti-imperialist forces off-balance, if only

83. See, for example, FR(1) Sept. 1938, FR(1) Oct. 1938, FR(1) Nov. 1938, H.P. F.18/9/1938, 18/10/1938 and 18/11/1938; The Tribune, 30 Aug., 17 and 24 Sept. and 31 Oct. 1938.

for a while. Of course, they could still argue, and with justice, that the counter-offensive had become necessary in the first place because of their offensive — an offensive they had maintained day after day for many years by now. If the Unionists had carried the day by providing debt relief, then at least some of the credit still went to those who had publicly raised and popularised the demand for debt relief since 1935. In fact, since the movement had been agitating on the debt issue, the only viable line in 1938 was to welcome the legislation as a product of the peasants' agitation, to claim all the credit for it, and maintain the pressure for more radical measures. That was the only possible way of denying the Unionists the advantage in hegemonic terms. All the criticisms they made of the legislation would then have made sense, if they came after extending full support. But, blinded by its political hostility to the Unionists, and deafened by the uproar created by its non-agriculturist supporters, the Congress was in no position to evolve an adequate response.

IV

Apart from being witness to the activity around specific issues which we have already discussed — the Colony tenants' struggle, the anti-settlement movement in Amritsar, the struggle over canal outlets in Lyallpur and Amritsar, the mobilisation and counter-mobilisation around the agrarian legislation, the political prisoners' release movement, the malba agitation — this period also saw a great deal of undefined but intense organisational, ideological and political

activity among peasants. To ignore this undramatic, everyday, bread-and-butter aspects of the peasant movement in preference for the moments of high drama would be to forget that there is no high drama without painstaking and often repetitive preparation. Behind the peasant who marched in the jatha and bravely bore lathis and courted arrest lay the daily, untiring grind of the kisan activist who had made numerous visits on foot or on bicycle to the peasants' village, first persuaded him to come to the meeting in the Gurdwara or under the tree in the village square, then to become a member of the Kisan Sabha and the Congress Committee that he had formed in his village, to attend the conference organised in the nearby large village, to contribute grain for the larger conference, and finally when occasion arose to march in the jatha to the district or provincial headquarters. One might say that when one sees the strength of a particular morcha or struggle, one can estimate the groundwork that went into its making. But what about those areas which did not show off their strength through morchas or strikes, though they were as capable and ready as the next district, simply because no occasion for it arose by way of an immediate issue for struggle? Surely the less dramatic activity of their peasants, their homely tale of meetings and conferences, also needs a chronicler.

The method of presentation I have adopted here is to begin with a general survey of political activity among

peasants and then to take the district of Jullundur as a case study to show the kind of intense political mobilisation that was carried on at this time. In the general survey, I shall perforce focus on the highlights, the big conferences, the attempts to spread to new areas, election campaigns, celebration of specific 'weeks' or days, etc. In the account of Jullundur, I shall turn the spotlight primarily on the daily village meetings, the enrolment of members, and the tours of kisan workers.

In the first quarter of 1938 (apart from the Political Prisoners' Release agitation, the Nili Bar tenants' movement, and the Fatehwal incident, which we have already discussed), the most important conference was the Punjab Provincial Political Conference held at Madina in Rohtak district in the last week of March. Elaborate preparations were made, and appeals were issued by Sri Ram Sharma, MLA and President of the Rohtak DCC, and the Congress President, Dr. Satyapal, to all nationalists to collect in large numbers to storm Chhotu Ram's citadel. Thousands of villagers reportedly attended and heard the speeches of the President of the Conference, Sardar Kishen Singh (father of Bhagat Singh), Nawabzada Mahmud Ali, and Mrs. Satyawati, a firebrand socialist from Delhi, in which they questioned the Unionist Ministry's credentials as a 'zamindar' government, asked people not to participate in the coming imperialist war, and demanded reduction of land revenue to one-fourth of the actual

produce.⁸⁴

An important kisan conference was organised in January at Kamalpura in Ludhiana, where it was mostly the CPI group of Communists who were in the forefront: Master Kabul Singh, Sohan Singh Josh, M.L. Kalia, Abdul Waris, Harkishen Singh Surjeet. Congress Ministries were praised for their stand on release of political prisoners and for allowing publication of the Kirti paper. In contrast, Unionists had suppressed civil liberties and not done anything for peasants. The red flag was unfurled but the socialists' willingness to fight under the national flag, the tricolour, in the battle for freedom was emphatically asserted. Around 30,000 people participated in the proceedings of the Conference, which also appealed for non-participation in the coming war.⁸⁵ Ferozeshahpur, Lyallpur and Karnal held district political conferences, and Ambala a big rural political conference to counter the effects of a tour by the Ministers.⁸⁶

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84. FR(2) March 1938, H.P. F.18/3/1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, April 1938, H.P. F.58/38; The Tribune, 23, 26 and 29 March 1938.
85. FR(1) Jan. 1938, H.P. F.18/1/1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, 1st half of January 1938, H.P. F.58/38; The Tribune, 7 Jan. 1938.
86. Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, April and 2nd half of May 1938, H.P. F.58/38; The Tribune, 24 and 26 March 1938.

In a clear attempt to extend to the uncovered, backward and outlying areas, there was a tour between 11 and 14 March of Kangra district by a deputation headed by the Congress President Dr. Satyapal. The Congressmen visited villages, addressed large meetings, formed Congress committees, and demanded exemption from land revenue of those paying less than Rs.5 and abolition of begar. They told the Dogra Rajputs, a community that supplied a large number of recruits, not to join the army.⁸⁷ A similar attempt to extend Congress influence was made with the holding of a District Political Conference at Tulamba in Multan district. An audience of 6,000 was addressed by Gopal Singh Quami, Lala Achint Ram, Principal Chhabil Das, Bibi Amar Kaur, Com. Abdul Gafur, Pandit Shiv Datt Ranga, and Gian Sagar.⁸⁸ While new ground was being occupied, political activity continued in the old strongholds. Hoshiarpur, Jullundur, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Gurdaspur, Sheikhpura, Rohtak, Hissar, Ferozepore, Lyallpur — all continued to report a steady pace of activity.⁸⁹

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87. FR(2) March 1938, H.P. F.18/3/1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-recruitment and Anti-war Propaganda in Punjab, April 1938, H.P. F.58/38; The Tribune, 14 and 23 March 1938.
88. The Tribune, 5 April 1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, 1st half of June 1938, H.P. F.58/38.
89. FR(1) Jan. 1938, FR(1) and (2) Feb. 1938, FR(2) March 1938, H.P. F.18/1/1938, 18/2/1938, 18/3/1938. Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, 1st half of January, 2nd half of March, April, 1st half of May., 2nd half of May, and 1st half contd...

The second quarter of the year saw intense mobilisation by Congress among villagers in the Sialkot area since Dr. Satyapal, the Congress President, was standing in a bye-election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly from the Amritsar-Sialkot (General) Rural constituency. There were tours by groups of Congress workers in the villages; there was the Sialkot District Political Conference; there was the Gujranwala Political Conference which was attended also by a lot of people from neighbouring Sialkot; there were processions and meetings in Sialkot. Prominent in the mobilisation were Chaudhri Krishan Gopal Dutt, a Congress leader who hailed from Sialkot, Lala Sham Lal, MLA (Central), Bhim Sen Sachar, Mian Iftikhar-ud-din, Harjap Singh, and Baba Rur Singh of Ferozepore. Their efforts were rewarded when peasants went to vote in jathas singing nationalist songs. An important

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of June 1938, H.P. F.58/38; The Tribune, 7, 27 Jan., 5 Feb. 1938. In Sheikhpura, the Congress held meetings in 20 villages within one fortnight. The Tribune, 7 Jan. 1938. Different representative bodies of peasants presented their point of view before the Punjab Land Revenue Committee (see Chapter 1 above), chaired by M.L. Darling, which was touring the province. In Montgomery, the demand was for a limit on the share of rent and land revenue that was to be paid by tenants. In Lyallpur, exemption from land revenue payment was demanded for those owning less than 5 acres. In Amritsar, a deputation from Tarn Taran tahsil comprising representatives of Akalis, Kisan Sabha, Socialists, and Congress and led by Udham Singh Nagoke wanted a complete change in methods of assessment. Representatives of Amritsar tahsil supported the evidence of the Institute of Agrarian Reform and wanted immediate relief for underfed and starving peasants. The Tribune, 15 and 28 Jan. and 21 Feb. 1938.

feature was 90 per cent voting by women and also a strong female presence in meetings. Dr. Satyapal won with a comfortable majority of 4,000 in a total of 17,000 votes.⁹⁰

Apart from Jullundur, which we shall deal with separately, Hoshiarpur was the most active in this phase. Conferences, small and big, continued almost incessantly. May Day celebrations in villages, and a series of big conferences — Haryana Political Conference, Hoshiarpur Political Conference, a big Kisan Conference in Una and the Doaba Rural Political Conference in Garhshankar tahsil — were all held in this period.⁹¹ Activity continued in Kangra,⁹² and was sought to be extended to Attock⁹³ and Rawalpindi⁹⁴ districts, as also Jhang and Montgomery.⁹⁵ Ludhiana held an important district political conference, preceded by a Volunteers' Training Camp at Jassowal from which volunteers marched on foot to the venue of the Conference at Bajewal.⁹⁶ Rohtak

90. The Tribune, 22, 26, 27 and 29 April, 1 May 1938.
FR(1) May 1938, H.P. F.18/5/1938.

91. The Tribune, 9 April, 3, 5 and 17 May, 4, 8, 11 and 15 June 1938, FR(2) June 1938, H.P. 18/6/1938.

92. The Tribune, 2 June 1938.

93. The Tribune, 19 and 28 June 1938.

94. The Tribune, 3 June 1938.

95. FR(2) April 1938, FR(2) May 1938, H.P. F.18/4/1938, 18/5/1938. For Lahore and Ferozepore, see The Tribune, 4 and 29 June 1938.

96. The Tribune, 4, 11 and 17 June 1938, FR(1) June 1938, H.P. F.18/6/1938.

and Karnal also continued to receive political attention.⁹⁷

The Congress was very active in Gujranwala as well, where a big meeting on the occasion of the annual fair at the shrine of Sain Gulab Singh in the historic town of Ramnagar was addressed by Dr. Satyapal. This was followed by largely attended meetings in Akalgarh, Kallianwala and Hafizabad, and by village tours by members of the DCC for enrolling members and forming Congress committees.⁹⁸ In Sheikhpura, the peasant Conference that was held at Chuharkhana was graced by Baba Wasakha Singh, one of the most revered of the Ghadarites involved in the 1914-15 Conspiracy Case. Resolutions demanding the release of political prisoners, urging non-participation in the next war, and reiterating all the continuing peasant demands relating to land revenue and cesses such as malba, chowkidara, chahi, panchotra, etc., were passed.⁹⁹ The Congress Socialist Party of Punjab announced at the Lahore session of the AICSP in April that they

97. The Tribune, 13, 21 and 25 May 1938. The indefatigable Sri Ram Sharma, M.L.A., was busy organizing rural conferences in Rohtak, discussing with workers the problems arising out of recent arrests, and also visiting villages in Karnal.

98. The Tribune, 14 June 1938.

99. The Tribune, 1 July 1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-war Propaganda in Punjab, 2nd half of July, H.P. F.58/38. Baba Kesar Singh and Baba Harnam Singh American were also present.

had already recruited 75,000 members for the kisan sabhas in only five months of work.¹⁰⁰ And, as we know already, Lyallpur was already in the grip of the canal outlets' agitation in May-June, and the movement was rapidly enveloping Amritsar, the latter simultaneously gearing up for its big demonstration in July. Unrest was continuing among the colony tenants as well.

In the third quarter of the year, the limelight was stolen by the Amritsar Bandobast Morcha and the polarisation and mobilisation for and against the agrarian legislation, which we have already detailed. There was still a lot of activity, though, in addition to these major thrusts. The effort to reach out to the hitherto 'dark areas' continued, with Red Shirt volunteers, other Muslim leaders, and Congress workers from neighbouring districts being roped in by the Rawalpindi Congress Committee which organised a political conference in Adhwal in Attock in mid-August. This was reported to be the first political gathering of its kind in this 'backward locality'; the Muslim League also started counter-propaganda against the conference.¹⁰¹ In mid-September, this

100. The Tribune, 13 April 1938.

101. FR(2) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1938; The Tribune, 8 July 1938. The Muslim League's efforts appear to have met with some success, for, according to an Intelligence Report, four out of the five meetings addressed between 18-24 Aug. in Attock by Nawabzada Mahmud Ali (the young Congress leader who was a nephew of the Premier and was specially brought in on such occasions to blunt the attack of the opposition) "met with a hostile

conference was followed by an Akali District Conference in Attock, which was marked by a sharp attack on the Unionist Ministry for its pro-landlord bias, its refusal to accept the demand for land revenue on the same basis as income-tax even after both the conferences at Lyallpur (the Congress and the Unionist-sponsored conferences) had demanded it, its lathi-charge on Amritsar kisans, and the high salaries of its Ministers (Rs.3,000) as compared with those of the Congress Ministers (Rs.500). At this conference, Master Tara Singh predicted the demise of the Unionist Ministry in less than a year.¹⁰² The significance of Attock was that it was the district of the Premier, Sikandar Hayat Khan, and these were brave attempts to take him on in his home ground.

Other highlights include the observance of the All India Kisan Day on 1 September, of the Anti-Recruitment Bill Day on 4 September (this was the bill that was passed by the Central Assembly with Jinnah's support which Sikandar had been instrumental in securing), and the Amritsar Kisan Day on 1 October to press for the release of those arrested in

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 reception" and consequently his tour was curtailed. It was being made clear through 'hostile receptions' that any effort to breach the fortress of high landlordism, even if made with the help of an 'insider', was not going to be tolerated. See the Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-war Propaganda in Punjab, 2nd half of September 1938, H.P. F.58/38.

102. The Tribune, 17 Sept. 1938.

the Amritsar Bandobast Morcha.¹⁰³ Hectic activity continued in Hoshiarpur, where the DCC organised 36 meetings in 36 villages between 26 July and 15 August. Forthcoming elections to the District Board had provided a new opportunity and occasion for mobilisation.¹⁰⁴ Amritsar, too, maintained a running pace, even after the Bandobast Morcha had come to an end and many of its activists were still in jail. There was a flurry of activity in August to counter the effects of the Ministerial tour, and this was followed by a number of meetings in September organised under the Congress and Kisan banners.¹⁰⁵ A special feature was the political conference organised as part of the Muslim mass contact campaign in Waran Dattan, which was attended by 15,000 people, half of whom were reportedly Muslims. Sohan Singh Josh presided, and he and other speakers, many of them Muslim, criticized the Unionist Ministry and the Muslim League for cooperating in getting the Army Recruitment Bill passed.¹⁰⁶ In Rohtak, too, the Muslim mass contact programme was reported to be

103. See FR(1) Sept. 1938, H.P. F.18/9/1938; The Tribune, 1, 5 and 19 Sept. 1938.

104. The Tribune, 9 and 27 July, 14 Aug., 5 Sept. 1938. FR(1) July 1938, FR(1) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938, 18/8/1938.

105. FR(1) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1938; The Tribune, 11, 21, 28 and 30 Sept. 1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, 2nd half of Sept., H.P. F.58/38.

106. The Tribune, 12 and 13 Sept. 1938.

proceeding very well.¹⁰⁷

Another district which reported high levels of activity was Ludhiana, where the agitation over malba came to a head again, with some peasants getting arrested. The district had already achieved considerable success on this score, with 100 villages successfully getting exemption from payment of the malba cess. In addition, a Kisan workers' school was held and there were tours by the DCC; the Congress was reportedly quite happy with its progress in the district.¹⁰⁸ Lahore district held a district political conference and numerous other meetings, including by the District Kisan Committee, condemning the new settlement.¹⁰⁹ District political conferences were also held in Montgomery and Ferozepore.¹¹⁰ An

107. The Tribune, 5 and 12 Aug. 1938.

108. FR(1) July 1938, FR(2) Sept. 1938, H.P. F.18/7/1938, 18/9/1938; The Tribune, 23 July, 12, 28, 29, 30 Aug. 1938.

109. FR(2) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1938; The Tribune, 7 July, and 1, 12, 24 Sept. 1938. Also see the Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, 1st half of Aug. and 2nd half of Sept. 1938, H.P. F.58/38, for the Distt. Kisan Conference held at Kirtowal in Lahore district on 4 July 1938, and a political conference at Pattoki on 15 Aug. 1938.

110. The Tribune, 11 Aug. 1938; FR(1) Aug. 1938, H.P. F.18/8/1938; Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War propaganda, 1st half of Aug. and 2nd half of Sept. 1938, H.P. F.58/38. This last report also showed that 11 meetings were held in Montgomery district between 1 and 13 Sept. at which anti-recruitment speeches were made.

attempt was also made to move into a part of Gurdaspur district so far outside the ambit of Congress influence,¹¹¹ and the breakthrough made in Kangra was being consistently maintained by organizational consolidation.¹¹² The Ferozepore Kisan Committee was also busy assisting the peasant activists of the neighbouring Kalsia state in their picketing of the annual cattle fair at Chirak.¹¹³

In the last quarter of the year 1938, the first important event was the holding of the Provincial Kisan Conference from 16-18 October by the Punjab Kisan Committee at Lyallpur.¹¹⁴ Its significance lay in that it was the first time that delegates duly elected by primary members and representing the Kisan Committee in each district were meeting in a formal conference. These delegates would now in turn elect the office-bearers of the Provincial Kisan Committee. The fact that the process of enrolment of members, elections of delegates and then the election of office-bearers at the provincial level was successfully completed demonstrated the

111. FR(1) Sept. 1938, H.P. F.18/9/1938.

112. The Tribune, 21 Aug. 1938.

113. FR(1) Sept. 1938, H.P. F.18/9/1938.

114. This account of the Lyallpur Kisan Conference in this and the subsequent two paragraphs is based on the following: FR(2) Oct. 1938, H.P. F.18/10/1938; The Tribune, 3, 10, 11, 17, 19, 21 Oct. 1938; Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, pp.206-7.

viability of this new provincial organisation of the peasantry.

The Provincial Kisan Conference was held under the Presidentship of Sajjad Zaheer, the U.P. Communist leader; about 20,000 people attended the open session. It appears that there was an attempt to demarcate the Kisan Sabha position from that of the Congress on the recent agrarian legislation by denouncing the 'Kisan' conference organised by the Congress in Lyallpur at the same time as the Unionist-sponsored Zamindara Conference in early September as a 'capitalist' gathering. This may have been partly the result of the difficulty faced on the ground in explaining the Congress position on the legislation and partly a response to the censure of the All India Kisan Council for aligning with the Congress "in failing to give unqualified support to the Punjab Government's recent agrarian legislation." The resolution passed at the conference now talked of support to the legislation to the extent that it helped the poor peasants of the province. It also declared that till the Land Alienation Act was so amended that the tiller of the soil was declared an agriculturist, the big landlords, who did not till the land, were removed from the list of agriculturist tribes, and the tenants entitled to have proprietary rights on land, a campaign should be continued against the Punjab Ministry.

In the election of office-bearers, Baba Kesar Singh became President instead of Baba Jawaia Singh, who had met with a tragic and fatal road accident in May 1938 when

travelling back from Montgomery. Baba Rur Singh, MLA, became Vice-President, and Bhagat Singh Bilga General Secretary. Tehal Singh Bhangali became Joint Secretary. Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Harnam Singh Chamak were elected Secretaries, and Bhagwan Singh Longowal Treasurer.

According to Bhagat Singh Bilga,¹¹⁵ who was in the thick of the deliberations at the Conference, there were elaborate discussions at which the demands of each district were formulated and then the issues for struggle were decided. The plan was to hold a huge provincial-level demonstration after preparing for a year or a year and a half. Before that, demonstrations were to be held in different districts. The Jullundur demonstration for canal water in December 1938 was the first one held as part of that plan. Others were to follow in other areas. The idea was that this would also enable them to assess their own strength. (This plan, formulated at Lyallpur, was, however, says Bilga, disrupted by the unplanned launching of the Lahore Morcha, but more on that later.)

That the Punjab peasant movement had by this time been given a definite organizational shape by the Punjab Kisan Committee was acknowledged by the Government as well, as the following longish quotation from a report written on the eve of the Lyallpur session of the Punjab Kisan Sabha would demonstrate:¹¹⁶

115. Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga.

116. FR(2) Sept. 1938, H.P. F.18/9/1938.

Agrarian agitation continues to be fostered by the Punjab Kisan Committee at Amritsar and its district branches.... It now claims to have a paper membership of 75,000. Its aim and objects correspond with those published in the manifesto of the all-India Kisan Committee and are briefly complete freedom from economic exploitation and full economic power for the peasants and workers.... The Central Punjab and colony districts have regularly constituted Kisan Committees between which and the Punjab Kisan Committee at Amritsar there is a steadily increasing volume of correspondence indicating sound organisation and co-ordination and recognition of the value of propaganda. The recognised paper of the party is the 'Kirti-Lehar', a revolutionary and Communist Urdu and Gurmukhi weekly, financed by the Sikh American Ghadar Party and published in Meerut. The movement is now spreading to the Indian States in the Punjab, and is gaining in strength and popularity among a section of the Sikhs who comprise almost the entire membership.... The general effect of the movement is subversive and is directed primarily to spreading mass disaffection rather than to securing the redress of grievances.... The police are consistently vilified as the instruments of a reactionary Government... the differences between landlords and tenants are exaggerated and exploited. District Kisan Conferences and local fairs are made the occasion for disseminating communist and revolutionary ideas. Recently there has been a strong current in evidence at Kisan meetings of anti-British feeling, opposition of war and enlistment in the army and condemnation of the Unionist party.

Apart from the Lyallpur Conference, the month of October was also taken up by the intensive tours of the Ministers, which we have already discussed above. Perforce, much of the oppositional activity was concentrated on a counter-campaign.¹¹⁷ In addition, this was the time when enrolment

117. FR(1) and (2) Oct. 1938, H. P. F. 18/10/1938; The Tribune, 8 and 14 Oct. 1938.

of Congress members intensified to meet the last date of 31 October.¹¹⁸ The final membership figures showed a considerable increase in enrolment over the past year: from 94,772 to 143,343 for rural members and from 128,855 to 188,791 for all members.¹¹⁹

In Hissar and Rohtak, and especially in Hissar, famine conditions prevailed and the Congress workers were totally preoccupied with the work of providing relief. Sri Ram Sharma and Neki Ram Sharma were organising the Congress Relief Committee, and the latter even went to Calcutta to get help from traders and also Subhas Bose, the Congress President. Political conferences to demand relief from the government were also held.¹²⁰ In Lahore, remissions in revenue were demanded on account of failure of rains and scarcity of canal water.¹²¹ In Amritsar, there was again great agitation over the issue of malba in the Ramdas Ilaqa, presumably because local officials must have demanded the cess in contravention of the announcement by the Government.¹²² Subhas Bose, the

118. FR(1) and (2) Oct. 1938, FR(1) Nov. 1938, H.P. F.18/10/1938, 18/11/1938.

119. FR(2) Nov. 1937, FR(1) Dec. 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1937 and 18/12/1938.

120. FR(1) Nov. 1938, FR(1) Dec. 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1938, 18/12/1938; The Tribune, 13 Oct., 6 and 7 Nov., 14 Dec. 1938.

121. The Tribune, 1 and 4 Nov. 1938; FR(1) Nov. 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1938.

122. The Tribune, 7 Dec. 1938.

Congress President, visited the province in the second half of November, and addressed meetings all over the province, including Lahore, Hoshiarpur, Jullundur, Gujranwala, Jhelum, Rawalpindi and Campbellpore. His visit, however, according to an official assessment, was not as great an attraction as Gandhiji's or Nehru's.¹²³ Districts which continued to report a high level of activity were Ludhiana, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Lahore, Sheikhpura and Gurdaspur,¹²⁴ and, of course, Jullundur, which we shall discuss separately.

In the year 1939, the energies of the peasant movement were mostly consumed by the Lahore Kisan Morcha which began in March. Nevertheless, there were other stirrings which deserve mention, and which it would be unfair to ignore. We have already discussed the unrest in the Canal colonies of Multan and Montgomery which occupied a prominent position in the first quarter of the year 1939, with deputations to

123. FR(2) Nov. 1938, FR(1) Dec. 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1938, 18/12/1938.

124. In Ludhiana, after 23 years, for the first time a conference was held to commemorate the death of Kartar Singh Sarabha, hanged in the Ghadar Conspiracy Case of 1914-15, at his village Sarabha in Ludhiana. It was organized by Communists. An important Kisan Conference was held at Mallah in Ludhiana in December where Sohan Singh Josh and other MLAs addressed the gathering. FR (2) Nov. 1938, FR(1) Dec. 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1938, 18/12/1938; The Tribune, 12 and 13 Dec. 1938. For Amritsar, see The Tribune, 15 and 31 Oct., 12 Dec. 1938. For the rest of the districts, see FR(1) and (2) Nov. 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1938, The Tribune, 9 Oct. 4, 15 Nov. 1938.

Lahore, clashes, arrests, etc. Apart from this, there was considerable activity in Hissar in connection with famine relief work. The Congress under the leadership of Neki Ram Sharma collected money, grain, and clothes for distribution among the famine-stricken. Protest rallies were organised and it was pointed out that of an affected population of 7 lakhs only one and a half lakhs were covered by the famine-relief works.¹²⁵

In Gurdaspur, the peasants of village Chima Khudian resolved to stop paying the punitive police tax which they and seven other villages in the district had been paying for some time, Chima Khudian having already paid Rs.18,000 by itself. The President of the Punjab Kisan Committee, Baba Kesar Singh, addressed a conference in the village, and this was followed by a series of meetings in the village, leading to great excitement in the whole Ilaqa.¹²⁶ In Amritsar, a deputation of the Kisan Committee met the Deputy Commissioner to ask for remissions on account of damage to crops by a hail-storm.¹²⁷ Kisan leaders of the Bandobast Morcha of last July who were released now were welcomed with conferences at which dramatic performances were staged which 'did much harm to government'.¹²⁸ In Hoshiarpur, a number of meetings were addressed by prominent leaders such as Dr. Satyapal,

125. FR(1) Jan. 1939, H.P. F.18/1/1939; The Tribune, 15 and 19 Jan., 16 Feb. 1939.

126. The Tribune, 23 Jan., 4 Feb. and 4 March 1939.

127. The Tribune, 23 Feb. 1939.

128. FR(2) March 1939, H.P. F.18/3/1939.

Sardul Singh Caveesher, Gopal Singh Quami and Bibi Raghbir Kaur to mobilise for the coming District Board elections.¹²⁹ In Rohtak, Unionist supporters resisted a Congress attempt to hold a meeting in village Asaudah, leading to a clash. Another attempt a few days later with Sarojini Naidu in the chair also met with physical resistance.¹³⁰ In Attock, Rawalpindi and Jhelum in the West, Congress attempts to extend to the more backward and predominantly Muslim areas continued.¹³¹ In Ludhiana, Karnal and Rawalpindi, District Board elections contributed to the political activity in the rural areas.¹³²

Bhagat Singh's death anniversary was observed on 23rd March at 6 places in the province, including at his village Khatkar Kalan in Jullundur district, where a Shaheed Mela was organised by Socialist and Kisan activists with Ram Kishen, a recently-released revolutionary terrorist, as President. The Lahore Kisan Morcha also commenced at this time.¹³³

Another development around this time was a move to refuse canal water as a protest against the enhancement of

129. FR(1) Jan. 1939, H.P. F.18/1/1939; The Tribune, 21 Jan., 22 and 28 Feb. 1939.

130. FR(2) Feb. 1939, H.P. F.18/2/1939; The Tribune, 5 March 1939.

131. FR(1) March 1939, H.P. F.18/3/1939; The Tribune, 23 March and 15 Feb. 1939.

132. FR(1) Jan. 1939, FR(1) March 1939, H.P. F.18/1/1939 and 18/3/1939.

133. FR(2) March 1939, H.P. F.18/3/1939.

revenue under the new settlement in Lahore and the refusal of Government to accept the demands for reduction in land revenue and water-rates. Presumably encouraged by the Committee formed for this purpose, some landholders of village Kanganpur in the Kasur sub-division of Lahore, who had collected to give evidence before the Canal Act Committee, refused to have any dealings with the Committee, and even followed the Canal Committee into the neighbouring Montgomery district. There were also reports of canal outlets being damaged and soon the agitation was said to have spread from Kasur in Lahore and Dipalpur in Montgomery to Ferozepore district where a Water Rate Reduction Committee was formed. Forty outlets were reportedly closed by agitators and their supporters. Towards the end of May, the agitation was called off after an interview with the Premier. However, at the same time came fresh reports of peasants in the Muzaffargarh district refusing to accept water from the new Haveli project because of the increase in assessment rates. In Multan, too, stoppages and delays in the new canal system were causing discontent.¹³⁴

At the end of June, another struggle erupted, this time in Chuharchak village in Ferozepore district. This was the village of Baba Rur Singh, MLA, now Vice-President of the Punjab Kisan Committee. Villagers resolved to stop payment of the chowkidara tax -- its abolition had been a longstanding

134. FR(1) and (2) April 1939, FR(1) and (2) May 1939, H.P. F.18/4/1939 and 18/5/1939.

demand of the peasant movement. A deputation that went to negotiate with the tahsildar at Moga was arrested for non-payment. On hearing of this, more jathas came from the village and in a few days 350 people, including 50 women, had courted arrest. Since this tax was collected along with the land revenue, and the revenue officials would not accept land revenue without this tax, in effect the movement became one of non-payment of land revenue. The Punjab Kisan Committee, however, at this point, engaged in a desperate effort to save the Lahore Kisan Morcha, did not want any diversion of resources or attention and ordered the local committee to unilaterally suspend the agitation in order to concentrate all energies on Lahore.¹³⁵

From 15 to 22 August, the Congress observed the Mass Contact Week in which a vigorous propaganda effort was made. The Communist leader Sohan Singh Josh, recently elected General Secretary of the Provincial Congress Committee, gave a call to all shades and schools of opinion to make the week a success by carrying to the masses the message that communalism and religious disunity only served the interests of the

135. FR(2) June 1939, FR(1) July 1939, H.P. F.18/6/1939 and 18/7/1939; Craik to Linlithgow, 8 July 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/88; All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939-40, Appendix B, Report of the Punjab Kisan movement, March 1939 to Feb. 1940, Archives of Contemporary History, JNU; Interview with Ram Nath, a left wing political activist of Ferozapore district; The Tribune, 5, 6, 7 and 9 July and 8 Aug. 1939.

rich and all communal tendencies in the province must be eradicated. The Rohtak DCC announced a tour of 100 villages with meetings and enrolment of members. In Sialkot, 8 meetings in 8 different villages were held in 2-3 days. In Kangra, mass contact included a tour by Muslim Congress leaders asking other Muslims to join the Congress. In Ferozepore, the DCC organised a programme by which 3 groups of Congress workers covered 200 miles on foot and delivered the message to 15,000 kisans in their villages. Lyallpur and Amritsar also reported activity in connection with mass contact, and MLAs toured their constituencies.¹³⁶

Kangra, Rawalpindi, Hissar, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Gujranwala, Sheikhpura, Rohtak - all continued to report high levels of activity¹³⁷ (in addition to that connected with the Lahore Kisan Morcha). Lyallpur peasants took a jatha of 500 to the headquarters of the district demanding remissions for damage to crops by hailstorms.¹³⁸ In Rohtak, the Congress Socialist Party's conference was presided over by Jaya Prakash Narayan in the absence of Acharya Narendra Dev who was refused entry into Punjab. Their pandal also became the venue of the Famine Conference

136. The Tribune, 10, 13, 16, 22, 23, and 25 Aug. 1939; FR(2) Aug. 1939, H.P. F.18/8/1939.

137. The Tribune, 6, 10, 12, 21, 23, 25, 29 May, 4, 12 and 27 July, 14, 23, 25 Sept. 1939; FR(1) and (2) May 1939, H.P. F.18/5/1939.

138. The Tribune, 7 July 1939.

attended by 5,000 people.¹³⁹ Seth Sudershan and Bhagat Ram, MLAs, toured Hoshiarpur and Kangra.¹⁴⁰ In Amritsar, a 3-day conference at village Sainsara continued despite arrests of activists.¹⁴¹ At Sargodha from 5-7 September, just before the recently - declared Second World War was to bring most open political activity to a halt, the Second Punjab Provincial Kisan Conference was held. (The last one was held at Lyallpur in October 1938.) N.G. Ranga attended, and Baba Rur Singh was elected President and Dr. Bhag Singh General Secretary. The Lahore Kisan Morcha was yet to be called off, and about 4,000 workers and leaders of the Punjab Kisan Sabha were at that time in jail.¹⁴²

Moving now from the province to a single district, I take up the case of Jullundur, which saw perhaps the most intense political mobilisation and activity among all the districts of the province and yet had no occasion to launch any 'direct action' of its own.

VI

To get a rough idea of the scale and intensity of the political activity in the district, I have drawn up a list

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139. FR(1) July 1939, H.P. F.18/7/1939; The Tribune, 4 and 7 July 1939.
140. The Tribune, 31 Aug., 25 Sept. 1939.
141. The Tribune, 4 Sept. 1939.
142. The Tribune, 8 Sept. 1939; Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, p.207.

of the places mentioned in just one year, 1938, in just one source - The Tribune - in connection with meetings, conferences, propaganda tours or enlistment of members. The Tribune, it should be kept in mind, was an English-language provincial-level paper, based in Lahore, and not a local daily of Jullundur; its coverage, though quite remarkable given its middle class character and that of its readership, could by no means be exhaustive. Nevertheless, the list is impressive. (The date of the newspaper report is given in brackets after the name of the place):

In villages Kotli Than and Isarwal, and in 20 villages of Munki Ilaqa, Kisan Committees were formed (4 January). Sikh dewan in Kartarpur Ilaqa (11 January). Conference at Loraya, near Bhogpur (8 February). Big political conference at Bhungarni (15 February). DCC carries on propaganda in remote areas of Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil: meetings at villages Dharamgarh, Mahilgehla, Karnama, Mokandpur and Aur (22 February). Political conference at Kotla Nautar Singh (22 February). Conference at Chitti in Jullundur tahsil (6 April). Large gathering of peasants at Garhi in Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil (15 April). Well-attended dewan on Baisakhi at Dhesian Sang in Phillaur tahsil (17 April). Deputation led by Hari Singh Soundh touring rural areas to collect funds for Doaba Socialist Conference at Lidhar Kalan in Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil (22 April). May Day celebrated in village Shankar (3 May). Conference held at Kanj Kalan in Nakodar tahsil attended by villagers of Bet Ilaqa (12 May). DCC to hold

15 conferences between 20 May and 15 June; first five at Posijan Kalan, Malsian, Shahkote, Sandhewal and Talwandi Sanghesian (14 May). DCC to hold conference in Lasoori, Turna, Nal Manak, Lohian, Khiwa Oggi, Kangna, Killi, Nirawal, Sadiqpur in Nakodar tahsil (20 May). Bhagat Singh Bilga presides over DCC-organised conference for District Board elections in Sashal Qazian in Nawanshahr tahsil. Four more conferences planned (28 and 31 May). Doaba Political Conference being held at Banga, Nawanshahr tahsil by DCC (2 June). Meeting at Shahkote in Nakodar (4 June 1938). Conference at Dosanjh Kalan, Phillaur tahsil. Meetings held at many places in Nawanshahr tahsil (5 June). More meetings planned at Adampur Doaba, Govindpur, Jhandaji on 6, 9, 13, 14 June for Congress propoganda among rural masses (7 June). Political conference attended by a galaxy of provincial leaders at Shahkote on 11 and 12 June (15 June). DCC organised annual fair at Baba Jawahar Singh's samadhi at Khattar Kalan in Nawanshahr tahsil, thousands attended (18 June). Another meeting in Nawanshahr tahsil in village Phaiala. More meetings in Nakodar tahsil next fortnight (23 June). Well-attended political conference at Litran in Nakodar tahsil held by DCC (15 July). Political conference held at Banda Bahadurgarh (17 July). Well-attended conference on 20 July at Nahal in Nakodar tahsil by DCC (22 July). Political conferences in three villages in Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil (23 July). Another meeting at Kohan Kalan in Shahkote Ilaqa. Massive propoganda effort by DCC - political conferences in Chitti, Kang Kalan,

Adampur Doaba, Nassi, Nagra, Barwa, Gunachaur, etc. (29 July). District Kisan Committee organising jathas of 100 each from the villages Bilga, Jandiala, Bundala, Chima, and Uppal to send in support of Amritsar Bandobast Morcha (3 August). Congress Committees formed in 20 villages in last few weeks: Mokandpur, Sarhal, Khankhana, Bains, Kultham, Rurka Kalan, Appra, Dhanua, Sang Dhesian, Phillaur, Roorkee, Mothadda Kalan, Moran, Lasara, Dallewal, Jhala, Chima Kalan, Mehshampur, Khaira, Nawanpind. Congress Committee at Chitti starting a Kisan Workers' Training Camp (11 August). Political workers on tour collecting funds for political conference at Lidhar Kalan in Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil. Peasants of Alawalpur Ilaqa hold a meeting (7 September). Conference at Talwandi Madho in Nakodar tahsil (29 September). Premier and Chhotu Ram visiting village Kalabakra in Bhogpur Ilaqa (3 October). Rural political conference at Bandagarh in Jullundur tahsil (3 October). Nurmahal and Phillaur Thana Kisan Committees set up (5 October). DCC to hold District Political Conference at Kasra Kalan in Nakodar tahsil on 15 and 16 October (6 October). Kabul Singh Gobindpuri, MLA, and others toured Adampur Ilaqa, organising Congress Committees, addressing meetings (15 October). Bhagat Singh Bilga, General Secretary of the Punjab Kisan Sabha and of the District Congress Committee interned in his village Bilga (22 October). Comrade Harbans Singh of Bundala interned in his village for second time for one year (27 October). A mass meeting was held in Goraya in Phillaur tahsil which condemned internment

of kisan activist Bujha Singh in his village Chak Maidas for one year (8 November). A crowded dewan at Shankar in Nakodar tahsil congratulates recently-released Babbar Akalis (10 November). Public meeting at Rurka Kalan, Phillaur tahsil (19 November). A band of kisan activists led by Lahori Ram Pardesi to address meetings and form kisan committees in many villages: Bhandal, Himmat, Kot Badal Khan, Unarpur, Sherpur, Ajha, Shadipur, Jaggar, Dhanipind and a dozen others (19 November). A Dehati Political Conference being organized at Kartarpur by DCC on December 24 and 25. At a meeting in a village in Adampur, Congress position towards Muslims was clarified to remove misconceptions spread by Muslim League (21 November). A public meeting at Jamsheer reiterated kisan demands (22 November). A political conference at Sarhala Khurd condemns policy of interning comrades (24 November). A political conference was held at Khanpur in Nakodar where 5,000 kisans vowed to participate in demonstration on 20 December in Jullundur for canal water (26 November). Jullundur District Political Conference being held at Noormahal on 17 and 18 December (1 December). A kisan meeting was held at Barapind (5 December). Meetings demanding remissions and steps to tackle scarcity of water held by kisan workers in Themdian, Kahma, Sidhwan, Bharowal, Hirain, Chak Dama, Malla Budhian, and Jhingran villages in Nawanshahr tahsil (6 December). Rural political Conference at Bandagarh (10 December). The DCC was to hold political conference at Noormahal in Phillaur tahsil and at Kartarpur as part of Muslim mass

contact programme (14 December). A public meeting was held at Samrani in Phillaur tahsil reiterating long-standing peasant demands (17 December).

That the depth of politicization and level of political consciousness was no less than in any comparable area such as Amritsar or Lyallpur, and certainly higher than in Lahore district which hosted the famous Kisan Morcha, is also shown by the fact that the Lahore Kisan Morcha was sustained for one full month by volunteers from Jullundur during May 1939.¹⁴³ In fact, so complete was its absorption in the Lahore Kisan Morcha that it took four months for normal, routine political activity to be resumed by the Jullundur Kisan Committee.¹⁴⁴ Earlier, in July 1938, volunteers were ready to go to Amritsar as well to participate in the Bandobast Morcha, but the Morcha was called off before they actually left.¹⁴⁵

Jullundur was also the district chosen for the first demonstration that was held as part of the organized plan formulated at the Lyallpur Kisan Conference in October 1938 to hold test demonstrations in different districts before

143. All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939-40, Appendix B, Report of Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939-Feb. 1940. Also see The Tribune, 3, 5 and 20 May 1939.

144. The Tribune, 24 Oct. 1939.

145. The Tribune, 3 Aug. 1938.

organizing a mammoth provincial-level demonstration.¹⁴⁶ Interestingly, the first report of the proposed demonstration that we have, dated 30 September, suggested that what was planned was a 'satyagraha on the lines of the Amritsar Morcha', and not just a demonstration.¹⁴⁷ However, this was before the Provincial Kisan Conference at Lyallpur, and clearly after that there was an understanding that morchas were to be postponed till the organised strength of the movement had been tested through demonstrations that did not culminate in morchas.¹⁴⁸ The Jullundur demonstration on 20 December was thus organized strictly according to the line laid down at Lyallpur.

Preparations for the demonstration had obviously begun well in advance, for by early November the Akalis of the district were so worried about the District Kisan Committee, i.e., the leftists, stealing the show that they organised a jatha of 100 to demonstrate before the Assembly at Lahore and secured an interview for their deputation with the Premier and the Revenue Minister. They raised the same

146. Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga. See Section IV of this chapter.

147. The Tribune, 30 Sept. 1938. The District Kisan Committee meeting under the Presidentship of Baba Hari Singh Soundh passed a resolution that in the event of the Punjab government failing to meet the peasant demands, a satyagraha would be launched on the lines of the Amritsar Morcha on 20 December 1938. The list of demands was very long - abolition of begar, chowkidara, chahi, malba, change in system of revenue, and, of course, immediate steps for arrest of falling water-level.

148. Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga.

demand that was announced by the District Kisan Committee as its main demand: a canal for the district to counteract the effects of the declining water-level which made well-irrigation very difficult. The Revenue Minister made an announcement in the Assembly that the problems of Jullundur (and Hoshiarpur) relating to the falling water-level were being investigated.¹⁴⁹

The final demonstration held on 20 December in Jullundur was supported by all political groups - the Congress, the Akalis, the Babbar Akalis, the Socialists, the Kirtis, and the Communists. The leadership was provided by the District Kisan Committee. Smaller meetings at which peasants took vows to attend the demonstration had been held earlier and prominent Kisan activists from other parts of the province had assembled in Jullundur to ensure the success of the demonstration. According to Bhagat Singh Bilga, 'the whole district collected' for the demonstration, and this is confirmed by other participant-organizers. The demonstration was completely peaceful, nor did its members attempt to defy any laws and court arrest ¹⁵⁰ (as in Amritsar the previous July and in Lahore in the following March).

Jullundur district also served as an excellent example of the success of the policy of working within the Congress;

149. See FR(1) Nov. 1938, H.P. F.18/11/1938; The Tribune, 12, 13 and 14 Nov. 1938.

150. FR(2) Dec. 1938, H.P. F.18/12/1938; The Tribune, 26 Nov., 8, 15, and 17 Dec. 1938; Interviews with Bhagat Singh Bilga, Ujagar Singh Bilga, and Master Hari Singh.

Kisan and Congress activists were usually the same people. The District Congress Committee was as active as the District Kisan Committee in rural mobilisation, and the office-bearers of the Congress Committees were mostly the left wing peasant activists.¹⁵¹ Bhagat Singh Bilga was the General Secretary of the DCC.¹⁵² Left wing workers were freely elected to represent the district in the higher Congress bodies.¹⁵³ The Congress organisation was firmly established in the villages by the efforts of the Kisan activists and they in turn reaped the advantage of going to the villages as representatives of the Congress -- the party of Gandhiji and Nehru, and the symbol of Indian anti-imperialism. Jullundur was second only to Lyallpur in enrolment of Congress members -- in November 1938 it had 316 primary committees and 14,455 members.¹⁵⁴

151. For example, of the three members of the District Congress Committee, who were reported to be doing Congress propaganda in the remote areas of Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil, Master Kabul Singh Gobindpuri and Harkishen Singh Surjeet were clearly Communists. The Tribune, 22 Feb. 1938. Bhagat Singh Bilga, the Kirti Communist leader, played an active role in the Congress mobilisation for the District Board elections. See The Tribune, 28 and 31 May 1938. Baba Hari Singh Soundh, President of the District Kisan Committee, presided over the DCC-organised meeting at the annual fair in village Khattar Kalan. The Tribune, 18 June 1938. Dr. Bhag Singh Canadian, Lahori Ram Pardesi, Bhagat Singh Bilga, all well-known Communist workers, participated in the DCC-organised political conference at Litran in Nakodar tahsil. The Tribune, 15 July 1938. Also see, for example, The Tribune, 22, 23, 26 July, 11 and 25 Aug. 1938. The examples are endless.

152. The Tribune, 22 Oct. 1938.

153. See The Tribune, 7 Jan. 1938 and 12 Jan. 1939.

154. The Tribune, 7 Nov. 1938.

Jullundur also had the advantage, because of its old political tradition, of being the home of many dedicated and accomplished political activists, among them being Baba Karam Singh Chima, Master Kabul Singh Gobindpuri, Harjap Singh, Seth Sudershan, Pandit Mulraj Sharma, Master Mota Singh Anandpuri, Baba Hari Singh Soundh, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Bujha Singh, Lahori Ram Pardesi, Harbans Singh Bundala, Hira Singh Dard, Lal Singh American, Balwant Singh Dukhia, Ujagar Singh Bilga, Jwala Singh Barapind, Dr. Bhag Singh Canadian, Chain Singh Chain, Daya Singh Bundala, Gurcharan Singh Randhawa and Harkishen Singh Surjeet. Many of them were from the Ghadar-Kirti party and had been trained in Moscow. The high rate of emigration from the district also contributed to the widening of the political horizons — returning emigrants brought back new ideas of liberty and equality along with hard cash.

Again, the high level of political consciousness is also testified to by the activists. H.S. Surjeet, for example, says that already by 1936 the consciousness of the people was very high due to various reasons, among them Nehru's slogan of socialism and the acute debt problem since the early 1930s. He says that of the 1200 villages in the district, he himself had personally set up kisan organisations in 800. He would visit 10 villages a day and set up Congress and kisan committees, enrolling about 10 members himself and leaving other comrades to do the rest while he went on to the next village. The organizational task

was relatively easy because of the high level of political consciousness.¹⁵⁵ Chain Singh Chain points out that when the old Ghadri Babas went to the villages and asked the people to contribute in any way, they readily did so, thus easing the otherwise difficult task of mobilization.¹⁵⁶ The old proverb, 'even a dead elephant is worth a lakh and a quarter', was very true of the Ghadar/Kirti political workers. Even when they were interned in their villages, they performed the extremely useful task of holding training camps for activists.¹⁵⁷ As a consequence, again, the political level of the ordinary activist was raised, and this in turn would affect the political level of the peasants he organized. The size of the audiences at the political conferences was also suggestive -- and it is to be noted that these were taking place in ordinary times, not when a struggle or morcha was on. For example, 45,000 people were said to have attended the Doaba Political Conference at Narur in April 1939.¹⁵⁸ To collect audiences of this size without star attractions such as Nehru or Bose or even Jaya Prakash Narain or N.G. Ranga and without any morcha in the offing was in itself a considerable achievement. More than that, it was proof of the spread of political consciousness among the people. It is easy to mobilize people

155. Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

156. Interview with Chain Singh Chain.

157. Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga.

158. The Tribune, 10 March and 4 April 1939.

around a long-felt demand or grouse, it is easy to get them to strike in a moment of anger or hatred, but it is not easy to get them, on any ordinary day, for no specific identifiable reason, with no bait of darshan of a great man, to trudge miles on dusty roads to attend a meeting. And the peasants of Jullundur, it seems, were willing to do that.

VI

As in post-modern fiction, the climax of our story comes in the middle and not in the end. In the Kisan Morcha at Lahore in 1939, the Punjab peasant movement touched a peak -- in organisation, in influence, in mobilisation -- which it did not reach again till independence. (After 1939, war-time repression, the unpopular Peoples' War line and its fallout, and then the Partition continued to handicap the movement.) A total of around 5,000 people went to jail in this Morcha, a considerable figure by any reckoning. And except in the very early days, sentences of nine months and above were quite common -- again, a tough punishment by any standards. The Morcha lasted six months -- a long time for a provincial-level sectional struggle.

Its success is all the more striking when we consider that its origins were and still are shrouded in a controversy that time has done little to mellow. If we recall that the Lyallpur Kisan Conference in October 1938 had chalked out a detailed plan of action in which different districts were to hold demonstrations to test their strength, and then, at the end of these series of demonstrations, a big provincial

level demonstration would be organized. Besides, an organized effort to spread influence in hitherto untouched areas and sections was to be made. The Lahore Kisan Morcha, launched by the District Kisan Committee of Lahore, without the permission of the Punjab Kisan Committee, was, in the eyes of the dominant group in the Punjab Kisan Sabha, the Kirtis, a sabotage of this plan. The District Kisan Sabha had no authority to extend the demonstration into a Morcha by violating Section 144 and offering arrests. There is even a suggestion that this was a deliberate violation of discipline by the CPI group who dominated the District Kisan Committee of Lahore — Yog Raj and Tehal Singh Bhangali.¹⁵⁹

According to Bhagat Singh Bilga, a major leader of the Kirti group and then General Secretary of the Punjab Kisan Committee: "perhaps they did not do so intentionally but still it was a sabotage of our movement. Because we were still preparing — preparing for the big struggle. And in between

159. Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga. Master Hari Singh also says that the district leadership of the Kisan Sabha launched the Morcha without permission of the provincial leaders who were compelled to lend support and mobilize from the whole province. Interview. Chhajju Mal Vaid also recounts that his first political contacts were with cadre returning from jail in the Lahore Kisan Morcha. They told him how the movement had not been planned by the Executive. It was started by two men who were with the CPI, Yog Raj and one other, and then everyone had to join and 4,000 went to jail. Interview.

they started another struggle.... We were pushed into this struggle. We had made no preparations for it."¹⁶⁰ Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who belonged to the CPI group, disagrees and argues that if a certain area is burning, you cannot wait for the whole province to get ready. He maintains that Yog Raj and Tehal Singh Bhangali took the decision after due discussion.¹⁶¹ Despite Surjeet's protests, however, it does appear that, whatever the merits of the decision taken at Lahore to go in for courting arrest by defying Section 144, it was taken without the prior sanction of the Punjab Kisan Committee.

The Annual Report for 1939-40 on the Punjab Kisan Movement submitted by the General Secretary of the Punjab Kisan Committee to the All India Kisan Sabha also clearly expressed the feeling that the Morcha was a diversion from the plan. To quote: "The Kisan Workers had intended to strengthen their organisation in view of the impending critical times. But the district of Lahore was restive.... In spite of our efforts to postpone the struggle, the Lahore demonstration turned into a prolonged Morcha. All the energy and resources of the kisan workers, intended to be used for placing the kisan committee on war basis, had to be utilized to make the Morcha a success." It also went on to say that, because of the Morcha, "we were precluded from devoting our attention

160. Interview.

161. Interview.

towards the task of extending kisan work (to areas) heretofore outside the pale of kisan movement."¹⁶² However, this does not mean that the Provincial Kisan Committee stinted in its support to the movement, as will soon become evident from the account of the movement.

On the 22nd of March 1939, it was reported that around 3,000 Kisans had arrived in Lahore to participate in the demonstration before the Assembly Chamber the next day to protest against the enhancement in land revenue in the recent resettlement of Lahore district. A meeting was held on that day as well as on the morning of the 23rd at Mori Gate after which a procession wound its way towards the Assembly. The demonstrators were stopped at Circular Road and told to send a deputation to meet the Premier, but the members of this deputation could not be 'non-agriculturists', or non-residents of Lahore district. This excluded the leader of the demonstration, Yog Raj, and the offer was therefore declined. After this, a decision was taken to defy Section 144 by insisting on going to the Assembly, and in this manner 105 members of the demonstration were arrested. The next day the Premier sent a message through the Senior Superintendent of Police offering to receive a deputation led by Yog Raj, "provided he does not stay there or act as your spokesman." This was not acceptable to the agitators and the courting of arrest

162. All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939-40,
Appendix B, Report of the Punjab Kisan Movement,
March 1939 to Feb. 1940.

continued. By the end of the month, 374 arrests had been effected.¹⁶³

In the early part of April, there was difficulty in getting recruits for offering arrests, partly due to the onset of the harvesting season,¹⁶⁴ and the Punjab Kisan Committee stepped in to lend its support to the District Committee.¹⁶⁵ Volunteers were called from neighbouring districts and by the 16th 700 arrests had been effected.¹⁶⁶ The Punjab Kisan Committee also appointed a sub-committee consisting of Baba Rur Singh, Master Gajjan Singh and Ram Kishen to guide the Lahore District Committee.¹⁶⁷ On the 16th of April, the Premier met a deputation which included all the members on the original list. He explained to them the sliding scale system, the results of the new settlement, and promised to investigate grievances and release the 700 prisoners. The agitators,

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163. The Tribune, 23, 24, 25 March, 1 April 1939. FR(2) March 1939, H.P. F.18/3/1939. At this stage, the Governor dismissed it as an agitation manufactured by the Congress and Communists to embarrass the Ministry and prophesied that it should fizzle out in a few days. Letter from H.D. Craik to Linlithgow, 2 April 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/88.
164. FR(1) April 1939, H.P.F.18/4/1939. Interview with Sohan Singh Narangabadi of Amritsar district, who recounts the difficulty in getting volunteers because of harvest season.
165. The Tribune, 10 April 1939.
166. The Tribune, 17 April 1939.
167. The Tribune, 11 April 1939.

however, it appears, now wanted not only the right to demonstrate before the Assembly but a three-year postponement of the settlement and negotiations with them on how the final settlement would be implemented. For a moment it had looked as if a settlement might emerge, but this was not to be and the Morcha continued.¹⁶⁸

A concerted effort was now made to demonstrate kisan strength. The Punjab Kisan Committee took over the Morcha and summoned more volunteers from other districts.¹⁶⁹ A new feature was the participation of women. Between 17 April and 3 May, the number of women arrested outnumbered the men. A total of 107 women offered themselves for arrest in this period. Among these were Bibi Tej Kaur, Mrs. Tehal Singh and Mrs. Yog Raj. Some of the women came with their babies in their arms. Initially the authorities adopted a soft attitude towards the women, and would send them back to their villages, but they later felt that this was encouraging the women and therefore started to put them in jail. Some of the batches of women were very militant; they sat on dharna and did siapa or mock mourning, and complained of abuse by the police when produced in court. The women volunteers were mostly from Lahore district.¹⁷⁰ But it was the jatha of eleven octogenarian

168. The Tribune, 17 April 1939, FR(1) and (2) April 1939, H.P. F.18/4/1939. Letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 16 April and 2 May 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/88.

169. FR(1) May 1939, H.P. F.18/5/1939.

170. The Tribune, 18, 22, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30 April, 2 and 3 May 1939; FR(1) May 1939, H.P. F.18/5/1939.

kisans carrying a red flag and marching in procession that stole the show! The police kept well away from them.¹⁷¹

By May it seemed that Lahore district had exhausted its strength and after that the Morcha was mainly run by volunteers from other districts. Amritsar and Jullundur led in this but help also came from Gurdaspur, Lyallpur, Ferozepore, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Sheikhpura, Sargodha. Meetings exhorting peasants to join up for the jathas marching to Lahore were held in these districts and then jathas formed and flagged off to Lahore on foot. En route they passed through many villages and spread the message of the Morcha.¹⁷² Amritsar even organised a jatha of 500. Amritsar's

171. The Tribune, 16 June 1939.

172. For example, Master Hari Singh recalls that he organized 50 meetings in his constituency, Hoshiarpur, and sent jathas. He specially mentions the districts of Jullundur, Lyallpur, and Ferozepore as extending support to the Morcha. Interview. We give below some examples to show the kind of support that was received: the Kisan Committees of Gurdaspur and Faridkot State wrote to the PKC offering 100 men each for the Morcha. The Tribune, 11 April 1939. Gurdaspur also offered a women's jatha. The Tribune, 24 April 1939. The District Kisan Committee, Ludhiana, sent a jatha of 15 people. The Tribune, 11 May 1939. The Sheikhpura Kisan Committee sent a jatha of 100 led by Com. Hayat Mohamed on foot. The Tribune, 23 May 1939. The Kapurthala Praja Mandal sent a jatha of 100. The Tribune, 29 May 1939. Hoshiarpur district planned a jatha led by Harjap Singh, MLA, at the end of June. The Tribune, 30 May 1939. From Gurdaspur, Comrade Shiv Kumar Sharda came with a jatha of 100 peasants. The Tribune, 12 June 1939. Jathas of 100 each were reported to be coming from Hoshiarpur and Sheikhpura. The Tribune, 16 June 1939. A jatha of 20 from Lyallpur was arrested at Lahore on 2 July. The Tribune, 3 July 1939. Kisan workers in Gurdaspur were arrested and the Sheikhpura City Congress Committee President and two other Congressmen served notices for alleged incitement of kisans. The Tribune, 6 and 7 July

willingness to contribute to the Morcha was particularly striking given the fact that most of its activists had only recently returned home after serving nine-month long sentences. Before they had any breathing space, they went back for another stint.¹⁷³

contd...

1989. Ujagar Singh Bilga, a prominent Kisan activist of Jullundur district, who was deputed by the Punjab Kisan Committee to Lyallpur to mobilise for the Morcha, was arrested on 8 July. The Tribune, 10 July 1939. A jatha of 7 arrested near Lyallpur. The Tribune, 13 July 1939. A jatha of 16 from Kapurthala arrested. The Tribune, 9 Sept. 1939. A jatha from Hoshiarpur arrested. The Tribune, 19 Sept. 1939.

173. A few examples to show the kind of support extended by Amritsar peasants and peasant activists; Ram Singh Majitha tells us how after coming out of jail, having spent nine months for Amritsar Morcha, they went back to jail for the Lahore Kisan Morcha. Interview. Sohan Singh Narangabadi and Balwant Singh Azad were members of a jatha of 30 which went from Tarn Taran to Lahore in April. They went through villages holding meetings as they went. Interviews. Dalip Singh Tapiala recalls that he led a jatha of 500 till his arrest; then someone else became the leader. He was kept in jail for 9 months. Interview. From Jhabal, a jatha of 25 went to Lahore. The Tribune, 24 April 1939. The District Kisan Committee of Amritsar held a very large number of meetings to mobilise support, and workers toured the villages. The Tribune, 12 and 25 May, 9 June 1939. A jatha of 500 was to leave on 17 June. The Tribune, 16 June 1939. Kisan leaders, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Pritām Singh Sargodha, were arrested for organizing the Kisan jatha from Ajnala. The Tribune, 18 June 1939. A big meeting was held at village Marhana addressed by Baba Wasakha Singh and Bibi Raghbir Kaur. At the end of the meeting, a jatha was flagged off to Lahore. The Tribune, 20 June 1939. This was followed by a series of arrests of leaders and jatha members in the district. See The Tribune, 22 and 26 June, 2, 3, 5, and 10 July 1939. In the first half of July, of the 140 who courted arrest at Lahore, 108 were from Amritsar. FR(1) July 1939, H.P. F.18/7/1939.

The Government toughened its stance after the middle of June and arrested a number of leading organizers. It also started the practice of arresting the jathas soon after they formed in their own home districts, and thus preventing them from reaching Lahore.¹⁷⁴ Not all, however, could be so easily dissuaded. Comrade Wadhawa Ram, who had recently joined the Kisan Sabha via the Multan tenants' struggle, describes how he was part of a group of eleven who started off for Lahore on hearing that the Morcha "was getting weak and all those who could manage should reach Lahore to offer arrest." They went all the way through the villages and when they neared Lahore they disguised themselves as shepherds and somehow reached Bradlaugh Hall and contacted the leaders. They were told to offer arrest in a jatha of five near the Victoria Statue. They again dispersed, hid in the zoo, and emerged at the appointed time with their flag. "The police stopped us and asked us where we wanted to go. We said we wanted to meet Sikandar Hayat. He is our brother and he has told us to come and meet him whenever we have any difficulty. They tried to persuade us not to insist on going forward, etc., but we persisted and were arrested."¹⁷⁵ In

174. FR(1) and (2) June 1939, FR(1) and (2) July 1939, H.P. F.18/6/1939, 18/7/1939. Letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 21 June, early July and 23 July 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/88; The Tribune, 18, 22 June, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 25, 27 July, 10, 16, 20, 23, 28, 31 Aug. 1939.

175. Interview.

Jullundur, the strategy of only 5 members of the jatha appearing at one time was devised. If they were arrested, another five appeared at the next stage of the journey. This way, even if they were arrested at every stage, at least the last batch of five would offer arrest in Lahore since it would show up only at the last minute.¹⁷⁶

In fact, towards the last stages of the Morcha, in July and August, Jullundur made the most important contribution. In August, in fact, the only reports of arrests or jathas were from Jullundur.¹⁷⁷ One village, Barapind, in Phillaur tahsil, alone had 70 men arrested in the Morcha.¹⁷⁸ It was the first to send jathas in early May¹⁷⁹ and its decision in July to send a jatha of 100 led to a cache of 60 constables descending on the village to watch the activities of this 100.¹⁸⁰ Village Mahal Ghella sent a jatha of 23.¹⁸¹ Among the other villages that sent jathas were Rurki, Sangh Desian, Khankhana, Kharnana, Dosanjh Kalan, Kotli Than Singh, Jandiala. A number of leaders, Lal Singh American, Bhag Singh Canadian, Chanan Singh, Bhai Teja Singh, Sardara Singh, Baba Karam Singh

176. The Tribune, 1 Aug. 1939.

177. See The Tribune for the month of Aug. 1939.

178. Interview with Jwala Singh Barapind, a kisan activist belonging to the village.

179. The Tribune, 3 and 5 May 1939.

180. The Tribune, 6 and 7 July 1939.

181. The Tribune, 20 May 1939.

Chima, and Sardar Harbans Singh courted arrest in the jathas.¹⁸²

The Morcha also received the support of a wide spectrum of political parties, groups and organizations, and individuals. The Congress came out in support and the PCC even observed 4 June as Kisan Day.¹⁸³ The President of the PCC, Dr. Kitchlew, was highly critical of the Unionist attitude to the agitation.¹⁸⁴ The Akalis, too, lent support and even sent a jatha to court arrest. They were willing to send more but the Kisan Committee was reluctant to accept Akali support and cold-shouldered the offer. Nevertheless, they continued to express support in meetings, etc., no doubt because they feared a loss of influence if they were isolated at this juncture since most of the peasant participants were Sikhs.¹⁸⁵ The Punjab Socialist Party extended full support.¹⁸⁶ The AIKS supported the Morcha, and N.G. Ranga was particularly active in issuing statements in solidarity with the struggling peasants. He even declared 4 June as Punjab Kisan

182. See The Tribune, 30 May, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 25 and 27 July, 1, 3, 10, 11, 16, 20, 23, 28, 31 Aug. and 7 Sept. 1939.

183. FR(2) March 1939, H.P. F.18/3/1939; The Tribune, 30 May and 13 June 1939; Interviews with Master Hari Singh and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

184. The Tribune, 22 June 1939.

185. The Akalis had organised a Kisan Fauj in early April, apparently frightened by the thought of losing ground to the Communists. They even met the Premier in a deputation around the same time as the Kisan Committee deputation in mid-April. They continued to publicly offer support to the Morcha in conferences. See The Tribune, 18 and 19 April and 12 June 1939, FR(1) and (2) April 1939, H.P. F.18/4/1939.

186. The Tribune, 3 April, 16 May 1939.

Satyagraha Day to be observed by kisans all over the country.¹⁸⁷ The Labour Federation of Amritsar and trade unions in Jullundur offered support.¹⁸⁸ Students of Lahore took out their own jatha.¹⁸⁹ Even the police, at least those sections that came in daily contact with the satyagrahis, were sympathetic, as shown by Wadhawa Ram's account. He narrates that after their arrest they were put in a closed van and taken off to the lock-up. "On the way, whenever the van would be about to pass through a crowded area, the policemen would signal to us to start shouting slogans. We couldn't see outside as the van was a closed one but they could and they would tell us when to start shouting slogans so that those outside could hear us."¹⁹⁰

On 28 August 1939, a deputation of Kisan leaders again met the Premier in an attempt to find a way out of the situation.¹⁹¹ In August, repression in the home districts of the jathas had resulted in the Morcha in Lahore being virtually dead.¹⁹² Among the districts, only Jullundur continued to

187. The Tribune, 5 April, 8 and 22 May, 3 June 1939.

188. The Tribune, 12 April and 11 Aug. 1939.

189. Interview with Jagjit Singh Anand.

190. Interview.

191. FR(1) September 1939, H.P. F.18/9/1939; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 13 Sept. 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/88, The Tribune, 29 Aug. 1939.

192. See FR(1) and (2) Aug. 1939, H.P. F.18/8/1939; and The Tribune for the month of Aug. 1939.

show signs of life.¹⁹³ It was unlikely that the Government would grant any major concessions at this stage of the movement. The Premier, it seems, merely gave some assurances about investigating grievances and agreed only to release the rank and file of the prisoners, and not the activists.¹⁹⁴ In the circumstances, the Kisan Committee unilaterally withdrew the Morcha in the last week of September though it continued to project that it had actually won some demands.¹⁹⁵ Only the rank and file of prisoners, many of whom had in any case run out their terms, were released, while political activists were generally left to run their full terms.¹⁹⁶

Even its critics, however, acknowledge that the Morcha had a powerful impact on the peasant movement in Punjab. The Kisan Committee was recognized as a force in the province. The cause of the peasants received great publicity and the influence spread to hitherto unaffected areas such as Campbellpur, Kangra and Gujarat.¹⁹⁷ The Government was restrained

193. See The Tribune for the month of Aug. 1939.

194. Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 13 Sept. 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/88; All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939-40, Appendix B, Report of the Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939 to Feb. 1940.

195. All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, Appendix B, Ibid.

196. FR(1) and (2) Sept. 1939, H.P. F.18/9/1939; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 13 Sept. 1939. Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/88.

197. All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939-40, Appendix B, Report of Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939 to Feb. 1940.

from increasing the revenue . . . in other areas.¹⁹⁸ And most important, a very large number of cadre was generated by the movement.¹⁹⁹ This was an important achievement and also proof that the movement had aroused genuine enthusiasm among the peasants, because cadre is only generated in such an upsurge. According to Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, several district-level Congressmen gravitated to the Communist movement as a result of this Morcha.²⁰⁰

It does seem, however, that the Morcha was nevertheless not able to arouse much interest and enthusiasm among the general public. Even if we compare it with the Amritsar Morcha — which was able to evoke considerable interest, sympathy and support from the general public of Amritsar city, with daily public meetings being held for a number of days and large crowds following the satyagrahis — the difference is quite striking. Harkishen Singh Surjeet feels that their inability to use this movement for greater publicity among other sections of society was because of immaturity.²⁰¹ But this would not explain the difference with Amritsar. Perhaps this was a result of the fact that the initial lathi charge

198. Ibid.; Interviews with Master Hari Singh and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

199. Interviews with Master Hari Singh, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Chhajju Mal Vaid.

200. Interview.

201. Interview.

in Amritsar had aroused a lot of anger and sympathy or perhaps it was a consequence of the fact that the Amritsar Morcha was jointly led by the Kisan Committee, the Akalis, and the Congress, and all had contributed their mite. The relative lack of support from other sections was one reason the Government could ignore the Morcha for so long and in the end also refuse to concede anything substantial.

This does not detract from the other criticism that perhaps the right time to enter into a settlement was mid-April when the Morcha was still going strong and the Government was willing to come to a settlement. In April, the Government had at least offered to release all the prisoners, in September it did not even do that. Besides, it had accepted the most important immediate demand - that non-agriculturist political activists could legitimately represent peasants, and Yog Raj was allowed to lead the deputation. Again, if one compares with the Amritsar Kisan Morcha, one can see the wisdom of the agreement entered into by the leadership in Amritsar after 20 days of struggle before the enthusiasm began to wane. In the case of Lahore, the Morcha was allowed to drag on endlessly and purposelessly, in the process exposing all the weaknesses of the movement to public view - something a wise leadership always avoids. Perhaps the Communists were paying the cost of their unthinking criticism of the National Congress leadership for entering into negotiations and making compromises with the rulers. Having got into the habit of seeing all compromise or settlement with

the Government as surrender and proof of vacillation towards Imperialism, they could not themselves conduct negotiations and arrange compromises even when these were necessary for the movements they led. The role of leaders is not only to initiate and lead struggles, they also have to find ways and means of bringing them to respectable conclusions - since all struggles cannot end in victory. The Communist leadership of the Punjab peasant movement was able to perform the first task but failed in the equally important second task.

CHAPTER 12

PEASANT PROTEST: STRAYING FROM
THE STRAIGHT PATH 1939-47

The outbreak of the Second World War on 1 September 1939 ushered in a period of turmoil, of uncertainty, of repression, and of sharp changes in political line for the peasant movement in Punjab as in the rest of the country. The orderly growth that had been possible in the previous few years was no longer possible once the Defence of India Rules (DIR) came into existence since that meant that the sword of Damocles always hung over one's head. Though in practice the Government did not order a major swoop till June 1940, political activists were wary from the time of the beginning of the War, especially since most of them were carrying on anti-war propaganda, and also because sporadic arrests did take place.¹ The peasant movement was also initially handicapped by the fact of a large number of its leaders being in jail till December 1939 or January 1940, serving their terms for the Lahore Morcha.² Nevertheless, a considerable amount of political activity, both open and underground, was carried on and its chief focus at this stage was anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda.

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1. See The Tribune, 4 and 27 Sept., 16 Oct. 1939, 29 March, 25 and 30 April, 20 May and 7 June 1940, for reports of arrests of activists before the big operation in June 1940.
 2. Some Lahore Kisan Morcha prisoners were still in jail in February 1940. See The Tribune, 1 Feb. 1940.

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Anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda had been carried on in a vigorous fashion in Punjab since late 1937. Yusuf Meherally had set the tone in a speech at Amritsar on 3 September 1937 when he declared that "in the event of a World War not a single man or a single pie would be provided to the British Government by the Indians". Around the same time, Prof. N.G. Ranga, addressing a series of socialist meetings in Jullundur district, had advised the people to render no help in case of a war. This theme had then been repeated at the two big kisan conferences held around that time, one at Barapind in Jullundur, which was addressed by Swami Satyanand, and the other at Nowshera Punuan in Amritsar, which was addressed by Jaya Prakash Narayan. Anti-war propaganda was then given a big fillip at the massive conference held at Gardhiwala on 11 October 1937 when Jawaharlal Nehru talked of the clouds of war hovering over the world and how India should make use of these troubled times to set her own house in order. Nehru had followed this up with a special visit to Shahpur district, a major recruiting area, where he made anti-recruitment speeches. In November of that year, an organisation called the League against Fascism and War was founded in Lahore, which organised an Anti-war Day on which meetings were held in eight districts. From 1st April to 15 December 1937, a total of 115 persons had made anti-war speeches at 71 meetings in the province. Apparently, this had already affected recruitment since the Recruiting Officer, Lahore Area, complained in May 1937 of a falling

off in the number of recruits in the districts of Sheikhpura, Gujranwala and Shapur due to anti-military propaganda.³

There was a further spurt in 1938, with about 300 speeches being made between 1st January and 31st September, at meetings and conferences all over the province by Congress, Congress Socialists, Kisan Committees, and Ahrars. There was hardly any leader of note who had not made anti-war speeches; and most of the meetings were in rural areas.⁴ This continued increasingly till September 1939⁵ when the War broke out and a large number of arrests under the Defence of India Rules led to a decline in open propaganda.

Underground propaganda, however, continued, and in this the Communists and Socialists were particularly active. The Congress Socialist Party at its meeting on 9 September decided to send volunteers to all recruitment centres as soon as recruitment began and also to send its activists for intensive anti-recruitment propaganda in the recruitment areas.⁶ The

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3. Note on Anti-Militarist Propaganda in Punjab by the Punjab CID, dated 16 Dec. 1937, H.P. F.58/38.
 4. Intelligence Reports on Anti-War and Anti-Recruitment Propaganda in Punjab, 1st half of January, 1st and 2nd half of March, April, 1st and 2nd half of May, 1st and 2nd half of June, 1st and 2nd half of July, 1st and 2nd half of August, 1st and 2nd half of September, October, 1st and 2nd half of November and 1st half of December 1938, H.P. F.58/38.
 5. Intelligence Reports on Anti-War and Anti-Recruitment Propaganda in Punjab from March to Sept. 1939, H.P. F.61/39.
 6. Intelligence Reports on Anti-War and Anti-Recruitment Propaganda in Punjab for Sept. 1939, H.P. F.61/39.

Communist Party of India, as part of its overall plan of underground work prepared in order to forestall the possibility of all-out repression, had appointed in Punjab a committee of three headed by Ferozuddin Mansur to arrange for the issue of anti-war literature and to conduct propaganda among troops and police. The CPI group in Punjab (Sohan Singh Josh, Karam Singh Mann, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, etc.) brought out the Communist in Urdu and Gurumukhi and the Kirti group brought out Lal Jhanda. The Communist group also brought out leaflets titled Ailan-i-Jang in which there was a strong anti-war message. Copies of these were found thrown in the Regimental Lines of the 19th Lancers in Lahore. The Students Federation also carried on anti-war propaganda in rural areas.⁷ A report dated 29 October 1940 talked of "organized approaches... being made to the families and relations of serving soldiers and prospective recruits, and their imagination being stirred with exaggerated accounts of the dangers of overseas service".⁸ Underground workers continued to hold small meetings of 30, 40 or 50 people in villages where anti-war propaganda was carried out. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, for example, worked underground for over a year in this fashion, and so did Karam Singh Mann, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Ram Singh Majitha, Dalip Singh Jauhal,

7. A note on 'Communism in India - a survey of recent developments (to 31-10-1939)', H.P. F.7/7/39; 'A summary of recent information relating to C.P.I. activity for Oct. 1940', H.P. F.7/1/41.

8. Ibid.

etc.⁹

The impact of this tremendous effort at anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda could be seen in the response to the recruitment in the Central Punjab districts. The Governor was continually complaining of the shortage of Jat Sikh recruits and impressing on all his Sikh visits ^{or} the necessity for stimulating recruitment.¹⁰ He believed that this was due to the "anti-Government propaganda carried on for so many years by the Akalis on one side and the Communists on the other."¹¹ The Akalis under Master Tara Singh had already moved away from the Congress on the question of Sikh enlistment in the Army (refusing to accept the Congress position of 'hands-off the

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9. Interviews. Sushila Chain, who joined the Kirti Party in 1940, recalls how she first started getting Lal Jhanda, the underground newspaper, in Pathankot. Then there were anti-War posters all over the town. Interview. Darbara Singh also recalls how he, as a Congress worker, carried on anti-recruitment propoganda during the War and prevented recruitment when recruiting parties came around. He then set up a khaddar shop as a cover for his anti-war propoganda. At night he would write anti-war posters in hand and paste them within a radius of 10-15 miles, and during the day would sell khaddar. Interview. In Jullundur and Hoshiarpur, a government report said Babbar Akalis and Communists were engaged in subversive, anti-war propoganda. Two deserters from the army were at large, one killed an informer while the other was arrested. FR(2) April 1940, H.P. F.18/4/40.
10. See letters from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Linlithgow, Viceroy, India, dated 16 October, and 15 November, 1940 and 13 January, and 10 February 1941, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/89 and 90.
11. Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 15 Nov. 1940, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/89.

war'). They were now wooed by the Government to do their bit for encouraging enlistment. While they were understandably reluctant to publicly come out in support of recruitment, they did supply six or seven Parcharaks or paid propagandists to the Khalsa Defence of India League, an organisation set up in January 1941 by an All Parties Sikh Conference with the support of the Maharaja of Patiala and Sir Jogendra Singh, and the covert support of the Akalis. The work done by these propagandists in preaching recruitment in the villages, particularly in the Amritsar district, which was the worst affected, was reported to be quite effective.¹² Even after this 'improvement', however, the supply still fell quite short of the demand. "The total demand for March, including the shortage in February, was 484 Jat Sikhs and 656 other Sikhs. The actual recruitment up to the 10th of March was only 62 of each class or 124 in all". These figures pertained to the Lahore recruiting area.¹³ That the task of the Khalsa Defence of India League and other similar organisations that tried to encourage recruitment among Sikhs was not easy is evident from the fact that

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12. Craik wrote to Linlithgow on 13 Jan. 1941 that "Sikh recruitment is still very unsatisfactory. I had a talk the other day with Short, one of the Liaison Officers working under General Haughton. Short is in close touch with several of the Akali leaders and particularly Master Tara Singh. According to Short, Tara Singh and his party are genuinely anxious to stimulate recruitment, but are afraid to come out in the open themselves, as they fear that by doing so they would be attacked as reactionaries and supporters of Government. They are, however, willing to supply Agents and propaganda for a recruiting effort". Craik to Linlithgow, 13 Jan. 1941, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/90. Also, letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 10 Feb., 28 Feb., 3 and 4 March 1941, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur., F.125/90.
13. Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 17 March 1941, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/90.

they dared not openly give a call for support to the British War effort and had to clothe their message in the garb of an appeal to defend the motherland, promote Indianisation of the Army and maintain the Sikh position in the Army.¹⁴ Master Tara Singh, too, was soon embarrassed by the public knowledge of his support to the Khalsa Defence of India League and tried to divert public attention to other populist issues.¹⁵

Trouble among serving soldiers was also thought to be the result of "bad influence in their homes". In July 1940, a mutiny in the Central India Horse was found to have been led by a man who was the nephew of a well-known Communist agitator recently externed from Bihar for causing labour unrest in Jamshedpur. Another man who was involved in trouble in the army in Egypt was Sadhu Singh, brother of State prisoner Wasdev Singh. Investigations into the trouble in Egypt and elsewhere revealed that the Meerut centre of 'Kirti' magazine was the source from which the propaganda emanated.¹⁶

Apart from the major theme of anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda, political activity among the peasants continued

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14. See The Tribune, 20 Jan., 28 Jan., 10 March 1941.
 15. Letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 3, 4 and 7 March 1941, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/90.
 16. Handwritten letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 31 July and 22 Aug. 1940, and a note by J.D. Anderson, Joint Chief Secretary, Punjab on the Conference held at Army HQ on 29 July 1940, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F.125/89. Also see H.P. F.94/13/40 and F.161/40 for reports on soldiers 'infected' by Kirtis and action to be taken against them, etc.

on the by-now-familiar lines of enrolment of members, formation of kisan committees, the holding of meetings at which the long-standing demands as well as any new or immediate demands such as relief in revenue due to damage to crops by hailstorms, etc., were voiced, and the holding of big conferences after every few months in each area at which provincial and even national-level leaders addressed large audiences. Amritsar, Jullundur, and Lyallpur continued to remain in the lead and very active.¹⁷

The Punjab Kisan Committee held its annual organisational elections with 425 out of the 500 delegates being present at a meeting in Amritsar in February 1940 to elect the office-bearers. Santa Singh of Gandawind was elected President, Mir Dad Khan of Campbellpore Vice-President, Kartar Singh Gill

17. For example, a District Political Conference was held at Lyallpur in December 1939 with Mian Iftikhar-ud-din in the chair, and Dr. Gopi Chand, Sampuran Singh, and other MLAs present. The Tribune, 24 Dec. 1939. There were also reports of meetings of kisans throughout the district to demand remission of land revenue and water-rates in view of failure of the present cotton crop. The Tribune, 8 Dec. 1939. The DCC Hissar organised a big Kisan Conference with Neki Ram Sharma presiding. The Tribune, 13 Jan. 1940. Organisational elections of kisan committees were held in Lyallpur and Jullundur. The Tribune, 6, 16 and 26 Feb. 1940. Ambala held a District Political Conference with Bibi Raghbir Kaur in the chair. The Tribune, 28 Feb. 1940. In Amritsar, a series of conferences were organised in villages Jubbulpore, Kasel, Dadrai Jhanjhoti, Verka, Isa Rur, Chamunda Devi, Wallah, etc. The Tribune, 16, 17, 26, 30 March, 4, 9, 17 April, 22 May and 1 June 1940. Thousands attended a political conference in Hoshiarpur at Kotli Hyatpur, The Tribune, 18 June 1940. Trouble broke out again in Chuharchak over collection of punitive police tax. The Tribune, 12 May 1940.

became General Secretary, and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia Treasurer.¹⁸ The All India Kisan Sabha also honoured Punjab by electing Sohan Singh Bhakna as its President in place of Rahul Sankritayan who was arrested under DIR.¹⁹

Arrests and detentions of kisan activists had been continuing ever since the outbreak of the War, but in June 1940, in one swoop, 84 communists were arrested in Punjab, including 5 MLAs. There were raids on the Bradlaugh Hall in Lahore, and in houses in towns and villages all over the province. The reasons given were their increasingly subversive and anti-war activities, and that they tried to tamper with the loyalty of the Army, created labour trouble, encouraged terrorists, exploited local grievances and disseminated alarmist rumours, distributed virulent and violently-worded pamphlets and newsheets issued by their secret propaganda organisation urging people to rise and overthrow British Imperialism and Capitalism. They were detained under Rule 26 of the DIR.²⁰

The arrests and detentions of so many political leaders at one go led to ^abig outcry in the province. The Working Committee of the Provincial Congress Committee condemned these arrests as an attack on the Congress and said that they savoured of Nazi methods.²¹ From the villages, too, came reports of

18. The Tribune, 29 Feb. and 1 March 1940.

19. The Tribune, 30 March 1940.

20. FR(2) June 1940, H.P., F.18/6/40; The Tribune, 28 and 29 June, 2 July 1940.

21. FR(2) June 1940, H.P., F.18/6/40.

protests. The village of Dader had observed a spontaneous and complete hartal when Sant Baba Wasakha Singh, President of the Desh Bhagat Pariwar Sahaik Committee, was arrested on 27 June, and had taken out a huge procession to condemn the repression.²² In early July, large numbers of villages observed protest days, especially in Amritsar and Jullundur.²³ In September, the prisoners who were kept in Montgomery jail went on hunger-strike to demand better conditions, and there was a wave of sympathy expressed in numerous public meetings in villages in many areas, with the Congress giving full/organisational and other support to the campaign. This resulted in the Congress leader Dr. Gopi Chand being allowed to visit the prisoners in jail and persuade them to withdraw their hunger-strike.²⁴ Arrests, detentions, attachments of property of absconders, continued unabated.²⁵ In December 1940, two major 'absconders', Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Karam Singh Mann were caught; the former was reportedly the key man in the underground set-up in the province.²⁶ The figure for persons detained without trial was highest for Punjab in September 1940: 75 out of a total of 237 for all-India.²⁷

22. The Tribune, 29 June 1940.

23. The Tribune, 8, 9, 15 July 1940.

24. The Tribune, 22, 23, 24, 29 Sept. 1940; FR(1) and (2) Sept. 1940, H.P. F.18/9/40.

25. See The Tribune, 21 July, 14, 23, 25 and 28 Oct., 8 and 10 Nov., 16 and 25 Dec., 1940, 9, 13, 23 and 25 Jan., 8, 11 and 28 June, 24 July and 14 Sept. 1941.

26. Interviews with Karam Singh Mann and Harkishen Singh Surjeet, FR(1) Dec. 1940, H.P., F.18/12/40; H.P. F.7/1/41, Report for Nov. 1940.

27. H.P., F.19/1/40.

Meanwhile, in October 1940, the Congress had launched the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement. Gandhiji's idea was to express Indian resentment at being forced into the War without her consent and yet to express it in such a way that it did not obstruct the Allied war effort. He had therefore chosen the method of individual rather than mass protest, where pre-selected individuals would register their protest by giving a set speech saying that Indians would not aid the war effort. This was also a protest against war-time restrictions on civil liberties and the speech was designed to offer civil disobedience by violating the law banning such anti-war propaganda. The left-wing, as is common knowledge, thought Gandhiji should not restrict this movement to 'individuals', but make it a mass affair. They had been spoiling for a fight ever since the outbreak of the War, and failed to understand the subtleties of Gandhian strategy and tactics -- being more used to their own sharp swings and turns, from outright opposition to the War to total support. But we are anticipating the future here.

In Punjab, too, the left-wing kept up a constant refrain, demanding of Gandhiji that he transform individual into mass satyagraha.²⁸ They participated actively in the Satyagraha training camp held in June 1940 to prepare for the movement.²⁹ And in the rural areas, they evolved a method that would

28. See, for example, The Tribune, 15 Feb., 2 and 3 March, 13 April, 20 June, 24 July, 6 Aug. and 13 Sept. 1941.

29. See FR(1) June 1940, H.P. F.18/6/40.

transform it into a mass affair while remaining within the confines of Congress policy. According to the Congress injunction, prior notice of the date, time, and place of the satyagraha had to be given to the authorities. In practice, what happened was that the police often arrested the satyagrahi even before he could give his speech. To circumvent this, the left-wing activists would hide the satyagrahi after giving the notice. Meanwhile, they would organise a big public meeting at the proposed site of the satyagraha, collecting thousands of people from neighbouring villages. When the audience had all assembled, and the police was also waiting, the satyagrahi would be smuggled on to the stage, usually in some disguise, often of a woman. Surrounded by all the activists on the stage, and by an admiring audience of thousands, the police would hardly dare to reach him and he would make his speech at leisure, and so would all the others. The police would be allowed to make their arrests only after the entire proceedings had been gone through. Needless to add, this form of satyagraha, involving as it did a lot of hide and seek with the police, generated a lot of excitement and proved quite popular with rural audiences.³⁰

30. Interviews with Chhajju Mal Vaid, Wadhawa Ram, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri. Sohan Singh Narangabadi describes in his interview the manner in which Bibi Raghbir Kaur, MLA, offered satyagraha: "We brought Bibi Raghbir Kaur from her house in Lahore to the village, kept her hidden, organised a big function, got 200-300 women, all with their faces covered with veils, to surround her and take her to the function. They formed a cordon around her at the meeting as well. Our aim was that the arrest would take place only

The Individual Satyagraha which had provided an excellent opportunity for rural mobilization peaked around February-March 1941 and declined thereafter.³¹ In April, there was a big agitation by the Punjab Beopar Mandal or Traders' Association against the General Sales Tax Act and the Punjab Agricultural Produce Markets Act, 1939, the latter being due to come into force on April 15.³² This agitation, which involved hartals by the trading community, led to disruption of the agricultural produce markets and thus to demands by the peasants and their organisations that revenue collection be postponed till the

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after the speech, not before, as the police usually tried to do. We told the police to stay at the back; they couldn't come forward anyway because of the cordon of women. There were at least 10,000 people in this gathering. We had mobilised in all the surrounding villages. There was a lot of enthusiasm among the people. We conducted other satyagrahas also in similar fashion." Narain Singh Shahbazpuri's description of his own satyagraha is also worth quoting; "I got signatures of 300 people for Individual Civil Disobedience. Then I offered satyagraha. At least 20 to 30,000 people collected for the event held in a big Gurdwara in Shahbazpur. Gandhiji had also said that the satyagrahi must be garlanded by the eldest person in the house. In my house, my mother being dead, only my wife was there and her father had just died. That same day was his samskar. So she came back after the samskar to garland me. The police wanted to arrest me before I made my speech and shouted the slogan 'No money, no men, for the British'. At this, our village Nihangs took out their kirpans. Finally, I was arrested and sent to jail." Interview. Also see The Tribune, 24 July, 1941.

31. FR(1) and (2) Feb., FR(1) and (2) March, FR(1) and (2) April 1941, H.P. F.18/2/41, 18/3/41, 18/4/41; The Tribune, 4, 13 and 27 Jan., 1, 19, and 26 March, 19 April 1941; H.P. F.3/17/40, 3/17/41 and 3/6/42.
32. See FR(1) and (2) April, FR(1) and (2) May, FR(1) June, 1941, H.P. F.18/4/41, 18/5/41, 18/6/41. The date for the Agricultural Produce Markets Act was soon shifted to 15 Sept. but the agitation continued against the Sales Tax.

agitation was over as prices were too low.³³ This was followed up in June 1941 with a powerful agitation for better conditions for prisoners at the Deoli Camp Jail where left-wing activists from all over India had been kept. The week from 16-23 June 1941 was observed as Detenus Week. Along with the CSP and the CPI, the Punjab Kisan Committee participated fully in this and daily village meetings were reported by the District Kisan Committees of Amritsar and Ferozepore.³⁴ The Congress was extremely active in the rural areas of Kangra and Rohtak during this period, in the latter protesting against forced subscriptions to the War Fund.³⁵

In September, the PKC decided to hold its annual Provincial Kisan Conference at Fatehgarh in Ferozepore district from 18-22 September. The announcement led to a spate of internments, and arrests, with about 40 kisan workers being affected. The PKC also decided to take it as a challenge, and the Conference was held, on the banks of the river Sutlej, with jathas after jathas crossing the river to join the meeting. The police would arrest the President-elect of the Conference from the head of the procession, and a new one would be appointed. In this way, more than ten Presidents were arrested but the procession continued.³⁶ The Conference had been preceded

33. The Tribune, 19 and 26 May 1941.

34. FR(2) June 1941, H.P. F.18/6/41; The Tribune, 12, 16, 19, 26 May, 2, 10, 15, 19, 20, 21, 25 June 1941.

35. For Kangra, see The Tribune, 27 Jan., 26 March, 19 April, 19, 20, 28 May, 19 June 1941; and for Rohtak, see The Tribune, 22 Jan. and 17 June 1941.

36. The Tribune, 16, 17, 22 and 23 Sept. 1941; FR(1) and contd....

by an intense campaign of mobilisation in and around the Ferozepore district by the younger cadre who were outside the jail.³⁷ This was followed by a number of conferences in Amritsar, Jullundur and Sheikhpura.³⁸ In January 1942, a new phase

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(2) Sept. 1941, H.P. F.18/9/41; Interviews with Dalip Singh Jauhal, Sushila Chain, and Bhagat Singh Bilga.

37. Sushila Chain, who joined the Kirti Party in 1940, was sent to Ferozepore district to work among women in preparation for this conference. In her interview, she describes vividly her first political experiences as an eighteen-year old woman activist. Her escort was an older woman, Bebe Dhan Kaur, sister of one of the activists, Chanan Singh. At the time warrants of arrest were out for political workers, therefore meetings were not announced in advance. They would hold three meetings a day in different villages, traveling on foot from one village to another. They would hold separate meetings for women in the local gurdwara. The condition of women in Ferozepore was very bad; no woman would agree to sit in a chair and chair a meeting. So Bebe Dhan Kaur chaired and Sushila spoke. At one such meeting in Fatehgarh Kot, the venue of the proposed provincial conference, a women's meeting was on in a haveli, and Sushila was speaking, when a thanedar appeared and asked her to come outside. She asked him to speak in front of everyone. He questioned her about her identity which she and Bebe both refused to divulge. Then Bebe made fun of the thanedar by narrating a story about his childhood when she had beaten him up for stealing sugar-cane. The thanedar left, as in any case he had no warrant and could not arrest her. The impact of this incident was to remove the fear of the police in the area, and people flocked to the Fatehgarh Conference. A three-day langar was run by the women of the area. Many presidents were arrested and then the Conference was allowed to continue under the presidentship of Gair Singh Chajjar. The Conference was a huge success and she continued to work in that area for eight months.

38. See The Tribune, 24, 27 Sept., 13 Oct., 8 Nov., 22 Nov. and 20 Dec. 1941, 9, 14 and 15 Jan. 1942.

began with the adoption of the Peoples' War line by the Communist Party of India which had direct repercussions on the peasant movement, which shall form the subject of the next section.

The period from September 1939 to the end of 1941 was thus characterised by a strident anti-war political atmosphere which informed all aspects of activity. All political groups were against the War, the only difference being over how strongly to express this opposition. This naturally made for considerable unity and combined effort between Communists, Socialists and Congressmen and between the organisations they ran. In 1939, Sohan Singh Josh, a well-known Communist, was General Secretary of the Congress and, in 1940, Mian Iftikhar-ud-din, who, even if not a member of the Communist Party, was as close as one could be to the Communists, was President of the Punjab Congress. Little wonder then that the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee adopted in 1940 almost all the kisan demands proposed by the Punjab peasant movement.³⁹ It also appointed a Kisan Sub-Committee of the PCC with prominent PKC leaders as members.⁴⁰ In turn, leaders and workers of the peasant movement played an active role in the Individual Satyagraha and other Congress activities. The arrests of

39. The Tribune, 1 June 1940.

40. Sohan Singh Josh was the Chairman of this sub-committee. See The Tribune, 8 April 1940.

Communists were condemned by the Congress as an attack on itself and full co-operation was extended in the campaigns for better treatment, etc., of detenus. The Unionist Ministry's move to pass the Punjab Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Bill in November 1940 which extended the operation of the Act by another five years was condemned by the Congress in the Assembly as an attack on Communists.⁴¹ (We are emphasizing this at least partly because this was the last time we witness this kind of co-operation - the Peoples' War and its aftermath put paid to all this for good from 1942 onwards.) As a result, despite the concerted and vicious repression launched against left-wing activists, who were the most active elements in the peasant movement, political activity among the peasants continued at a vigorous pace through 1940 and 1941.

One of the striking features of the movement in this phase was its almost total emphasis on political issues - whether demanding release of prisoners of the Lahore Morcha, or of the detenus, or better treatment for them, or the whole gamut of anti-war propaganda, including the Individual Satyagraha campaign, almost all the issues were political.⁴² The focus on economic demands was relatively minor - with some agitation around relief in land revenue, etc., on account of

41. Extracts from Punjab Legislative Assembly Debates, dated 19 and 22 Nov. 1940, H.P. F.13/1/41.

42. Sohan Singh Narangabadi, in his interview, made a special point of this aspect.

hailstorms or the traders' strike or some other immediate issue. And the movement was no less vigorous for that reason - thus placing a big question-mark on the oft-repeated assertion that the peasants - or the masses or the poor - respond only to economic issues. Again, it is to be marked that all this mobilisation and activity occurred without any 'morchas' or 'struggles' - again indicating that vigorous political activity and politicization is possible without 'struggles' and certainly without violence.

II

Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 threw the left-wing in India into a state of confusion.⁴³ The Anglo-Soviet Alliance that followed created problems about how to characterise the War. Was it now an Imperialist War or not? There was nobody who was willing to give a clear answer. The top leaders were in jail, and even they, it seems, were really waiting for instructions from the Comintern and the Communist Party of Great Britain.⁴⁴ In the meantime,

43. For a general discussion of Peoples' War, etc. see Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit.

44. The 'Survey of Communist Activity in India for Aug. 1941' reported that there was no change yet in the anti-war attitude, but it seemed as if the leaders were waiting for a directive from outside. There was disagreement in the British Communist Party, with Rajni Palme Dutt taking the line that the Indian question was important and separate and should not be dismissed for the sake of a United Front with Churchill. H.P. F.7/1/41.

those outside did what they thought best. At some meetings of peasants in Jullundur and Amritsar districts during July to September, the release of Communists and Socialists was urged on the ground that the Government should prove its anti-fascist credentials and give them an opportunity to help the Soviet Union.⁴⁵

By December, the situation became clearer with the change in line being declared officially by the CPI. This at least put an end to the absurd formulations such as the war being an Imperialist War in the west and a Peoples' War in the east.⁴⁶ In Punjab, the adoption of this line by the CPI group was never in doubt once the CPI at the national level adopted it. But what about the Kirti group, who were in a majority? Would not their strong nationalist orientation, born out of their origins in the Ghadar party, make the acceptance of such a line, which spelt co-operation with the British in India, very difficult for them? In the normal course, it is very likely that this scenario would have been true. But the Kirtis

45. The first meeting at which support was extended to the Soviet Union in its struggle was at village Palsa in Jullundur district at the end of July 1941. See The Tribune, 28 July 1941. Another meeting in Amritsar district following this demanded proof of British government's anti-fascist policy by way of release of Socialists and Communists. The Tribune, 29 July 1941. Other meetings followed. See The Tribune, 30 July, 12, 19 Aug., 11 Sept. 1941.

46. See 'Survey of Communist Activity in India for October 1941', H.P., F.7/1/41; and FR (2) Sept. 1941, H.P. F.18/9/41.

had only recently, in the Deoli camp, where all the national-level leadership of the CPI had been present, worked out a compromise with the CPI group by which they had accepted organisational unity and the discipline of the CPI. The propelling factor had undoubtedly been the strong Marxist tenet that there could be only one 'legitimate' Communist Party in one country. It was an uneasy unity, which never really worked in practice, and was given up even in theory again a few years later. But the timing of this new-found unity resulted in the Kirtis going against their grain, and accepting the Peoples' War line.⁴⁷ The Kirtis accepting it meant that the Punjab Kisan Committee, which had a majority of Kirtis on it, would also follow this line. In any case, the All India Kisan Sabha, too, adopted the same line in February 1942, thus making it almost inevitable that the Punjab Kisan Committee would follow suit.⁴⁸

47. Bhagat Singh Bilga explained this at great length in his interview. According to him, for the sake of this unity, Teja Singh Swatantar, the leader of the Kirtis, kept his differences to himself. In any case, he says, the CPI leaders had a feeling that the Kirtis' anti-imperialism was stronger than their communism; that their communism was 'different'. It wasn't different, says Bilga, but it was also anti-British. And may be that wasn't such a bad thing in a slave country, he adds. Interview. For the Kirti-Communist merger, see also 'A note on the Progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', enclosed with the letter from F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 5 July 1944, dealing with the policy towards Communists. H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.

48. FR(2) March 1942, H.P. F.18/3/42.

On 1 May 1942, as a result of the understanding between the CPI and the Government of India, 8 major Communists of Punjab were released. They were Teja Singh Swatantra, the chief leader of the Kirti group, Acchar Singh Chhina (the Kirti leader who had brought the message of Peoples' War from the Soviets to the Indian Communist leaders in jail), and Bhagat Singh Bilga, another major Kirti leader. The other five belonged to the CPI group: Sohan Singh Josh, Karam Singh Gill, Fazal Ilahi Qurban, Feroz-ud-din Mansoor, and Iqbal Singh Hundal. Their release led to a major effort at re-organisation, since the repression of the last two years had completely disrupted the whole structure. In June, P.C. Joshi, the General Secretary of the CPI, came to Punjab and helped organise the Provincial Committee of the Party, allot work, etc. Study circles and conferences were held to spread the new line. The ban on the Communist party was lifted in July 1942. An open party was to be set up for the first time.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the Punjab Kisan Committee, in a meeting attended by 450 workers in late May, had already given directions for the political line to be followed. All kisan workers

49. FR(1) May 1942, H.P. F.18/5/42; Central Intelligence Officer, Lahore's F.R. for 2nd half of April 1942, H.P. F.226/42; 'A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.

were to support the War effort, demand a national government and release of security prisoners, and try to capture the Congress.⁵⁰ In the initial wave of enthusiasm for the new line, a number of conferences were held at which pro-war propaganda, including appeals to join the army and make it a national army were made.⁵¹ But opposition from the Congress and the Socialists soon began to tell on the morale of the activists. In Rawalpindi, the Congress Socialists disrupted the Detenus Release Conference organised by B.P.L. Bedi and Sohan Singh Josh.⁵² In the rural areas, the Congress and the Akalis are reported to have spread the story that Communists had purchased their release from jail on promise of support to the War effort.⁵³ The Lahore CSP had dissolved itself to be able to purge the Communists.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, too, there were reports of the Congress throwing out the Communists.⁵⁵ As a result, there was some softening of the pro-War edge and some strengthening of the anti-government tone

50. FR(2) May 1942, H.P. F.18/5/42.

51. FR(2) June and FR(1) July 1942, H.P. F.18/6/42 and 18/7/42.

52. FR(1) June 1942, H.P. F.18/6/42.

53. FR(1) July 1942, H.P. F.18/7/42.

54. FR(1) March 1942, H.P. F.18/3/42.

55. FR(1) July 1942, H.P. F.18/7/42. For hostility from Congress and Congress Socialists and Akalis, also see The Tribune, 12, 15, 17 June and 3 Aug. 1942, and FR(1) May 1942, H.P. F.18/5/42.

of Communist propaganda.⁵⁶

The Quit India movement which started on 9 August 1942 further queered the pitch for the Communists. In keeping with their line, they declared it to be a policy of 'national suicide'. It did not help much that they simultaneously blamed the Government for precipitating the present crisis and demanded the release of the national leaders and opening of negotiations for a national government.⁵⁷ They also followed a policy of dissuading peasants from participating in any acts of violence or sabotage.⁵⁸

Much more important than what they did, however, was what they did not do. It was by not giving a lead to the peasants to participate in the Quit India movement that the Communists, along with the Akalis, ensured that the movement never really took off in rural Punjab. The Congress in the rural areas of central Punjab comprised basically of these two political groups, and in 1942 both of them were aiding

56. FR(2) May and FR(1) June 1942, H.P. F.18/5/42 and 18/6/42.

57. FR(1) Aug. 1942, H.P. F.18/8/42.

58. FR(1) Aug. 1942, H.P. F.18/8/42. The Punjab Government noted with approval that "to the Party's credit must also be placed the fact that during the Congress rebellion of 1942, it stood firmly against sabotage, interruption of communications and any interference with the war effort, although perversely it placed the blame for the disturbances on the Government." Letter from F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 5 July 1944, dealing with the policy towards Communists. H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.

the British in the war-effort. Master Tara Singh had taken away the major chunk of the Akalis to protect the Sikh position in the Army and get Ministerships for Sikhs, and the Communists took away most of what remained of the rural activists to fight the Soviet Union's Peoples' War. In most villages, this meant that there were no other nationalist forces left to give the lead. As Jagbir Singh Chhina put it: "People do not join a movement only on the basis of principles, they go with individuals. They see who is leading the movement. The people who could lead the Quit India movement were too few. There were no forces who could lead it."⁵⁹ It was ironic and tragic indeed that those who were so desperate to convert individual satyagraha into mass satyagraha should have to watch the mass satyagraha fizzle out with their hands tied

59. Interview, Ataulloh Jahaniah, in his speech as Chairman of the Reception Committee of the AIKS annual Conference at Bhakna in April 1943 was right when he claimed that it was "because of kisan jathebandi that Punjab remained free of earthquake that shook other provinces on 9 August." By kisan jathebandi he meant clearly Communist influence over peasants. See The Tribune, 4 April 1943. That Akalis and Communists were the two political forces capable of leading the peasants in Punjab is also confirmed by the Chief Secretary's observation in 1945, while discussing the possibilities of the revival of Congress activity, that the danger would be if the Congress rescinded the present ban on the "Communists and Akalis who have a rural organisation capable of causing considerable trouble in the countryside." Letter from F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Additional Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, dated 11/14 Feb. 1945. H.P. F.4/7/44.

behind their backs. It was even more ironic that they should have to do this in the case of the only national struggle which adopted methods of struggle with which they had a 'natural' affinity: underground organisation, sabotage, violence, etc.

Nevertheless, despite the abandonment by the Communists and the Akalis, there were hartals, meetings, jathas, demonstrations, and violent attempts at derailment of trains, cutting of telegraph wires, etc. The active districts were reported to be Lahore, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Lyallpur, Multan, Karnal, Rohtak and Simla. There were also 'unnaturally large number of meetings with huge audiences' in some districts. A lot of illegal literature was distributed. In all, about 1840 arrests were affected, about 400 more than in the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement.⁶⁰ In other words, it was not as if no groundswell existed in Punjab which could be built into a powerful movement if the forces that were capable of providing the leadership had been willing to undertake their historic responsibility.

Resentment at the Communist line towards the Quit India Movement was obviously strong, for the Punjab Kisan Committee

60. For the Quit India movement in Punjab, see FR(1) and (2) Aug. 1942, FR(1) and (2) Sept. 1942, FR(1) Oct. 1942, H.P. F.18/8/42, 18/9/42 and 18/10/42. Also see H.P. F.3/30/42 for a brief summary of events from 9 Aug. to 30 Sept. 1942, and H.P. 3/33/42, for 'Statistical and Factual Information' relating to the Quit India Movement.

quietly ordered its cadre to lie low, postpone all conferences and stop all pro-war propaganda till the 'situation improves'.⁶¹ Karam Singh Mann recalls that there was so much sympathy for the Quit India movement in the villages that people would even turn their faces away from Sohan Singh Josh, who was so popular among the peasantry that earlier he would be paraded on a horse and garlanded, etc. Even among pro-Communist workers in Amritsar, says Mann, it was difficult at this time for Communists to hold a meeting without 50 lathi-wielding youth to guard them.⁶² Jagbir Singh Chhina describes a rural meeting in 1942 where Dalip Singh Tapiala was trying to explain the People's War line. An Akali jathedar of the area, totally uneducated, rose and said: "O Dalip Singh, don't you understand that you are helping the he - cat who has been beating us for 200 years, has been ruling over us for 200 years? You should be ashamed of what you are doing." And people were very happy with this. Jagbir Singh Chhina says that only those who had studied Marxism could understand the People's War line, not ordinary people.⁶³ In Joginder Singh Chhina's opinion, this line could not be accepted by the kisans because for the last 15-20 years the Kirtis had been telling them to throw out the British by whatever means possible. Also, the fact that the entire

61. FR(2) Aug. 1942, H.P. F.18/8/42.

62. Interview.

63. Interview.

national leadership - Nehru, Azad, Gandhi, Patel - was in jail made a difference. People loved them as well, so they would tell the Communists that even if what the Communists say is correct, they cannot accept it.⁶⁴ Dalip Singh Tapiala confirms: "When we took the People's War line to the peasantry through meetings, etc., we met with strong opposition. We were hooted."⁶⁵

Popular alienation from the Communists was shown also by the fact that they were able to get hardly any response to their efforts at mobilisation.⁶⁶ Two 'Unity Weeks' celebrated in November and December were quite unsuccessful except for some meetings in Amritsar district and Lahore.⁶⁷ In fact, there was very little sign of any political activity by the Kisan organisations between October 1942 and February 1943.⁶⁸ Gandhi-ji's fast in February 1943 provided an opportunity to come out of hiding and try to build fences with the Congress by organizing meetings under the Communist banner since Congress could not legally hold meetings. But the Government quickly put a

64. Interview.

65. Interview.

66. In October 1942, it was reported that Communists had given up anti-fascist work and, in the few open meetings held, have laid emphasis on release of national leaders, formation of national government and Congress League unity. Thus, the lack of response came despite their toning down considerably any references to the War effort, etc. See FR(1) and (2) Oct. 1942, H.P. F.18/10/42.

67. FR(1) Nov. and FR(2) Dec. 1942, H.P. F.18/11/42 and 18/12/42.

68. See FRs for this period.

ban on meetings and procession, thus bringing that effort to an end.⁶⁹ It was only the All India Kisan Sabha session to be held in April 1943 at Bhakna in Amritsar district that finally galvanised the Kisan Sabha activists into action, and they began collecting funds, enrolling members, making preparations. And though Rs.10,000 and 880 maunds of grain were collected for this conference, it failed to generate more than local interest, except among delegates.⁷⁰

From mid-1943, there was a quickening of activity, with more conferences and meetings being reported, especially in Jullundur, Amritsar and Ferozepore. The emphasis shifted to the organisation of food committees to deal with the shortages of essential items such as sugar and kerosene in villages. Another slogan was that of 'grow more food' to deal with the food crisis in the country. Organising relief for the victims of the Bengal famine was the third major item. Cultural groups came from Bengal to carry on propaganda for famine relief and help collect money and grain for relief. Their dramatic performances were quite popular in the rural areas and people gave generously.⁷¹ Around the middle of the year there had also

69. FR(1) and (2) Feb., FR(1) March 1943, H.P. F.18/2/42 and 18/3/43.

70. FR(2) March, FR(1) April 1943, H.P. F.18/3/43, 18/4/43; The Tribune, 4 April 1943, 'A note on progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.

71. See FRs from July to Dec. 1943, H.P. F.18/7/43 to 18/12/43; The Tribune, 21, 25 June, 6, 11, 13, 23, 26 July, 8 Aug., 4 21 Sept., 16 Oct., 24 Dec. 1943.

been a slight revival of anti-fascist and pro-war propaganda in response to the stricter line advocated at the Bombay Congress of the CPI held from 23 May to 1 June 1943,⁷² and the anniversary of Quit India had brought forth appeals for peace⁷³ -- but this revival had not lasted very long and the

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72. In this Congress, the CPI for the first time openly identified the Congress Socialists and the Forward Bloc with the Fifth Column and gave instructions that fifth columnists should be tracked down and exposed. It is possible that in keeping with these instructions, some members of the Party actually helped in the process of 'exposure'. At least this is the impression one gets from the following sentence: "The Party is genuinely opposed to Subhas Chandra Bose and his fifth-columnists, the Forward Bloc and the Congress Socialist Party and has given practical proof of its readiness to co-operate in intelligence plans to expose and arrest them." This was said in the letter written by F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab to the Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, dated 5 July 1944, discussing the need to review policy towards the Communists. H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W. For reports on the Bombay Congress, see Letter from Sir Richard Tottenham, Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, to All Provincial Governments, dated 20 Sept. 1943 (in which he reviewed the policy towards Communists and surveyed Communist activities since June 1942), and 'A note on progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W. This Congress also accused itself of 'Left Nationalist Deviations', "an extraordinary expression (which) covers a realistic appreciation of their failings." In simple words, this meant they had been too critical of the Government. 'A note on progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.
73. FR(2) July and FR(1) Aug. 1943, H.P. F.18/7/43 and 18/8/43.

party was soon back to business as usual with a token obeisance to the People's War line, followed up quickly with demands for release of national leaders, more sugar, kerosene, etc.⁷⁴

In September 1943, the annual Provincial Punjab Kisan Conference was held in district Lyallpur in the face of considerable Akali opposition.⁷⁵ The Kisan Sabha also tried to get popular attention by concentrating more on criticism of punitive police, police excesses, shortages, etc. It also took up the cause of tenants in a dispute between lessees and tenants in the Haveli project chaks of Jhang and Multan. In Jullundur, it supported the kisans in their opposition to the Sugar Control

74. By September, the Government reports again acquired an exasperated tone when reporting Communist activities. See FR(1) and (2) Sept., FR(1) and (2) Oct. 1943, H.P. F.18/9/43 and 18/10/43. Complaining about the very short period for which the resolutions passed in Bombay in May 1943 had any effect, an official report commented: "Unfortunately, however, it is a failing of the Communists, that having indulged in self-criticism of their past mistakes, they consider no further effort is necessary, and their good resolutions were still born. Instead of really tracking down and exposing fifth columnists, the Party developed the habit of calling all its opponents by this name, including Government itself. Instead of honestly inspiring anti-Fascist views in the minds of soldiers, they made a few undesirable contacts, in which anti-British and pro-Communist propaganda was the chief element. In the towns more and more open propaganda on behalf of Congress has been done and in rural areas pro-war and anti-Fascist propaganda has given place to every form of agitation which they consider likely to increase their influence and popularity." 'A note on progress made by the Communist Party of Punjab, since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.

75. FR(1) Oct. 1943, H.P. F.18/10/43; 'A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.

Order which prohibited the manufacture of gur within 20 miles of sugar factories, thus resulting in financial losses to them since the prices offered by the sugar factories were not as high as they could get by making gur.⁷⁶ Membership of the Kisan Sabha went up from 56,000 at the end of 1942 to 1,00,000 at the end of 1943, though it still fell far short of the quota of 2,00,000. All areas showed an increase, with new areas of influence being Kangra, Karnal, Rohtak, Gurgaon and Jhang. There was, however, no extension of influence to Muslim peasants, despite explicit instructions by the CPI national leadership.⁷⁷ A bye-election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly fought in February 1944 in Montgomery district was lost to the Akalis.⁷⁸

In 1944, there was consistent activity by the Kisan Sabha and the membership increased to 1,36,811. Amritsar was in the lead with 33,500, followed by Ferozepore with 16,711 and Lahore with 14,145. The influence in the eastern districts was reported to have been consolidated. The Grow More Food Campaign was abandoned in the beginning of the year and emphasis was on

76. FR(1) Dec. 1943, H.P. F.18/12/43. "Kisan workers have taken up every kind of grievance which they consider might extend their influence in rural areas, such as disputes between landlords and tenants, requisitioning of land for aerodromes, distribution of oil, etc., location of police posts and collection of war fund, and their agitation has had an unsettling effect." 'A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W.

77. Ibid.

78. FR(1) Feb. 1944, H.P. F.18/2/44.

voicing grievances of peasants over forcible collection of war funds, punitive police posts, sugar control orders, construction of canals and re-modelling of outlets, distribution of essential commodities, and increase in land revenue. Many conferences were organised to voice these demands, and were preceded by squad work to collect funds and do the necessary publicity.⁷⁹ The criticism of the Government for forcibly collecting war loans and of the police became quite sharp and led to a number of arrests⁸⁰ including that of Bhagat Singh Bilga.⁸¹ 1,500 kisan volunteers were recruited for the Provincial Punjab Kisan Conference at Jandiala in Jullundur district in September 1944.⁸² It almost seemed as if the curse

79. 'A Note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March, 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

80. Ibid.

81. Bhagat Singh Bilga, who was among the first group of eight major leaders to be released on 1 May 1942, was re-arrested in October 1944 for an allegedly objectionable speech he had made at a conference at Mandi Bahadurgarh in Ludhiana in June 1944. The Tribune, 15 Oct. 1944. Bhagat Singh Bilga recounts that Sohan Singh Josh told him one week before his arrest that his speeches were not to the liking of the Government, and that action would be taken against him. "And sure enough a week later I was picked up", says Bilga. He also recalled that "the links were very close at that time between the Government and the Party." In particular, he felt that Sohan Singh Josh, whom the Central party leadership was pushing as the leader in Punjab since he belonged to their group, went "too far" with the People's War line. Apart from his own example, which clearly showed Josh's close links with the Government, he also cites the example of Wadhawa Ram, the peasant leader from Multan, who was asked by Josh to leave his room when he went there to tell him about some possible contacts in the Army and the police. Bilga says that the cadre belonging to the Kirti group started getting re-arrested because they did not agree with the party line. Interview.

82. 'A Note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April, 1944, to March, 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

of the People's War line was wearing off and people were beginning to again listen seriously to the Communists. But no, fate had still more curses in store for the Communists; their cup of misery was not yet over. Now came the Muslim nationality line.

In brief, this formulation, which grew out of the very laudable desire to expedite Indian independence by promoting Hindu-Muslim unity, had been reached through a series of convoluted mental acrobatics that only Communists in certain phases were capable of. Hindu-Muslim unity had been translated as Congress-League unity, but this had to be given a theoretical basis for Communists could not stomach even the most patently opportunistic compromise without providing a theoretical basis for it. The theoretical basis was then given by making the Muslim League the legitimate representative of the Muslim of India. But the League wanted Pakistan - an independent nation. Therefore, religion came to be recognised as a basis for nationality - with a little stretching of Stalin's definition - and Muslims became a nation with a right to self-determination, and Pakistan became a legitimate demand of Muslims.⁸³

83. Interviews with Surjeet and Ranadive. Surjeet explains how the Party came to adopt the Muslim nationality line: "Muslim masses had gone behind the Muslim League, you are not able to rally them. Now the main hitch is, unless you are able to get Muslims with you, you cannot get independence.... So from that you come to some conclusion that... unless the Hindu-Muslim unity is forged, you cannot achieve independence.... Then, being Communist, you want to theorize it. So then you try to put it into the framework of a national question... then you theorize whether religion has been a contributory factor
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This theoretical position of support for Muslim nationality's demand for Pakistan had been there since 1942, but it did not impinge on practical politics in the province till Jinnah decided to formally subjugate the Unionist Ministry to the Muslim League in March 1944 by repudiating the Sikandar-Jinnah Pact of 1937 (by which all Muslim members of the Unionist party simultaneously became Muslim League members, but the ministry in Punjab continued to be a Unionist ministry). He now wanted the Ministry to be a League Ministry. When the Unionists led by the new Premier Khizar Hayat Khan refused to toe Jinnah's line, he began attempts to topple the Ministry, especially by involving the late Premier Sikandar's son, Shaukat Hayat Khan, in the attempt.⁸⁴ At this point, Sajjad Zaheer, a member of the Central Committee of the CPI, visiting the province in April 1944, discovered in this situation a conflict between pro-imperialist landlords and an anti-imperialist patriotic party of the Muslim people. Communists were

contd...

in the cultural development of certain communities.... So then you begin subjectively.... Once you are on that track, then you come to some subjective conclusion. Then you work on the basis of that. Then objective realities are relegated to the background and your subjective assessment comes to the fore." Also see Shri Prakash, "CPI and the Pakistan Movement", in Bipan Chandra, ed., The Indian Left...

84. Jinnah failed in this attempt to break the Unionist Ministry. He then expelled Khizar Hayat Khan from the Muslim League and this was followed by all other Muslim members of the Unionist Ministry resigning from the League. For the whole affair, see the letters from Glancy, Governor, Punjab, to Wavell, Viceroy, dated 6 April, 8 May, 23 May, 7 June, 24 June and 2 Aug. 1944, L/P and J/5/247, India Office Records (IOR), London.

told to support defections from the Unionists to the League to bring down the Unionist Ministry. The bait was that this would be replaced by a People's Ministry supported by the League, Congress, Akalis and Communists. This was not all. He also "recommended that the Party should assist the League to enrol Muslims in large numbers in order to make it a mass organisation which would eventually pass out of the control of its present reactionary leaders. As a result of his report, instructions were issued to all District Committees to assist Divisional organizers of the League in the work of enrolment whether they asked for Communist assistance or not." In fact, quite a large number of Muslims were enrolled by the Communists in the League;⁸⁵ Even better, Muslim Communists, the few that were there, were told to join the League, so that they could 'influence' it. "The understanding was that just as we have entered Congress and influenced it, similarly we could do that to the League. In any case, we thought, the League doesn't have much of an organisational structure in Punjab; we will

85. The quote in the text is from: 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April, 1944, to March, 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W. Also see Sajjad Zaheer, Light on League Unionist Conflict, PPH, Bombay, July 1940.

Dr. Adhikari was reported to have said that the foremost political task of the Punjab Party was to overthrow the Unionist Ministry by uniting the Congress, the Muslim League and the Akalis into one progressive coalition. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies' from April, 1944, to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45, and K.W.

influence it."⁸⁶ Mian Iftikhar-ud-din, despite his protestations that he had spent his entire life in the national movement -- "Do not do this crime", he said -- was sent to the League.⁸⁷ Danial Latifi, a most promising young comrade, became the Office Secretary of the Muslim League.⁸⁸ Ataulah Jahaniah, a prominent kisan leader, was sent to the League (and he never came back).⁸⁹ And these Communists even accepted the League's orders that they resign from the Communist Party before coming to the League. Nationalist Muslims were also asked by the Communists to join the League but they did not oblige.⁹⁰

The result of all this was that the Communist position became quickly identified in the public mind as being pro-Pakistan and pro-Muslim League. This had a disastrous effect on their mass base among kisans - which was majority Sikh and very open to the on-going Akali appeals about the need to beware of Muslim domination and Pakistan.⁹¹ The Akalis were

86. Interview with Karam Singh Mann.

87. Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

88. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March 1945; H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

89. Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

90. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.; FR(2) June 1944, H.P. F.18/6/44.

91. See, for example, FR(2) Sept. 1944, H.P. F.18/9/44, for the noise made by the Akalis when the Gandhi-Jinnah talks were going on.

quick to take advantage of the situation and stepped up their attacks on the Communists, publicly calling them anti-nationalist and pro-Pakistan.⁹² As Master Hari Singh said: "People's War line was also used against us, but what really made us notorious was the support to Pakistan - the Muslim nationality line."⁹³ H.S. Surjeet⁹⁴ and others concur in this understanding. Jagjit Singh Anand points out that Sohan Singh Josh lost the election in 1946 only because his opponent went around saying: "These are the people who are for Pakistan. They shout Pakistan Zindabad."⁹⁵ Dalip Singh Tapiala and Karam Singh Mann both acknowledge that the line was wrong.⁹⁶ Bhagat Singh Bilga is still understandably bitter: "I also opposed Adhikari's thesis on nationalities. I opposed the idea that Muslims are a nation - that is Pan-Islamism. Punjabis are a nationality, Pathans are a nationality, not Muslims. I opposed it openly, and was told to go home and do farming - which I went to do

92. Communists were called unprincipled atheists, Russian agents, those who wanted to destroy religion and private property and support Pakistan, were financed by British Government, and had embezzled foreign money. These charges were levied at the silver jubilee celebrations of the Jullundur District Akali Jatha at Jandiala between 25 and 27 Nov. 1944. This was part of the massive anti-Communist campaign being carried on by Akalis at that time. FR(2) Sept., FR(2) Nov., FR(1) Dec. 1944, H.P. 18/9/44, 18/11/44, 18/12/44.

93. Interview.

94. Interview.

95. Interview

96. Interviews.

but the police put me in jail." (Bilga was re-arrested in 1944 because he went 'too far' in his criticism of the Government.)⁹⁷

But if Muslims were a nation, what about the Sikhs? If religion was the basis of nationality, could it be denied to the Sikhs; moreover the Akalis were already vocal in their demand for 'Azad Punjab' as a counter to the 'Pakistan' demand. Propelled by the logic of their own theory, and also by the fear that the Sikh masses were reacting adversely to their support to Pakistan, and in order to build bridges with the Akalis, the Communists, instead of withdrawing from their erroneous position on Muslim nationality, tied themselves up in further knots by trying to reconcile the Sikh nation's right to self-determination with the idea of Pakistan. This led to a series of confused and confusing 'theses' on the Sikh question.⁹⁸

The first attempt was by Harkishen Singh Surjeet,⁹⁹ who, on his own admission, started this project as a reaction to the dismissal of his objections to the idea of support to Pakistan and the notion of religion being a contributory factor to the development of a nation. He had sent a note from jail where he was lodged at that time and in return he was sent a 30-page note by Sajjad Zaheer. He did not have

97. Interview.

98. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April, 1944, to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.; FR(1) and (2) Feb. 1944, H.P. F.18/2/44.

99. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April, 1944, to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

the maturity to argue back, he says; therefore he acquiesced and began working on the idea that if this was so for Muslims, then the Sikhs also were a separate nation.¹⁰⁰ According to an official report, Surjeet suggested support to the Nagoke group (the pro-nationalist group) of Akalis and the sending of party members into the Akalis party to overthrow the reactionary leaders.¹⁰¹

Another suggestion on the Sikh problem came from Sajjad Zaheer who recommended isolation of the Nagoke group as fifth columnists and an approach being made to honest Akali-Congressmen, whoever they were. This was ignored, "for the next move was that Sohan Singh Josh drafted a Khalistan scheme which, together with a demand for the release of Udham Singh Nagoke and other extremists, was used as a bait to attract the Akalis. Giani Kartar Singh was mildly interested and had an interview with Sohan Singh Josh and Teja Singh Swatantar. Nothing came of this as they could not agree over the Pakistan issue.... The Khalistan scheme was also subsequently rejected by the Central Committee of the CPI."¹⁰² This was followed by a series of manoeuvres, too petty and too confusing to be

100. Interview.

101. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March 1945', H.P. 7/1/45 and K.W.

102. Ibid.

documented.¹⁰³ "The final attempt at drafting a Sikh policy was made by Adhikari who somewhat belatedly came to the conclusion that the Communists had little hope of winning Sikh support for their policy as long as they were committed to uncompromising support of Pakistan leaving the Sikhs to make what terms they could with the Muslims.... To safeguard Sikh rights in Pakistan, he suggested three alternative plans," all equally impractical.¹⁰⁴

No publicity was given to these plans, fortunately, and references to Pakistan were banned in rural areas owing to the resentment caused among Sikh audiences. Attention was then turned to fighting Gurdwara elections, and forming a front to do so from which Akalis were excluded. Thus, after spending about a year trying to evolve a satisfactory policy towards Akalis, the Communists were back where they began - opposing the Akalis in the field. In the intervening period, however, "the rank and file had no clear cut policy to follow and at times the Central Committee of the CPI and the Provincial

103. These included Teja Singh Swatantar and Sohan Singh Josh trying to pose as 'Sikh' representatives and sending messages on behalf of 'Sikhs' to Gandhiji and Jinnah during their talks, supporting a Congress-League agreement, and organising a Sikh unity week and 'Sikh' meetings. They also included attempts to line up with the Nagoke group, which were foiled by Master Tara Singh's return to politics after his brief self-imposed exile.

Ibid.

104. Ibid. Jagjit Singh Anand in his interview gives details of these plans.

Organising Committee were at variance in their propaganda, and at others while one set of workers was promising co-operation with the Akalis, their comrades in the same district would be working against them."¹⁰⁵

If the 'People's War' line had meant that the cadre were working with their hands tied behind their backs, the 'vacillation on the nationality question', as H.S. Surjeet characterised the confusion over the Muslim and Sikh nationality business,¹⁰⁶ tied up their feet as well, and whatever success they achieved was remarkable considering they achieved it by crawling on their bellies. Generally speaking, the Kirti group raised strong objections to the nationality formulation, and this further accentuated differences between the Kirti and Communist groups, and seriously affected the functioning of the party in the province, leading to repeated interventions by the Party Headquarters, each one as unsatisfactory as the other. (In fact, it was the resentment over the People's War line and the Nationality question, both of which were seen by Kirtis as impositions of the CPI, that finally led to the break in 1947 and the formation of the Lal Party by

105. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.; also FR(1) Jan., FR(1) March, FR(2), April 1945, H.P. F.18/1/45, 18/3/45, 18/4/45.

106. Interview.

the Kirtis led by Teja Singh Swatantar.)¹⁰⁷

Summing up his assessment of the peasant movement in this phase, Chain Singh Chain, a grassroots organizer of Jullundur district, says: "There was no real movement in this period. Meetings, etc., were there, but that was all. People didn't understand why we were talking of People's War. Uptil now we were so anxious to throw out the British, and now suddenly we want to support them. They began to have doubts, which increased with the pro-Pakistan line and later with the slogan of 'this independence is false.'"¹⁰⁸ It is fashionable among some to defend the People's War phase by pointing to the high membership figures as proof of the line having no negative effect. Chain Singh Chain demurs: "Our membership may even have increased, but that was because workers were free to go about now and people were not afraid to enlist but it also meant that a lot of people enrolled casually, not like earlier, in the Imperialist War phase, when our strength was solid. The strength in the People's War phase was not a real strength. There was something missing."¹⁰⁹ Karam Singh Mann, too, points

107. See Interviews with Bhagat Singh Bilga, Joginder Singh Chhina, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Tapiala. For Kirti-Communist differences and the attempts made to resolve them, see 'A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942', op. cit., H.P. F.7/5/44 and K.W., and 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

108. Interview.

109. Interview.

out that "the hard core remained with us, but our influence was not much. We could collect food for the Bengal famine, etc., because of the strong Punjabi tradition of Guru Govind Singh, 'ਭੁੱਖੀ ਭੁੱਖੀ ਚੰਦੇ' , which means, 'the Khalsa's vessel will always be full', and not because of our influence over people. Just as in this country you can collect 20 to 25 thousand people on any pretext, though you couldn't do this in England or Russia, similarly you can collect foodgrains (in Punjab) - it is our tradition. The hard core remained, but not enthusiastic. Every section of our movement suffered.... And we were not really convinced about our line. At least I wasn't. There just wasn't that kind of conviction as we had earlier. We were always anti-British. To change was not easy."¹¹⁰ Jagbir Singh Chhina echoes the same: "Among the committed workers, it (the Party) did retain its base. But it cannot be denied that it lost among the ordinary people. If you support the Government, you are bound to lose. In the 1946 elections, Communists did not get what they expected - it was the result of this line."¹¹¹ Sohan Singh Narangabadi points out that the reason they got the response they did from the peasants during this period was "because we were the ones who had begun political work in the villages, whether on behalf of Communists or Congress. The response we got was not the same

110. Interview.

111. Interview.

as in 1938 or 1939 or 1940, when we would collect 15-20,000 people. Now only 4-5 thousand would come. People didn't like the People's War line. We had taken the tempo of the people so high on anti-war that it could not be now brought down. The response we got was simply because of the personalities and sacrifices of the leaders."¹¹²

Harkishen Singh Surjeet, in his assessment of this phase, points to another way of seeing the negative impact of the People's War line and the line on the nationality question. He considers these as the two mistakes which prevented the Communists from being in the first row in Punjab. "If these two mistakes were not there, I do not think anybody could have beaten us in Punjab, we could have been the single biggest force in Punjab." Dalip Singh Tapiala, too, accepts that had "the slogan of People's War not intervened, the kisan movement would have advanced further."¹¹³ One might add to this list of 'ifs' by pointing out that the People's War slogan meant missing out on the best opportunity for growth that the peasant movement (and the left) had been provided with since it had begun to stand on its feet: the Quit India Movement. It would have been one thing to follow a 'wrong' line during a period of stability, but the historical cost of missing out on the phenomenal opportunity

112. Interview.

113. Interviews.

presented by a mass upsurge - when growth takes place in leaps and bounds and not incrementally - was incalculable. The Congress Socialists grew from a small group into a major force within the Congress because of their role in 1942. The Communists and the Kisan movement they^{led} had a far greater capacity to participate and grow in the course of the Quit India movement - and certainly in Punjab they were the only ones, with the non-Communist Congress Socialists being very few.

As the end of the Second World War approached, it wasn't a very healthy and vigorous kisan movement that braced itself to face the fresh challenges.¹¹⁴ It was like an army with all the best equipment and superb organization, with shining uniforms, but with something lacking in the spirit. It was to spend all its time in the next couple of years trying to recover the ground it had lost by straying from the straight path.

III

The post-war phase technically began in August 1945 but in practical terms it began much earlier when the Government relaxed the restrictions on political activity, and released many Congress workers towards the end of 1944. The Congress organisations were still under a ban, but Congressmen were able to meet under the banner of the Punjab

114. However, among all the 'fronts' of the Communist Party - women, labour, student, kisan - the kisan 'front' had done the best. Others had declined considerably. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

Congress Workers' Assembly at Ludhiana on 16 and 17 December 1944. This was a very successful meeting with 400 provincial activists present and marked the beginning of the Congress revival in this new phase. By January, Congress Workers' Assemblies had been formed in most districts.¹¹⁵ The Congress also soon announced its plan of setting up its own kisan sabhas (as well as labour and student organisations). This was inevitable, for as more and more Congressmen came out of jail, the resentment that had been generated against the Communists because of their violation of party discipline in the Quit India Movement came to the fore, and the desire to demarcate themselves from the Communists was very strong. The threat of expulsion from the Congress and the formation of rival front organisations began to loom large for the Communists.¹¹⁶

The Communists tried their best to wipe out the taint of 1942. They prepared to vigorously participate in the Independence Day celebrations on 26 January 1945, but the

115. 'Note on Revival of Congress Activity in Punjab, 1944-45', dated 9 February 1945, H.P. F.4/7/44, FR(1) Jan. 1945, H.P. F.18/1/45.

116. 'Note on Revival of Congress Activity in Punjab, 1944-45', dated 9 February 1945, H.P. F.4/7/44; FR(2) Feb. 1945, H.P. F.18/2/45; 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

Government put an end to these plans by prohibiting meetings, etc.¹¹⁷ Undaunted, the Communists tried their best to get into the Congress Workers' Councils being formed in the districts, and were reported to have succeeded in some eight or nine districts, including Kangra, where all the office-bearers appeared to be Communists.¹¹⁸ They attended the National Kisan Conference organized by the Congress in Gujjarwal village in Ludhiana district in March and argued quite effectively with the Congress position.¹¹⁹ In May, they even helped the Congress in the Assembly bye-elections from Rohtak and Lahore to convince Congressmen of their usefulness and commitment to Congress and the national movement.¹²⁰ In August, they succeeded, via Jawaharlal Nehru, who was on a visit to the province, to gain admittance as observers to the meeting of 2000 Congress

117. FR(2) Jan. 1945, H.P. F.18/1/45.

118. Weekly summaries of Information to Honourable Members of Council, Serial No.6, dated 6 Feb. 1945, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, H.P. F.51/10/45. They had failed to get admission to the Congress Workers' Assembly in Ludhiana in December despite 400 of them, led by Adhikari, assembling in Ludhiana and carrying on the most vigorous propaganda to gain admittance. 'A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

119. FR(1) March 1945, H.P. F.18/3/45. According to one report, this Conference was a failure from the Congress point of view because of preliminary propaganda and presence of large number of supporters of Communists. 'A note on Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945', H.P. F.7/1/45 and K.W.

120. FR(2) May 1945, H.P. F.18/5/45.

workers organized by Pratap Singh Kairon to facilitate the task of re-organization of the Punjab Congress. They even persuaded Nehru to come to their meeting, but failed to get any assurance from him that the Congress would adopt an attitude of leniency towards them.¹²¹ They kept postponing the announcement of their plans for the 1946 elections till the Congress took a decision on their fate.¹²² Finally, in October, the Punjab Congress took the decision to suspend 14 Communist members of the PCC from PCC membership and authorised district and tahsil Congress Committees to take similar action against those of their office bearers who had opposed the Quit India movement. (It simultaneously suspended the Akalis and all those who had not participated in the Individual Civil Disobedience movement.)¹²³ The suspension was, however, from office and not from ordinary membership of the party. With this, a formal seal was placed on the split that had occurred in 1942 among the anti-imperialist forces which had been providing the leadership to the peasant movement.

While trying their best to avert the disciplinary action, the Communists had, in anticipation of the failure of their efforts, been working double time to dig in into

121. FR(2) Aug. 1945, H.P. F.18/8/45.

122. FR(1) Sept. 1945, H.P. F.16/10/45.

123. FR(1) Oct. 1945, H.P. F.18/10/45.

the rural areas of Central Punjab.¹²⁴ This was not easy, for they had to contend with strong Akali hostility as well as increasing Congress counter-mobilisation.¹²⁵ Their confused interventions on the Sikh nationality question and their stand on Pakistan had sufficiently affected their base among Sikh peasants. Attempts to recover this base by participating in Gurdwara elections and carrying on vigorous propaganda against Akalis did not seem to get them very far.¹²⁶ Continuing high prices of agricultural produce meant that the peasants were not inclined towards the usual modes of agitation around land revenue, abiana, etc.¹²⁷ Therefore, the Communists took up issues such as the shortage of cloth in the rural areas to express popular discontent.¹²⁸ They continued to organise conferences and meetings, especially ¹²⁹ in the Amritsar, Jullundur, Lyallpur and Montgomery districts.

From August 1945, the movement for the release of the INA prisoners began to engage popular attention. The Congress

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124. FR(1) Feb., FR(1) June, FR(1) July, FR(2) July, FR(2) Sept. 1945, H.P. F.18/2/45, 18/6/45, 18/7/45 and 18/9/45; The Tribune, 14 Dec. 1944, 2 March, 30 May, 5, 11 and 20 Sept. 1945.
125. FR(1) and (2) March 1945, H.P. F.18/3/45. Master Tara Singh had issued an appeal in December 1944 for Rs.2.5 lakhs for missionary activities which included countering the wave of atheism among Sikhs that was spreading as a result of Communist influence. The Tribune, 27 Dec. 1944.
126. FR(2) April and FR(1) June 1945, H.P. F.18/4/45 and 18/6/45.
127. FR(2) March 1945, H.P. F.18/3/45.
128. FR(2) July, FR(1) Aug. 1945, H.P. F.18/7/45 and 18/8/45; The Tribune, 30 May, 5 and 20 Sept. 1945.

was the first to take it up in a big way and there was a tremendous response, first in the towns, and then in the rural areas as the INA soldiers returned home.¹³⁰ The Muslim League and the Akalis also extended support to the INA soldiers' cause, though in their own sectarian fashion, by campaigning for the release of Muslim and Sikh soldiers respectively.¹³¹ The Communists, however, because of their serious reservations about the INA's role during the War, hesitated far too long and when they finally decided to join everyone else (when the rural areas began to respond in a big way), it was too late and their half-hearted efforts only led to more ridicule and

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129. FR(1) June, FR(1) and (2) July, FR(2) Sept. 1945, H.P. F.18/6/45, 18/7/45 and 18/9/45. 2 March, 30 May, 5, 11 and 20 September 1945.
130. See, for example, FR(2) Aug., FR(2) Sept., FR(1) and (2) Oct., FR(1) and (2) Nov., FR(1) and (2) Dec. 1945, FR(1) and (2) Feb., FR(1) and (2) March 1946, H.P. F.18/8/45, 18/9/45, 18/10/45, 18/11/45, 18/12/45, 18/2/46, and 18/3/46. From all accounts, INA heroes returning home were welcomed by crowds whose size and enthusiasm was unparalleled. When Shah Nawaz, Dhillon and Sahgal, the three big heroes of the INA reached Lahore in early January, the correspondent of The Tribune wrote that he has "no words to describe adequately and fully the scenes that he, along with over a lakh of people, witnessed at the Lahore railway station.... The least that one can say is that Lahore has never seen ever before such crowds, bubbling with enthusiasm." The Tribune, 6 Jan. 1946. The train and car by which they travelled were repeatedly stopped by milling crowds and deepmalas were lit in their honour. The Tribune, 6, 7, 9 and 11 Jan. 1946. Also see Interviews with Karam Singh Mann, Narain Singh Shahbazzpuri and Jagjit Singh Anand.
131. See, for example, FR(1) Sept., FR(2) Oct. 1945, FR(2) Feb. 1946, H.P. F.18/9/45, 18/10/45 and 18/2/46.

hostility.¹³² They thus missed out on one of the major possibilities of recovering their strength in the post-war phase.

The communal situation had been deteriorating rather rapidly in the province, with Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs getting increasingly polarised around their respective communal positions. Sikhs were particularly vocal about the demand for an independent state since they feared being abandoned to a Muslim Pakistan.¹³³ The rapid communalisation of the Sikhs is shown by the tremendous response to the All India Akali Conference held at Gujranwala from 29 September to 1 October 1945. 80,000 people attended this conference to which every political group which had Sikh support, except the Communists, was invited.¹³⁴ The Punjab Kisan Sabha could only gather between 3-8,000 people at its annual conference held at Jia Bagga in Lahore district on 29 and 30 September 1945.¹³⁵ Akali propoganda was mentioned as one of the reasons

132. See, for example, FR(1) Dec. 1945, H.P. F.18/12/45. In February 1946, the Communist offer of a joint demonstration in support of the mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy was turned down by the Congress and the Muslim League. FR(2) Feb. 1946, H.P. F.18/2/46. Karam Singh Mann also testified that the anti-Bose sentiments among the Communists led to a lack of genuine enthusiasm for the INA prisoners' release movement and prevented them from rising to the occasion and taking advantage of the opportunity. He contrasts the Communist behaviour with that of Nehru who, despite his differences with Subhas Bose, took up the INA cause and was able to emerge as the leader of the movement. Interview.

133. See, for example, FR(1) March 1946, H.P. F.18/3/46.

134. FR(1) Oct. 1945, H.P. F.18/10/45.

135. FR(1) Oct. 1945, H.P. F.18/10/45; and The Tribune, 1 Oct. 1945.

for this poor response -- poor even in comparison to the war years.¹³⁶ Nor had the line of support to Pakistan gained them any following among Muslim peasants.¹³⁷ It had not even made the Muslim League better disposed towards them -- their overtures for an alliance for the coming elections were rebuffed by the League.¹³⁸

From September 1945, the election campaign began to occupy all the attention and energies of the various political groups and parties. The Communists, having finally given up hopes of remaining within the Congress, put up 24 candidates, of which 17 were from Sikh rural constituencies, 3 from Labour, one from a women's (Sikh) constituency, and 3 from general constituencies. They did not put up any candidate from the Muslim constituencies. A consistent campaign was carried on, but they were just not on the right side of any of the issues that dominated the election campaign. The Congress appeal was based on the sacrifices of 1942, and on the strong anti-British feeling generated by the INA movement. The Akalis were combining communal mobilisation with support to the Sikh INA under-trials. The Muslim League was primarily concentrating on the 'Islam in Danger' and 'Pakistan' theme, along with support to the Muslim personnel of the INA. The Communists could neither talk of 1942, nor of the INA,

136. FR(1) Oct. 1945, H.P. F.18/10/45. Also see FR(1) Dec. 1945, H.P. F.18/12/45.

137. FR(1) Sept. 1945, H.P. F.18/9/45.

138. FR(2) Nov. 1945, H.P. F.18/11/45.

nor about Pakistan or Azad Punjab. Their opponents were primarily the Congress and the Akalis, and while it suited the former to remind the people of the Communist role in the Quit India Movement, the latter could happily harp on the Communist support to the Pakistan demand.¹³⁹

The result was a complete rout for the Communists - they lost everywhere.¹⁴⁰ Teja Singh Swatantar, who had been elected unopposed in 1937 from inside jail, lost his deposit.¹⁴¹ Sohan Singh Josh, who had defeated the biggest landlord of the area in 1937, lost to a "right-wing Akali scoundrel (who) went around saying 'these people are for Pakistan. They shout Pakistan Zindabad'."¹⁴² The general consensus seems to be that the 1946 elections were lost because of the unpopular policies based on the Peoples' War and Muslim nationality lines of the Communist Party.¹⁴³ The hesitation on the INA

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139. FRs from September 1945 to February 1946, H.P. F.18/9/45 to 18/2/46; 'General appreciation of the results of elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly, 1946', by the Election Commissioner, Punjab, L/P&J/8/472; Kripal C. Yadav, Elections in Punjab, 1920-1947, Tokyo, 1981, pp.106-22; The Tribune from September 1945 to February 1946; Letters from the B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, from September 1945 to February 1946, L/P&J/5/248 and L/P&J/5/249.
140. FR(2) Feb. 1946, H.P. F.18/2/46; 'General appreciation of the results of elections...', op. cit., L/P&J/8/472.
141. Interview with Dalip Singh Tapiala.
142. Interview with Jagjit Singh Anand.
143. See, for example, Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Joginder Singh Chhina, Dalip Singh Tapiala and Jagjit Singh Anand.

prisoners' release agitation also contributed to the debacle.¹⁴⁴ Also, this was the first time the Communists were going it alone. In 1937, it had been the combined strength of the anti-imperialist forces on which they had won their seats. After all, it was Dr. Satyapal and other Congressmen who had proposed Teja Singh Swatantar's name for election in 1937 when he was in jail.¹⁴⁵ Isolation from the anti-imperialist mainstream had cost the Communists dearly indeed.

The election results had ended Unionist dominance in the legislature -- they got only 20 seats. The Muslim League gained the maximum: it won 75 seats. The Congress got 51, an increase of 18 over 1937. The Panthic Sikhs (Akalis) got 23.¹⁴⁶ A Congress-Akali-Unionist coalition ministry took office with Khizar Hayat Khan continuing as Premier.¹⁴⁷

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144. Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet. Also see FR(1) December 1945, H.P. 18/12/45.
145. This point was particularly emphasized by Dalip Singh Tapiala in his Interview. Also see Interview with Master Hari Singh; and FR(1) October 1945, H.P. F.18/10/45.
146. FR(2) Feb. 1946, H.P. F.18/2/46; General appreciation of the results of the elections...", op. cit. L/P&J/8/472; Letter from B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab, to Viceroy, dated 28 February 1946, L/P&J/5/249.
147. For the various negotiations and discussions leading to the formation of the Ministry, see letter from B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab, to Viceroy, dated 28 February and 15 March 1946, L/P&J/5/249; and Confidential Note on the 'Formation of a Ministry' by B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab, dated 7 March 1946, L/P&J/8/472.

But the Muslim League was in no mood to take its distance from power lying down and Muslim Unionists became special targets of attack as they were seen as the main barriers to power.¹⁴⁸ At the popular level also, communal mobilisation was getting stronger day by day, and the League's anger at being so close to and yet not in power only added to the intensity of their virulence in the province.¹⁴⁹

The defeat in the 1946 elections had demoralised the Communist activists, including those working among the peasants. "With the purpose of driving out the memory of this defeat from the hearts and minds of the people",¹⁵⁰ and in keeping with the latest CPI line of 'Final Assault',¹⁵¹ the Kisan Sabha decided to launch a Kisan Morcha in Amritsar district, which came to be known as the Harsa Chhina Morcha

148. See, for example, FR(1) and (2) March 1946, H.P. F.18/3/46.

149. See, for example, letter from B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab, to Viceroy, dated 15 April, 2 and 15 May 1946, L/P&J/5/249; and FRs from March to December 1946, H.P. F.18/3/46 to 18/12/46.

150. Interview with Jeginder Singh Chhina. Also see FR(2) Feb. 1946, H.P. F.18/2/46, for a similar perception by the Government, and The Tribune, 27 July 1946, for an identical assessment by Congress and Akali leaders.

151. Interview with Harkishan Singh Surjeet. In the words of the official report, there was "an increasing tendency towards mass action to redress real or imagined grievances". It also observed that the agitations launched in this phase were "symptoms of the growing contempt for authority, and of the desire of the left-wing politicians to take the fullest possible advantage of it." FR(1) Aug. 1946, H.P. F.18/8/46.

after the name of the village - Harsa Chhina - that became its nerve-centre. The issue was the re-modelling of canal outlets -- also known locally as 'Moghas', and the movement is also, therefore, known as the Mogha Morcha -- on the Upper Bari Doab Canal. (We may recall that an agitation on the issue of remodelling of outlets had emerged earlier as well, in mid-1938, in the Lyallpur and Amritsar districts. See Chapter 11, Section II above.) The Canal Department argued that the re-modelling was necessitated by the need to supply more water to some villages at the tail of the distributary, but this did not cut much ice with the villages at the head of the distributary whose water-supply was being reduced.¹⁵² Some of the affected villages were in the Ajnala tahsil of Amritsar district, the three Chhina villages being among them. They were the Communist strongholds -- with Achhar Singh Chhina, the Kirti leader, hailing from the main village, Harsa Chhina.¹⁵³

152. Explaining the origins of the agitation, the Governor wrote: "It is always difficult to distribute water evenly from the head to the tail of a distributary, and the Irrigation Department have to watch their results very carefully and to remodel the outlets if distribution is unfair. The Upper Bari Doab Canal was constructed in 1865, and the distribution of water from it was in many respects less scientific than that from other canals. A large re-modelling scheme has been in progress for some time, having been started by the late Sir Chhotu Ram. Some truculent villages at the head of the distributary whose outlets were to be reduced in order to give a fair supply to the villages at the tail, decided that the scheme must be stopped." Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 31 July 1946, L/P&J/5/249. Also see Interviews with Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Jagbir Singh Chhina, etc.

153. The Tribune, 17 July 1946; Interviews with Joginder Singh Chhina, Jagbir Singh Chhina, and Gurdial Singh
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At the initiative of the Communists, a meeting was called sometime in June 1946 on behalf of the affected villages to which representatives of the major concerned political parties -- Akalis, Congress and Communists -- were invited.¹⁵⁴ The discussions culminated in the setting up of a Upper Bari Doab Amritsar Circle Canal Committee on which all parties were represented. Gurdial Singh Dhillon, a young nationalist Akali, who later became Speaker of the Lok Sabha in independent India, was appointed its General Secretary. The Executive Committee of this body then issued an ultimatum to the Government that, if the issue was not resolved to their satisfaction by 15 July 1946, they would launch a movement to resist the re-modelling of the outlets.¹⁵⁵ This was followed by negotiations with the Government, which, it may be recalled, was at the time being run by the Akali-Congress-Unionist Coalition Ministry and was therefore open to pressure by Akali and Congress leaders who were involved in the agitation. On 15 July however, despite appeals by

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Dhillon; and Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, p.320.

154. Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina and Sohan Singh Narangabadi. The meeting was reportedly held at the Harsa Chhina bridge, made famous by the jathas who used to march across it every day only to get beaten with police lathis and trampled upon by horses in the legendary Guru de Bagh da Morcha fought during the Akali movement of the 1920s. Interview with Jagbir Singh Chhina.
155. The Tribune, 15 July 1946; Interview with Gurdial Singh Dhillon and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

senior Congressmen such as Gopi Chand Bhargava to extend the ultimatum as they were negotiating a settlement with the authorities, the Executive Committee decided to go ahead and launch the Mercha.¹⁵⁶

On the afternoon of 16 July 1946, Achhar Singh Chhina led a jatha of 15 members from Harsa Chhina village. On his shoulders he carried an iron mogha or outlet. The declared aim was to remove one of the existing outlets placed by the Canal Department ^{and} substitute it with the bigger outlet carried by the jatha. The jatha, whose members carried their respective party flags, proceeded towards the canal distributary, followed by a big crowd. Before they could reach the canal, the police stepped in, arrested them and whisked them away to Amritsar.¹⁵⁷ This pattern was repeated on subsequent days as well.¹⁵⁸ In addition to this form of resistance, the residents of nine villages of the area also refused to take canal water as a mark of protest.¹⁵⁹

156. The Tribune, 15 and 17 July 1946.

157. The Tribune, 17 July 1946; and Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

158. See, for example, The Tribune, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28 July, 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 14 and 15 August 1946. Women's jathas also offered arrest. For example, on 24 July, 51 women led by Bibi Raghbir Kaur courted arrest. The Tribune, 25 July 1946. Also see Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, etc. One jatha was also arrested in Lahore while demonstrating in front of the Assembly. The Tribune, 22 July 1946.

159. The Tribune, 21 July 1946.

Meanwhile, however, efforts to bring about a settlement had continued unabated. On 16 July itself it was reported that under instructions from Sardar Baldev Singh, Minister for Development, and Bhim Sen Sachar, Minister for Finance and Industry, a delegation consisting of Ishar Singh Majhail, the MLA representing the affected area, Sant Ram Seth, another MLA, and two members of the Canal Committee, had gone to Harsa Chhina to try and bring about a resolution of the problem and avert the agitation.¹⁶⁰ Three days later, there was a report of another attempt at a solution by Congress and Akali MLAs,¹⁶¹ followed the next day by a statement by the Congress Assembly Party indicating that a settlement was in the offing.¹⁶² On 22 July, less than a week after the beginning of the Morcha, it seemed that the efforts of the mediators had finally succeeded. A deputation which included the President and Secretary of the Strike Committee that was conducting the Morcha met Sardar Baldev Singh, an agreement was reached, and an official communique drafted in their presence. This communique, which was then issued to the Press, announced the appoint^{ment} of an enquiry committee to go into the whole issue, promised the release of these arrested, and hoped the jathas would be discontinued. The

160. The Tribune, 17 July 1946.

161. The Tribune, 20 July 1946.

162. The Tribune, 22 July 1946.

Government now waited for the leaders of the agitation to honour their part of the agreement and suspend the Morcha.¹⁶³

But that was not to be. Clearly under pressure from the Communist leadership at whose initiative and under whose control the movement was being conducted, the agreement was flouted and the jathas continued to march.¹⁶⁴ Presumably secure in their faith that relentless militancy was the surest way to revolutionary deliverance and 'negotiated settlement' a sure sign of bourgeois deviations, they continued to scuttle all possibilities of a successful conclusion to the Morcha.

In fact, what is remarkable about this Morcha is the sheer number of the opportunities that were continuously presented and consistently rejected. Immediately after the renegeing on the agreement, another appeal made by Congress and Akali MLAs to call off the Morcha in view of the Government's offer to review the re-modelling scheme was

163. The Tribune, 23, 25, 27 and 28 July 1946; Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 31 July 1946, L/P&J/5/249.

164. According to Jagbir Singh Chhina, a nephew of Achhar Singh Chhina and one of the prominent Communist activists in this movement, "the agreement got stuck on a small issue." The Communists insisted that the Government first release the agitators, change the outlets, and then the jathas would stop. The Government, on the other hand, wanted the Morcha withdrawn before it released the prisoners and changed the outlets. Interview. From the newspaper accounts and government sources, however, it seems clear that even this was an afterthought or a pretext to refuse to call off the movement. Earlier, in the meeting with Sardar Baldev Singh, an agreement had been reached and it was on that basis that the Government made its announcement.

rejected.¹⁶⁵ This was followed by another opening provided by Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, a senior Congress leader and member of the Congress Working Committee, who tried to intervene in the issue.¹⁶⁶ Colonel Niranjan Singh Gill, hero of the INA, and now President of the Sikh Panthic Board and Dictator of the Council of Action, offered another opportunity by appealing to both sides to relent.¹⁶⁷ A few days later, on 2nd August, the Revenue Minister, Sir Mazaffar Ali Khan Qazilbash, appealed to the peasants to stop the morcha and promised to restore the old meghas if the Enquiry Committee appointed by the Government recommended it.¹⁶⁸ A day later, the Government named all the 14 members of the Enquiry Committee and announced that it would begin its sittings on 13th August in Amritsar.¹⁶⁹ The Committee members included political leaders like Pratap Singh Kairon and Udham Singh Nageke who could be expected to take a stand sympathetic to the peasants.¹⁷⁰ Further, the Working

165. The Tribune, 24 July 1946.

166. The Tribune, 28 July 1946.

167. The Tribune, 29 July 1946.

168. The Tribune, 3 Aug. 1946.

169. The Tribune, 4 Aug. 1946.

170. The Tribune, 8 Aug. 1946. When the Enquiry Committee commenced its sittings in Amritsar on 13 August, a big crowd forced its way into the compound, shouted slogans, etc. On the 14th, the crowd remained quiet, and representatives went and submitted a memorandum requesting status quo till Committee gives its report. The Tribune, 14 and 15 Aug. 1946.

Committee of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee appointed a special committee to try and bring about a settlement.¹⁷¹ But, untempted by opportunities for a settlement, unmoved by appeals and unaffected by criticism, trapped in the inexorable logic of their own theoretical constructions, the Communists continued to deliver their daily minimum quota of fifteen arrests.

By mid-August, when the saga of daily arrests had gone on for a month and around 500 persons were already in jail,¹⁷² when it was clear that the leaders of the Morcha had no intention of arriving at a settlement, and when everyone had tired of making appeals, the Government changed tack and stopped arresting the jathas. As a result, for ten days, the jathas marched undeterred to the canal and demolished ten of the offending moghas.¹⁷³ But the lack of arrests, it appears, contributed to a waning of popular enthusiasm.¹⁷⁴ In order to whip up enthusiasm, it was then decided that no more moghas were to be demolished and the jathas would now go to the Canal Department premises in Amritsar city.¹⁷⁵ The expectation obviously was that

171 . The Tribune, 11 Aug. 1946.

172. FR(1) Aug. 1946, H.P. F.18/8/46.

173. The Tribune, 17, 22, 23, 24 and 25 Aug. 1946; FR(2) Aug. 1946, H.P. F.18/8/46.

174. Interview with Sohan Singh Narangabadi. Jagbir Singh Chhina and Sohan Singh Narangabadi also allege that stopping of arrests was combined with physical threats and this, too, scared away the people. Interviews.

175. The new programme of action was announced by the Mogha Strike Committee at a big conference held at Harsa
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demonstrations in the city would attract greater publicity and thus make it difficult for the Government to continue its present policy of ignoring the agitation.

In accordance with this plan, on 26th August, two jathas of 20 each, one of men and the other of women, accompanied by a crowd, reached the Canal offices, they then proceeded to throw stones and forcibly try to enter the office building -- thereby provoking the police to make a lathi charge.¹⁷⁶ This tactic was possibly designed by a leadership desperate to revive the flagging support by provoking repression in the hope of arousing sympathy. In the event, however, even the brutal lathi charge, in which women also were injured,¹⁷⁷ failed to have the expected effect. Clearly, the usually sympathetic sections of political opinion among the Congress and the Akalis had lost patience with a movement they had tried their best to bring to a honourable conclusion.¹⁷⁸ Besides, the size of canal outlets in Ajnala tahsil could hardly be expected to compete successfully for political attention with the larger questions of elections to the Constituent Assembly, the formation of the Interim Government at the Centre, the survival of the coalition Ministry in the province, and the rising tide of communalism.¹⁷⁹

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Chhina on 25th August. The Tribune, 26 Aug. 1946.
Also see Interviews with Sohan Singh Narangabadi and Jagbir Singh Chhina.

176. The Tribune, 27 Aug. 1946; PR(2) Aug. 1946, H.P.
F.18/8/46.

177. The Tribune, 27 Aug. 1946.

178. This is evident from the fact that the usual condemnation of police excesses through press statements

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Nevertheless, oblivious of their own irrelevance and of the cause they were doggedly flogging, the Communist leaders continued on their chosen path. To make up for declining local support and to demonstrate their influence in other areas, jathas of activists were now called in from other parts of Amritsar district, as well as from other districts such as Jullundur, Ferozepore, Montgomery, Sheikhpura, and from Kapurthala State.¹⁸⁰ Most of the time, these jathas were intercepted on the way to the Canal office and their members arrested, thus preventing any recurrence of publicity-generating events like lathi-charges, etc.¹⁸¹ The leadership also tried to revive public interest by organising kisan conferences in some major villages.¹⁸² But by mid-September, two months after the Morcha began, it had clearly run out of steam and even Communist obduracy could

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or public meetings was totally absent.

179. See, for example, The Tribune, 19 and 20 July 1946; FR(1) and (2) Aug. 1946, H.P., F.18/8/46.
180. See, for example, The Tribune, 23, 26 and 29 August, 3, 5, 7, 12 and 14 September 1946. Also see Interviews with Joginder Singh Chhina, Jagbir Singh Chhina, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ruldu Khan, and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.
181. See, for example, The Tribune, 28 and 29 Aug., 3, 5, and 7 Sept. 1946.
182. See, for example, The Tribune, 2 and 3 Sept. 1946.

keep it going no longer.¹⁸³ The Morcha was never withdrawn, it just fizzled out on its own. And despite assertions to the contrary in official party reports and histories,¹⁸⁴ there was not even the fig-leaf of a settlement, leave alone a 'victory'.¹⁸⁵ Peasants who had stoically watched their crops wither while their neighbours' fields turned green,¹⁸⁶

183. The last report of a jatha being arrested is dated 17 September 1946. The Tribune, 18 September 1946. The Governor also noted on 14 September 1946 that "the Amritsar agitation about canal outlets looks like petering out." Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 September 1946, L/P&J/5/249. Jagbir Singh Chhina also confirms that the Morcha lasted for two months. Interview.

184. The claim of victory is made in the official report of the All India Kisan Sabha which says that the Government ultimately yielded and increased the water-supply. Report for 1945-47 presented by General Secretary of AIKS at its 10th session held at Sikandra Rao in U.P. from 22-26 May 1947, published in AIKS, Organisational Reportage, No.1 of 1947-48, Sikandra Rao Decisions. More recently, Master Hari Singh, in his book, which is virtually an official Communist history of the peasant movement in Punjab, has claimed that "the morcha continued till settlement was reached between irrigation minister and leaders of the movement to the effect that water allowance to the concerned villages would not be reduced. At this the morcha was called off and all the prisoners numbering over 1000 were released." Master Hari Singh, The Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, p.322.

185. The local-level organizers of the movement, however, readily acknowledged that it was a failure. Jagbir Singh Chhina, for example, said: "No settlement took place. No concessions were made. The morcha failed. Concessions would have been made only if an agreement had been made; once the morcha failed, why should the Government give concessions?" Interview. Dalip Singh Tapiala, a prominent leader of the movement who stayed underground for five months in Harsa Chhina village, stated: "In that morcha, in reality we get nothing." Interview.

186. Jagbir Singh Chhina said that one of the causes of the loss of morale of the peasants was that after the breakdown of the agreement the Government succeeded in persuading some peasants in neighbouring villages to accept water from the new outlets. Interview.

fight to the end.¹⁹⁰ Instead, the allies, who were hardly political novices, saw through the game and gradually withdrew their support from a movement that was heading nowhere.¹⁹¹

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Interview.

189. Dalip Singh Tapiala, for example, said that one of the reasons for the inability of the movement to sustain itself was that it was being run only by the Communist Party. Other parties gave only half-hearted support. Interview. It does not, however, occur to him that the Communists' own attitude had at least contributed to the half-heartedness of the others.
190. To quote Jagbir Singh Chhina, "Before starting the struggle, we called all the parties. But once the struggle started, the Communist Party dominated. The other parties felt that their assistance would go waste, the Communists will get all the advantage. So bit by bit they started retreating." Interview.
191. The first public criticism of the movement by Akali and Congress leaders was made after the Communists arbitrarily backed out of the agreement they had made with the government. The Tribune, 27 July 1946. After this, their withdrawal of support to the movement was made clear by repeated appeals for its withdrawal. The renegeing on the agreement by the Communists had considerably embarrassed the Ministers and other mediators and after that they had no choice but to distance themselves from the Communists. This was particularly so because the agreement had been made against the advice of the Governor, who made no secret either of his disapproval or of his subsequent smugness when it was not honoured by the Communists. See letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab, to Viceroy, dated 31 July 1946, L/P&J/5/249.

It was indeed tragic that a movement which had aroused considerable support among the peasants and in which they had made a great deal of sacrifice -- which had a very significant participation of women, including among the roughly 1,000 persons that went to jail, for which many dedicated grass-roots level organizers worked selflessly for weeks on end,¹⁹² which was initiated with the support of powerful political allies who were willing to use their influence with the Government in its favour-- had so little to show in the credit column of its balance-sheet and for so little reason.

The post-script to the Morcha was even more embarrassing. The resistance having died out without any settlement emerging, the cadre remained trapped in jail -- even trials¹⁹³ were not held. Outside, the political situation deteriorated so rapidly and, with Partition becoming a distinct possibility, a sense of panic gripped those inside the jails. Worried about their homes, their families, their villages,

192. Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Gurdial Singh Dhillon, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, and Joginder Singh Chhina.

193. It seems that Congress and Akali leaders continued to make efforts to secure the release of those arrested. The Tribune, 11 and 13 Oct. 1946. It also appears that Sardar Baldev Singh, the Minister for Development, made efforts to secure their release, but the Governor advised strongly against it. Baldev Singh's bargaining position in the matter was obviously not strong given the earlier behaviour of the leaders of the movement in rejecting the agreement he had personally negotiated. Letters from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 31 Aug. and 14 Sept. 1946, L/P&J/5/249.

not knowing whether they would be in India or Pakistan, dead or alive, most of the activists, it appears, got out on bail after six months by standing surety for each other.¹⁹⁴

Gurdial Singh Dhillon was among the very few who, in defiance to party (Congress) discipline, stayed till a habeas corpus petition drew a severe reprimand from the High Court about detention without trial and was released. This was around June 1947.¹⁹⁵

The unnecessary nature of the tragedy invited by the leaders of the Harsa Chhina Morcha upon themselves and their followers is brought into sharp relief by the contrast presented by the victorious tenants' struggle led by the Congress Socialists in Hissar district that ran its course within the time span of the Harsa Chhina Morcha. The struggle was centred in the village of Chotala which, along with two neighbouring villages, Taju Khara and Babu Khara, was owned by 20 families of malguzars who cultivated their 45,000 bighas of land through 5,000 tenants.¹⁹⁶ The dispute between the malguzars and the muzaras or tenants on the issue of evictions had been going on since 1943 and in October 1945 130 tenants were arrested when under the leadership of Devi Dayal they protested against the landlords' violation of

194. Interviews with Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Jagbir Singh Chhina and Gurdial Singh Dhillon.

195. Interview with Gurdial Singh Dhillon.

196. The Tribune, 7 and 23 Aug. 1946.

197. Even though they may not have been legally classified as occupancy tenants, the fact of their having been in continuous occupancy for the last 100 years (The Tribune, 23 Aug. 1946) had obviously given them a strong claim to the land, at least in their own consciousness.

an agreement arrived at through the arbitration of the Sub-divisional Officer of Sirsa only a month earlier. The Congress had been supporting the tenants' cause and the Working Committee of the Punjab Provincial Congress had passed resolutions in favour of the tenants in 1945 and 1946 and various Congress MLAs had been involved in the negotiations. Jawaharlal Nehru was reported to have taken a personal interest in the matter.¹⁹⁸

A further attempt at evictions by landlords, followed by another abortive attempt at arbitration, this time by the Deputy Commissioner of Hisar district,¹⁹⁹ culminated in the arrest on 2nd August 1946 of 50 tenants led by Hem Raj, President of the Muzaras' Committee, and Comrade Om Prakash, a Congress Socialist worker.²⁰⁰ More arrests of tenants and Congress Socialist activists followed in the

198. The Tribune, 7 Aug. 1946. According to the Governor, the tenants were being encouraged by some Congress leaders who had personal and political rivalry with some of the landlords. See letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 15 Aug. 1946, L/P&J/5/249. While this may be true of some individuals, it does not explain the stand taken by the CSP, the Congress party and even Jawaharlal Nehru, all of whom could not be motivated by rivalry with the landowners of Chotala.

199. Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 15 August 1946, L/P&J/5/249.

200. The Tribune, 7 Aug. 1946.

next few days.²⁰¹ The Congress Socialists threatened to launch a satyagraha if the arrests did not stop and the demands were not conceded. A satyagraha camp was set up at Dabwali, a small town in the vicinity, and jathas were asked to be sent from other parts of the province. Chaudhuri Sahib Ram, an MLA, declared on 14 August that he would personally lead a jatha of satyagrahis if the repression did not stop and the demands were not met within a week.²⁰²

Meanwhile, efforts at a settlement had already begun. The Working Committee of the Provincial Congress Committee had sent Chaudhuri Tarif Singh to Chotala to help settle the dispute.²⁰³ Ministers and MLAs put pressure on the Deputy Commissioner via telephone calls from Simla, the summer capital.²⁰⁴ Seth Sudershan, a prominent Congressmen and Chief Whip of the party in the Provincial Assembly, was also despatched to the scene.²⁰⁵ And, by 22nd August, he, along with Chaudhuri Bagh Ali, the Private Parliamentary Secretary to the Revenue Minister, Punjab, had hammered out an agreement between the landlords, the tenants and the

201. The Tribune, 9 and 11 Aug. 1946.

202. The Tribune, 7, 15 and 20 Aug. 1946.

203. The Tribune, 10 Aug. 1946.

204. Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 15 Aug. 1946, L/P&J/5/249.

205. The Tribune, 18 Aug. 1946.

district authorities.²⁰⁶

The agreement amounted to a clear victory for the tenants. Ejectments were to stop and land was to be restored to the original tenants, landlords were to receive only one-third of the produce as rent, begar, which included forced labour and free service, was to stop, and all those arrested were to be released.²⁰⁷ With far less effort than the Communists in Harsa Chhina, the Congress Socialists had succeeded in turning to their own and the tenants' advantage the favourable objective situation created by the Coalition Ministry being in power. They quickly accepted the settlement and set about celebrating it as a big victory by organising large conferences to which national leaders^{were} to be invited.²⁰⁸ The Communists could have been celebrating a whole month earlier,²⁰⁹ if only the tyranny of a newly-emerging moribund party line had not forced them to turn even victory into defeat.

The post-war phase also witnessed the general resurgence of tenant struggles -- the Chotala tenants' struggle was part of a general wave of unrest and upsurge among tenants

206. The Tribune, 23 Aug. 1946.

207. Ibid.

208. The Tribune, 23 and 24 Aug., and 18 Sept. 1946.

209. The agreement which was later rejected by Communists in the Harsa Chhina Morcha had been concluded on 22 July 1946, and the Chotala settlement came on 22 August 1946, exactly a month later.

in the post-war phase. Some of these struggles occurred in new areas, others were revived after having been interrupted by the War. The biggest one was in Patiala, which we are looking at separately. In Nili Bar, Montgomery and Multan, where the movement had already advanced considerably in the year 1937-39, there was a fresh spurt in 1946-47. Tenants were refusing to pay anything more than the legal share of 50 per cent, no abwabs, no carrying the produce free of charge to the landlord's godown, etc. The demands were the same as earlier; more and more tenants were now lining up behind them and the targets were no longer primarily the lease-holding companies but also included the landlords. There was also an incident which involved the death of two tenants. Tenants had collected at Diluwala near Arifwala in Montgomery district on 1 January 1947 to meet the Deputy Commissioner who was coming for negotiations with representatives of the tenants and the landlords. Before the officer arrived, the police opened fire and killed 2 tenants. To cover up their action, the police then arrested a number of kisan workers who were still in jail when Partition came into force. According to the accounts of contemporaries, the movement in this area was expanding rather rapidly when Partition intervened and disrupted the process. ²¹⁰

210. FR(1) Nov. 1946, H.P. F.18/11/46; Express letter No. 1084-ADSB from Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Department, New Delhi, dated 7 Feb. 1947, H.P. F.22/6/47; General Secretary's Report for 1945-47 in AIKS Organisational Reportage, op. cit.; Chhajju Mal Vaid, Chapter on 'Tenant Movement', in Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, pp.275-6, 285-7; Interviews with Master Hari Singh, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, Wadhawa Ram, Chain Singh Chain, and Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri.

A number of other tenant struggles erupted in pockets spread all over the province — in Una and Umrur in Hoshiarpur district, and in Ferozepore district on the estates of the Nawab of Mamdot and the Sodhis. The Ferozepore struggle²¹¹ was particularly interesting because it revealed some interesting aspects of peasant consciousness. The Sodhis were descendants of the brother of the Sixth Guru of the Sikhs who had betrayed the Guru to the Mughals. They had been given the land of six or seven villages in return for that favour.²¹² These villages were in the Ferozepore tahsil of Ferozepore district, not far from the lands of the Nawab of Mamdot,²¹³ where the Kisan Sabha had established a base since 1944 by carrying on a struggle against evictions. The Nawab had been trying to get Muslim and Sikh tenants to fight among themselves by shifting Muslim tenants to the better lands. He also hoped in the process to prevent the establishment

211. The following account of the struggle in Ferozepore, unless specified otherwise, is based on the Interview with Ruldu Khan, a major organiser of the struggle, who later became a prominent leader of the Punjab Agricultural Labourers' Union.

212. Their holdings were to the tune of 4,500 acres. Chhajju Mal Vaid, Chapter on 'Tenant Movement', in Master Hari Singh, Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle, p.271.

213. The Nawab of Mamdot was the foremost leader of the Muslim League in Punjab. The Mamdot family owned the largest private landed estate in the province. They had been assigned the revenue of 229 villages. They owned private canals and sold water to other cultivators from these canals. They had also purchased seventy-six rectangles of land in Montgomery and twenty-two squares in Lyallpur, a total of 2,500 acres. DG Ferozepore, 1915, p.238; Imran Ali, The Punjab Under Imperialism, p.83.

of any claims to particular pieces of land by both Muslim and Sikh tenants. The Kisan Sabha, led by a young Muslim, son of an agricultural labourer, Raldu Khan, prevented these evictions by consistent propaganda and a volunteer force of village youth who went wherever evictions were threatened. However, despite being established in the Nawab's estate since 1944, the Kisan Sabha, till 1947, could only raise the issue of evictions, and never of reduction of the landlords' share of batai.

On the Sedhis' estate, however, the Kisan Sabha, starting work only in 1946, almost immediately gave the slogan of ne-batai. The reason was that the tenants of the Sedhis had a consciousness that they were at one time the legitimate proprietors of the land and that the Sedhis had acquired their right through illegitimate means -- by betraying the Guru. Though this was now a 200-300 year old story, it was still a living part of their consciousness. In other circumstances, the origins of the Sedhis' landownership would have disappeared into oblivion in these many years, but, given the nature of their past, it carried along in popular memory via the religious tradition. And if, as the religious tradition enjoined, the Sedhis' actions were illegitimate, then their rights to its rewards were also illegitimate. By implication, therefore, the legitimate right was that of the tenants whose forefathers had been dispossessed.

In the new circumstances created by the democratic political awakening, the availability of political organisations willing to take up their cause, and when other tenants were

engaging in struggles for their demands, as in Montgomery and Multan, the tenants of the Sodhis also got an opportunity to press forward a right that had probably been a part of their own and their forefathers' consciousness for generations. In the same circumstances, however, the Mamdot tenants could not even be persuaded to stir themselves to retain the land that they were cultivating at Partition when the Nawab left for Pakistan and his property was declared evacuee property and allotted to refugees from Pakistan. Most of the tenants were evicted by the new allottees.

The peasant struggles that emerged in the post-war years were situated in an entirely new political context. Independence had not yet come, but it was clear that it was coming very soon. The Secretary of State's public statement on 1 January 1946, the sending of the Cabinet Mission in March 1946, the formation of the Interim Government, and the elections to the Constituent Assembly, were sufficient proof of British intentions to leave. The prospect of impending freedom from colonial bondage unleashed a new energy -- which no longer needed to be directed against imperialism. It found expression instead in a new assertiveness in claiming greater rights and making more demands to secure a more advantageous position in the new political, social and economic structure that freedom was about to bring into being. In this sense, the peasant struggles of the post-war phase are to be seen not merely as continuations of the earlier struggles of the anti-imperialist epoch, but as transitional

to or marking the beginnings of the new phase of peasant struggles that continued into the 1950s and was marked by an immediate concern with questions of land reform -- abolition of jagirdari and zamindari rights, protective legislation for tenants and land ceiling legislation.

Indian independence was accompanied, as we all know, by the scourge of Partition. Punjab suffered as much as it was possible to suffer when a single whole is rent into two. The peasants of Punjab were amongst the worst sufferers. Many had to leave hearth and home and try to start life anew. Others, who were luckier, and did not have to leave forever their ancestral lands and homes, were sucked into the madness of looting and killing. Among those who had been leading the peasants, and had some influence over them, only the Communists and Congressmen retained their sanity and tried to help the peasants retain theirs. The Muslim League and the Akalis went overboard themselves, and could only help to increase the intensity of the insanity.²¹⁴

So overpowering was the wave of senselessness that even the most powerful of the leaders could, on their own admission, ^{only persuade} the villagers to refrain from killing -- there

214. The account in this and the next para is based primarily on Interviews with participants, especially Master Hari Singh, Chain Singh Chain, Ruldu Khan, Narain Singh Shahzazpuri, Jagbir Singh Chhina, Joginder Singh Chhina, Jwala Singh Barapind, Dalip Singh Tapiala, and Har- kishen Singh Surjeet.

was no way they could stop the looting.²¹⁵ Stories abound of heroic efforts by secular political activists, mostly Communist, often Congress as well,²¹⁶ to save encircled groups of Muslims, keep them in safe custody and escort them safely across what had become the new border. They were greatly helped in this by the womenfolk. Though it was more a symbolic effort, for most admit that at best they could influence their own villages and some others where their political presence was very strong, yet the symbolism was important.²¹⁷ For in times of darkness such as those that this sub-continent passed through in 1947, it is symbols like these that kept hope alive and promised a new beginning.

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215. This was particularly emphasized by Master Hari Singh and Harkishen Singh Surjeet in their Interviews.
216. Dalip Singh Tapiala and Jagbir Singh Chhina, both Communists, describe the work done by Congressmen, often along with Communists. Interviews. Harkishen Singh Surjeet however, asserts that only Communists remained secular in the moment of frenzy. Interview.
217. For example, Interviews with Chain Singh Chain, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, and Master Hari Singh. In western Punjab, where their influence was much less and they could not play as active a role, they nevertheless tried to help Hindus and Sikhs by furnishing information and providing assistance in escaping from communal attacks.

CHAPTER 13

PEASANT PROTEST: IN A NON-HEGEMONIC
STATE PATIALA: 1930-53

In this chapter, we turn our attention to the peasant movement in the largest princely or Indian State in Punjab - Patiala. The major reason for singling out Patiala for special attention from among the numerous Indian States in Punjab is that it was the locale for one of the most powerful and successful tenant struggles in the province. Besides, the peasant movement in Patiala had many links with its counterpart in British Punjab and in a sense, therefore, the story of the peasant movement in Punjab is really incomplete without the inclusion of its Patiala chapter. The Patiala story also enables us to take a peep into the immediate post-independence years since, unlike the movement in the British areas which was rudely interrupted by Partition, the peasant movement in Patiala continued into the early 1950s when its basic demands were incorporated into the new land reform legislation. A comparative look at the peasant movements operating within the very divergent political and state structures

of autocratic Patiala and semi-democratic British Punjab will also help in a delineation of the variables that influence the choice of modes and forms of protest.

I

Peasant movements in most of the Indian States had to encounter problems and operate in conditions quite different from those in British India, though the nature of the forces

that brought them about was similar. The India of the princely states was economically integrated with the rest of the country but, since the Princes were to serve as the bulwarks of Empire, they were allowed a certain leverage in the maintenance of authoritarian control over their subjects. Civil liberties of the kind that existed in British India were largely absent, and so were any forms of representative institutions.¹ This inevitably limited the scope of pressure that could be exerted on the authorities through more or less constitutional and legal means, and pushed popular protest and resistance into forms different from those in neighbouring British districts.

The personal style of functioning of the rulers and the concentration of authority in a single individual or at best a clique, made decision-making either too protracted or too rough and ready and abrupt a process. Further, the administration in most of the States lacked the bureaucratic efficiency of the government in British India, allowing situations to reach a crisis point much oftener than in the latter. Hence, there was all too frequent a resort to repression -- a price that had to be paid for the inefficiency in accommodation and

1. This was not true of all the Indian States. Some of them had introduced varying forms of representative institutions, for example, Rajkot, Travancore, Cochin, Mysore, Baroda and Aundh. Some of them, such as Baroda, even acted as havens of refuge for people running away from British repression, as for example during the Bardoli struggle in 1928 and the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930-31.

conciliation and early defusion of potentially explosive situations. The time-lag factor had its own implications — the British had been handling popular agitations at least since the first decade of the century; in the Punjab States at least, this awakening began to appear only in the 20s and 30s. It took a while for the autocratic set-ups to realize that pure repression, in the long-run, was counter-productive and that it must be combined with other, subtler means of containment.

The British were in a dilemma. They could neither afford to give all-out support to the repressive and authoritarian tendencies of the Rulers, as this might threaten rebellion, nor could they push the Princes too far, for their active support was crucial,² especially in the years when the air was thick with the talk of Federation.

Besides, the Congress had by now, in practice at least, abandoned the policy of non-interference in the affairs of the

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2. This duality of the British position is very well expressed in the response of the Punjab Government to the pressure brought to bear on it in 1930 by the Political Agent as well as the Patiala State to declare the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal an unlawful organisation. The Prime Minister of Patiala urged action on the ground that "His Highness the Maharaja of Patiala and his government have to bear the brunt of the Praja Mandal attacks...because His Highness has always been a staunch ally of the British Government...and it is up to the suzerain power to protect the Ruling princes... and thus prevent the extension of the Independence Movement into the Punjab States". (Emphasis added). Confidential note by Prime Minister, Patiala (undated, but internal evidence points to sometime soon after March 1930), L/P&S/13/885. The Political Agent in his turn reported that "the Punjab Princes have strong feelings of resentment on the subject and are anxiously waiting to see what steps may be taken by the Government
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princely states.³ The general radicalisation of the Congress that took place under the influence of Nehru and others with left-

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..." Extract from PY 72/31, p.12, ibid. The Chief Secretary, Punjab, seeking to explain the stand of his government to the Government of India, observed that while "ordinarily the policy of this Government has been to help the States and their rulers as far as we legitimately can...and in the past a good deal of assistance has been given...." and although "there is some ground for action against the Mandal... but if such action was taken, it appears to the Governor in Council that it is not unlikely to be construed as a deliberate step by the Government of India to stifle the airing and expression of grievances by state subjects in a recognized manner," especially as the proceedings of the Praja Mandal Conference held at Ludhiana in October 1930 show "that the Mandal considers the paramount power is the source from which relief may be expected." Nevertheless, he emphasized that the question must be decided on the basis of wider political considerations and that "it is for the Government of India to decide how far, in the circumstances, the desire of the States... should be met by action against the Mandal, and how far as a matter of general policy it is desirable that this machinery, by which apparently some quite reasonable or plausible grievances of state subjects are ventilated, should be shut down." Stressing again the wider policy implications of the matter, he concluded: "These considerations... are of wider import than those with which the Punjab Government are primarily concerned, and are matters to be weighed by the Government of India." (Emphasis added). Letter from Boyd, Chief Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, Simla, dated Lahore, October 23, 1930, enclosed with India Political Secretary's letter No.11 M, dated January 22, 1931, ibid.

3. In a note on 'the development of Congress activities within the boundaries of the Indian States,' dated 30 Dec. 1938, G. Ahmed of the Punjab CID had this to say: "I must again emphasize the point that although the Congress as a body is not taking a direct part in political agitation in the Indian States, prominent Congressmen, working under the cloak of one political organisation or another, are trying all they can to stir up unrest among the Indian States subjects. The attitude of the All India Congress Committee towards the States is stiffening unmistakably.... On the whole, it is clear that as time goes on, the Congress will more and more come out into the open and show its hand more clearly. At the present moment it is not fully prepared to carry on a fight against 'British Imperialism' and 'Indian Autocracy' simultaneously." Enclosure contd...

wing inclinations contributed to this shift.⁴ Further, as independence became a more immediate possibility, the question of the States acquired a sense of urgency. In any case, the All-India States Peoples Conference (AISPC), established in 1927, had close links with the Indian National Congress and these links were now strengthened, the process culminating in the election of Jawaharlal Nehru as President of the AISPC session at Ludhiana in 1939.⁵ The other most important groups, the Akalis, the Communists and the Socialists, had at no stage shared the Congress inhibitions about involvement in State politics.

The specific situation in Patiala was a product of all these diverse forces and tendencies. The people of the State, especially the Sikhs, had felt the politicizing influence of, and participated in, the Akali movement in its most radical phase in the early and mid-20s, incurring the wrath of the Maharaja who was undivided in his loyalty to the British.⁶

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to the letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab, to Linlithgow, Viceroy, dated 3 Jan. 1939, Linlithgow Papers, Mss. Eur. F125/88.

4. Ramesh Walia, Praja Mandal Movement in East Punjab States, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1972, pp. 11 12
5. Ibid., p.7.
6. Sewa Singh Thikriwala, the most influential Sikh leader from the States and a resident of Patiala, was arrested in 1923 at the height of the Gurdwara Reform movement and promptly extradited by the Maharaja of Patiala. Ibid., p.51.

The anti-imperialist and anti-feudal character of the Akali movement led to the dissemination of nationalist and democratic ideas, and brought the people of the States in contact with political currents existing in British India.⁷ In 1928, the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal was formed,⁸ with the avowed objectives of fighting for the establishment of a representative government and safeguarding the people's rights and liberties.⁹

From then onwards, all political activity in the neighbouring British areas found an echo in Patiala. The Praja Mandal organised widespread participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement; Independence Day, 26 January, 1930, was celebrated with great enthusiasm, the national flag was hoisted

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7. In Wallia's view the awakening in the Punjab States "was in a large measure due to the Gurdwara Reform Movement. The freedom movement in India did not inspire the East Punjab States peoples movement, it only helped it. The shape, character and the dimensions of the Praja Mandal Movement in East Punjab were determined directly by the Akali Movement" (emphasis added). Ibid., p.27.
8. The birth of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal was announced at a conference held on 17 July, 1928, at Mansa in Patiala State as part of the Akali leader Baba Kharak Singh's tour to rouse opinion and organise an agitation against the continued detention of Sewa Singh Thikriwala, who had been in jail since 1923 and had now been transferred from the Lahore Fort to the Patiala Central Jail, Sewa Singh was elected the President and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia the General Secretary; both leaders were then in jail. Ibid., pp.53-56.
9. Ibid., p.57. The official reporter noted that "the Akalis are trying to give a secular character to their movement." Ibid., p.56.

and many suffered the severe blows of an angry administration.¹⁰ The infamous Hidayat was proclaimed in 1932 banning political meetings and imposing stringent conditions for registration of political organisations.¹¹ Many important leaders such as Sewa Singh Thikriwala and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia were thrown into jail in 1933;¹² the former never to see freedom again as he died in January 1935 after a prolonged hunger strike protesting

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10. On 26 January, 1930, Sewa Singh led a procession, with a "flag of independence" carried in front, from his village Thikriwala to Barnala, the district headquarters, and there held a meeting. At Mansa, on the same day, the national flag was hoisted and a meeting defying the prohibitory orders was held, and cries of 'Inqilab Zindabad' rent the air. At Sunam, a procession taking the "Independence flag" was stopped and the leading members namely Harnam Singh Akali of Dharamgarh, Nand Singh Akali of Ugrahan and Kapur Singh Akali of Manderan assaulted the police officers on duty. Consequently, they were challenged, convicted and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. Confidential note by Prime Minister, Patiala, L/P &S/13/ 885.
11. Wallia, op. cit., p.115. The three 'Phulkian' states, Patiala, Nabha and Jind, issued a common decree which was later known as Hidayat 88 because it was signed on 5th Poh 1988 Bikrami. Patiala promulgated it in its territory through a special Firman-i-Shahi dated 14 January, 1931. This decree remained in operation till 1946 when it was finally withdrawn.
12. In the year, 1928-33, the Praja Mandal movement had many victories to its credit. It had secured the release of Sewa Singh twice, once in 1929 and the second time in 1931. It had launched the famous 'Indictment of Patiala' and the British Government had been forced, in order to save the Maharaja's honour, to order an official enquiry known as the Fitzpatrick enquiry. Numerous conferences had been held and the Praja Mandal organisation, under the leadership of Sewa Singh Thikriwala and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, had spread to all the East Punjab States. See ibid., Chapters III, IV and V.

against his inhuman treatment.¹³ The sacrifices of men like Sewa Singh exposed the inhuman, autocratic and irresponsible Patiala regime in which neither life, nor honour nor property was safe from the whims of the Maharaja. All this produced a new political ethos and climate which questioned the legitimacy of the traditional authority enjoyed by the ruler.

A favourable climate was thus created for the new ideas of peasant organisation and politics that were being generated in the country at large and in Punjab in particular. The Riasti Praja Mandal, which was in any case increasingly becoming a mirror image of the Congress, did not remain untouched by these new ideological and political influences.¹⁴ It too had, within its ranks, political activists who were beginning to subscribe to the more radical ideas advanced by the socialist

13. Ibid., pp.117-20.

14. As early as 1930, at a meeting of the Praja Mandal held at Khariyal (District Karnal) under the Presidency of Sewa Singh Thikriwala, Sadhu Singh Daler, a member of the Executive Committee of the Mandal, "explained the objects of the 'Kirti Kisan Dal' and exhorted the people to join it. Revolutionary cries of 'Inqilab Zindabad', 'Mr. Das Zindabad', 'Bhagat Singh Zindabad',... 'Naukar Shahi ka bera garg' (Down with Bureaucracy) and 'sar-maya dari ka bera garg' (Down with Capitalism) were raised. On this occasion the members of the Praja Mandal were found preaching the doctrines of Kirti Kisan, in other words bolshevism". Confidential Note by Prime Minister, Patiala, L/P& S/13/ 885.

elements,¹⁵ and in these ideas the peasantry occupied an important position. The Communists and Socialists in Punjab had concentrated most of their attention on organising the peasants and when the Praja Mandalists sought to put their new ideas into practice, they too turned towards the peasants.

II

The resultant peasant movement can be divided into two parts. One was the general peasant or kisan movement and the

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15. Four of the seven office-bearers of the Praja Mandal in 1938 were socialists -- Hira Singh Bhathal, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, Mansa Ram and Giani Sardara Singh Yuthap. (Yuthap was one of the editors of 'Kirti Lehar', a communist journal published from Meerut by Punjab communists during the period of the U.P. Congress Ministry 1937-39. He was also the President of the Reception Committee of the Ludhiana session of the AISPC in 1939.) The Punjab Kisan Committee was reported to "be taking an active interest in the States. For some time past it has been maintaining a very close link with the States Peoples and their ambitions and disabilities through the agency of the Riasti Praja Mandal leaders such as Bhagwan Singh of Longowal and Jagir Singh Joga of Phagusinghwala, ex-deportees of the Patiala State.... The Punjab Kisan Committee remained particularly active during 1938 in enlisting the States subjects as its members and forming branches in the Indian States territory...workers of the Committee were busy in the Patiala, Kapurthala and Jind States in distributing membership forms among the peasants." Note by the Punjab CID on 'the development of Congress activities within the boundaries of Indian States', dated 30 December 1938, Enclosure to the letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Linlithgow, Viceroy, dated 3 January 1939, Linlithgow Papers, MS³ Eur F125/88.

other the Muzara (or tenants) movement. However, it was the latter that really occupied centre-stage in Patiala. Therefore, the discussion here will be focused on the Muzara movement, except for a brief comment on the kisan movement for purposes of comparison. The kisan movement had as its major thrust of activity the organisation of self-cultivating peasants into kisan sabhas around the familiar demands of reduction of land revenue and water rates, relief from indebtedness, abolition of begar or forced labour, right to shamlat or village common land, right of shikar, amendment of Nazool laws, etc.¹⁶ These demands were expressed in public meetings, in pamphlets and posters and by political workers who toured the villages trying to organise kisan sabhas and enrol Praja Mandal or Kisan Sabha members.¹⁷ However, we find no attempt being made to organise a concerted campaign, either in the form of a no-tax campaign or a major demonstration or morcha involving the despatch of jathas from all over the state (a form made popular

16. Many of these demands such as those relating to reduction of land revenue, Nazool laws, shikar, popular control over cesses, etc., were formulated at the first meeting of the Praja Mandal at Mansa in 1928. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.58. In the period 1934-37 the movement focused on attempts to get the recent enhancements in water rate cancelled and secure some reduction in land revenue. Ibid., pp.129-31.

17. References to these activities are scattered all over our records, but it is impossible to cite them in full at this point. However, some references of files can be given -- see, for example, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Files 1546, 1547, 1544, 1555, 1553, 1554, 1559, 1561, 1650, 1574, 1563, 1573.

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and used with great success by the Akalis), around these issues. This remained true of all the diverse political groups that participated in this activity and this included the Communists, Socialists, Akalis, Congressmen or Praja Mandalists proper.

This movement, given the forms it took and the style of activity it followed, failed to strike deep roots in the state. The reason for this was not that its major demands, i.e., reduction of land revenue and water-rate, had no meaning for the Patiala kisans. The majority of the cultivators, who paid revenue directly to the state, did indeed suffer from a heavy demand. In fact the pitch of land revenue and water rate was substantially higher than in neighbouring British districts and there was a general clamour that it should be reduced at least to the British level. The reason for the failure lay in the unsuitability of the forms and techniques of political activity to the specific conditions in Patiala. The lack of *civil* liberties (as embodied in the Hidayat), which made it impossible most of the time even to hold a public meeting, made nonsense of a movement that had this as its chief form of activity. As a result, most of the public meetings of the state subjects were held on the borders of the state in adjoining British territory. Nor was this a foolproof method, for the states had mutual

18. Nevertheless, this movement did succeed in putting pressure on the State to introduce some changes -- such as the enactment of some debt relief legislation on the lines of the Punjab Restitution of Mortgages Act, etc.

extradition arrangements with the British government, and in any case this could involve only those living within a reasonable distance of the borders, and Patiala was by no means such a tiny state. The organisation of kisan sabhas, the other major form of activity, also had limited scope since the Hidayat 88 imposed very stringent regulations and conditions for registration of political organisations, and non-registration automatically made any organisation illegal.

The movement, therefore, remained a poor imitation of the one that inspired it, namely the peasant movement in neighbouring Central Punjab. In the British areas, it was possible for peasant organisations to keep up a tempo of political activity, keep alive interest and enthusiasm, even increase peasant involvement while retaining these forms, as they had propagandist value and also exerted pressure on the authorities concerned. But when the same demands, the same issues, the same style of activity were sought to be transferred, by the same political organisations (though instead of the Congress, the Praja Mandal acted as the front organisation) to neighbouring Patiala, the attempt floundered. It is probably a truism to say that different political set-ups require different types of political strategy and tactics, but this truism was probably lost sight of by those who tried to implant the movement in unfriendly soil. A technique of political action that included no form of 'direct action' made little sense in a situation where subtler attempts at pressures were either crushed or ignored by a heavy-handed and thick-skinned administration. In other

words, the crucial difference between a hegemonic state (which the British colonial state in India was, in however limited a way) and an autocratic or repressive state (such as Patiala) was not fully appreciated.

This difference, however, was fully visible in practice, and the considerable success of the muzara movement, also led by the same political groups, demonstrated the viability of the use of different kinds of techniques, which involved participation and pressure of a very different kind. This movement of the tenants of Patiala state developed rapidly into an open confrontation between the tenants and the state and, at many points, brought the government to its knees. The muzaras (or tenants) also held meetings (very often in British territory), joined kisan sabhas, went in deputations, sent petitions -- just like the kisans -- but along with all this they stopped paying rent and, later, took forcible possession of landlords' land. However, it would not be correct to attribute the difference in intensity and success between the two movements to political techniques alone, for there was a difference between the extent to which a landowning peasant would be willing to go in pursuance of his demands for reduction of land revenue, etc., which for him were not in the nature of a life and death struggle, and the readiness of the muzaras, filled with a deep sense of wrong at having been deprived, within living memory, of hereditary proprietary rights, to fight and sacrifice, for regaining their lost status.

III

The origin of the problem dates back to at least the First Regular Settlement of Patiala made in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁹ The Settlement Report however claims that the dispute over proprietary right existed prior to the commencement of settlement operations.²⁰ It seems that when biswedars (the local term for landlords), who earlier had only some mafi claims or revenue collecting rights, claimed, due to their growing influence in the administration, proprietary status, the tendency was for the courts to grant them this status and relegate the entire body of cultivating proprietors to the position of occupancy tenants.²¹ But the effect of the Settlement, too, was "to create causes for disputes where none existed before, and to aggravate ill-feeling where they did exist."²² The Settlement Commissioner was well aware that he was leaving "to

19. AISPC Papers, File 133A, 1945-48, folio 253-257; Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 556, 1929-30.

20. Final Report of the Settlement of the Patiala State, A.D. 1908-1909 (hereafter Settlement Report), p.26. "The relations between landlords and tenants...were strained and bitter, long before the Settlement commenced." Ibid., p.26.

21. "The tendency was for the small proprietors, who happened to be shareholders in a village in which someone connected with the official class was an assignee of revenue, or the owner of a predominant interest therein, to become occupancy tenants, and for old tenants in a Biswedari estate to sink to the level of mere tenants-at-will". Ibid., p.26.

22. Settlement Report, pp.26-27.

the revenue authorities of the future a legacy of trouble and discord in this connection."²³ However, far from remedying the inequitable court decisions, the Settlement merely accepted and gave further sanction to the status quo, granting full proprietary status to biswedars, and the not very great benefit of the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1885 to the tenants.²⁴ The tenants had protested even while settlement operations were continuing, and there was large-scale refusal to pay rent; a hurried temporary attestation of rents was carried out by the Settlement Commissioner, but "so truculent had the tenant body become...that compliance with these orders was not obtained without the adoption of very stringent measures, which do not ordinarily fall within the scope of a settlement officer's duties." Thus, "a very serious crisis, which threatened to develop in the direction of murder, arson and agrarian outrages of every description, was averted."²⁵

Further, it was not as if their position as occupancy tenants was specially privileged and secure, since all they got was fixity of tenure, but no protection against rack-

23. Ibid., p.27.

24. Ibid., p.28. The report also pointed out that "the great majority of the 17,706 cases, which have been fought in the appellate courts of the Settlement, have been concerned with tenants' rights and tenants' liabilities." Ibid.

25. Ibid., p.29.

renting. The Settlement Report noted that "the capacity of the tenants to resist extortion, and to maintain their hold on lands which they had brought under cultivation, rested upon their own strength or obstinacy, and upon the weakness or the good feeling of their landlords, rather than upon any legal basis" (emphasis added).²⁶ The landlords had also succeeded in getting issued a 'Hidayat' in 1872 making it incumbent upon all occupancy tenants to pay rent in kind.²⁷ Besides, the amount of batai or share rent was decided by the kankut system, which meant that standing crops were assessed before each harvest by a kankut committee consisting of state functionaries, and the amount to be given to the biswedars fixed accordingly.²⁸

The grievances of the tenants of roughly 800 biswedari villages (comprising about one-sixth of the total number in the state), therefore, related to three major issues: (a) the loss of proprietary right and reduction in their position in the tenurial structure, (b) the consequential increase in their obligations to the biswedars, and (c) the kankut system

26. Ibid., p.27.

27. Ibid. A similar shift from cash to kind rents occurred in the British-held Punjab as well. In a period of rising prices, which came in the wake of commercialisation, landlords, wherever they could, insisted on a share of the produce as rent, as this secured to them an automatic increase in rents. See Chapter 5, section IIIA, above.

28. AISPC Papers, file 139 , Part I, 1937-42, folio 295-303.

in which over-assessment of yield was a constant cause of complaint coupled with the uncertainty of the exact amount to be paid at each harvest.

The muzara movement that emerged in Patiala in the late 1930s was based on these tenants, who had lost their hereditary proprietary rights by virtue of the fiat of the autocratic state. The state moved at the instance of its officials, who were mainly drawn from the landed elite and who used their autocratic power to feather their own nests as well as those of other members of their class and kith and kin. The erstwhile proprietors, now turned tenants, had refused predictably to accept this devaluation of their economic and social status, especially as this devaluation was all the more galling for being so arbitrary and discriminatory -- their kinsmen and friends in many neighbouring villages which had escaped the shift in fortune continued to remain in full possession of their proprietary rights. The new tenants regarded the new landlords as parvenus, who had no legitimate right to the land which had been theirs for generations, and not in the manner in which a traditional tenantry might regard their old, established, feudal landowners, whose right to the land had acquired a certain social legitimacy by virtue of its very antiquity. Of course, in addition, the weight of the new rent burden -- which was fixed as a share of the produce to be paid in kind -- as well as the deterioration in the social

status²⁹ -- which, for example, even meant that people from the peasant proprietor or bhaichara villages were unwilling to give their daughters in marriage to their kinsmen in the new tenant villages because the daughter would have to suffer the economic and social indignity of being a tenant's wife -- made the change in circumstances even more irksome and humiliating and therefore difficult to accept. The situation, then, provided most of the ingredients for a potential flare up -- a strong feeling of having been wronged, of legitimate rights being taken away, economic hardship, social humiliation or deprivation, as well as continued resistance or refusal to accept the new position on the part of the more stubborn tenants. The only missing link was that of organization.

29. Many of the leaders we interviewed emphasized this aspect of the deterioration in social status and social oppression by biswedais as an important contributory factor in the movement. Jagir Singh Joga, the veteran Communist leader, even went to the extent of saying: "people do not tolerate beizzati (indignity), though they may tolerate many other things." Interview, April 1981.

But, since these grievances had existed from at least the time of the Settlement, if not earlier, the timing of the movement (in the mid-thirties) is a pointer to wider social influences, economic as well as political. For two decades, high and rising agricultural prices had probably mitigated the impact of a harsh and unwelcome settlement, but problems surfaced when prices crashed in the 1930s as a result of the Depression. Biswedars sought to impose their claims with greater efficiency and force as the value of their share declined and peasants resisted partly because they could afford to pay much less but largely because their new political consciousness (a result of widespread participation in the Akali movement for reform of Sikh shrines) and the possibility of political support (from the Praja Mandal and other political bodies) gave them a new confidence in their own strength. Besides, the death of the notorious Maharaja Bhupinder Singh and the succession to the throne of a young and inexperienced ruler produced at least a brief period of political uncertainty and a hope that old grievances might be redressed if projected vigorously. In many ways, thus, there occurred a confluence of circumstances conducive to the development of new political forces. The outcome was a movement that challenged the authority of the biswedar (landlord) as well as that of the State which

colluded with and helped maintain the biswedars in his position.³⁰ The movement, once begun, snowballed rapidly for it had strong historical as well as contemporary roots. The tenants had a strong sense of having been wronged and deprived of their rightful and hereditary position and status. The vision of a new world was made doubly attractive by its similarity to the memories of the old world that had been lost.

Trouble had been brewing for quite a while for, as early as 1929, the Superintendent of Police, C.I.D., Patiala, had reported that the Praja Mandal workers with their base at Mastuana³¹ "have now started exciting the tenants of the Biswedars of our state for the non-payment of 'batai'. As it is since after the last settlement the relations between the Biswedars and

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30. The settlement report had noted in the first decade of the twentieth century that there "was throughout the State a strong offensive and defensive alliance between the Ahlkar (official) and Biswedars (landlord) classes. The Ahlkar who was not a Biswedars generally contrived to become one, and the Biswedars found that it was necessary for salvation to obtain a footing in the official camp." Settlement Report, p.7.
31. The Akal College, Mastuana (on the Nabha-Jind border), started by a local Sikh divine, and financed specially by the deposed Maharaja of Nabha, had become the headquarters of Praja Mandal activities, a sanctuary for political agitators and a distribution centre for Praja Mandal literature. Sewa Singh Thikriwala was the Chairman of the Managing Board. Of the six people arrested in the Ahmedgarh Dacoity Case, 1929, five had been associated with this college, and two of them, Harnam Singh Chamak and Sahib Singh Salana, later became active workers of the Praja Mandal and the Communist Party. The Political Department of the Government of India also expressed concern over Mastuana having become a centre of communist and other revolutionary propaganda. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 556, 1929-30; Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.78-80.

their tenants are not very healthy, hence the slightest provocation of this kind will act as putting fuel on fire."³² Soon after, in May 1930, the Revenue Minister wrote to the Vice-President of the Patiala Cabinet informing him that in spite of the best efforts of the Revenue Officer and the Nazim of the district, two villages, Rajomajra and Bhadaur, were refusing to give batai to the ^{ed}biswars and that "their ringleaders carry on propaganda against the interest of the state" and "are reported to have been under the influence of the agitators from without the state." He further expressed his fear that "if no proper remedy is sought, the situation may become difficult to be handled in the near future and the neighbouring villages may be affected," and asked for advice on what steps could be taken "to check the unfortunate disease which is growing through the tenant class."³³

32. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 556, 1929-30.

33. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 639, 1930 ; Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.96. Walia also adds: "The Rajomajra tenants were probably the first to take the path of struggle. In June 1930, eighty-six of them were detected by the state informers at Kalka on their way to Simla to represent their grievances to the Agent to the Governor-General and the Viceroy." Ibid., p.96. Fitzpatrick, the Political Agent, who was holding an enquiry into the allegations contained in "Indictment of Patiala", wrote that he had examined the bundle of petitions forwarded to him and that "nearly all the petitions relate to land and are mostly from the tenants against landlords and Biswedars. Complaints have been made that their permanent rights in the land have been ignored and Sardars have been made Biswedars in the land broken by their ancestors and held in continued and uninterrupted possession. Nearly all petitions are addressed to the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal and a reference is made to the news that the Mandal has taken upon contd...

Further developments took place in 1931.³⁴ In June and July, tenant grievances were voiced at a series of Akali-Praja Mandal dewans³⁵ held at Bhutna (or Bhutan) in Ludhiana district, at Mohee, Mansa, Bhadaur, Ubha and Dhuri.³⁶ At Bhutna, Golbadan Singh, a leading member of the Kisan Sabha, Ludhiana, and others "delivered fiery speeches with a view to promoting agrarian trouble."³⁷ This dewan was reported to have been

contd...

itself the work of representing the grievances of the state zamindars to the government of India." Confidential D.O. from J.A.O. Fitzpatrick to Sir Charles Watson, Political Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Simla, dated Camp Mashobra, May 29, 1930, L/P&S/13/885.

34. Earlier, the Ludhiana session of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal held in October 1930 passed resolutions condemning the State for depriving the muzaras of several villages of their proprietary rights over their land and also expressed sympathy with the muzaras of village Rajomajra. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 609, 1930.
35. The term 'dewan' usually denoted a Sikh religious meeting or gathering held in the gurdwara. During the Akali movement, which had a religious-cum-political character, the term was used more widely for public meetings associated with the movement. In Patiala, even after the Akali movement came to an end, most political meetings were announced by the Praja Mandalists (most of whom were products of the Akali movement) as dewans in order to circumvent the stringent conditions in the State, as it was much more difficult for the administration to interfere with an ostensibly religious assembly.
36. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 655, 1931.
37. Ibid.

largely attended by peasants and tenants from the Barnala district of Patiala, and it was announced that another dewan would soon be held at Bhadaur to discuss the tenants' problem.³⁸ The other dewans mentioned above (except Dhuri) ended in fiascos because of biswedars opposition.³⁹ This prompted the organizers of the dewans to "make plans for a stronger show" at Dhuri. A procession was taken through the mandi of the town to the Gurdwara where the dewan was being held with Sewa Singh Thikriwala in the chair. Speeches were made, including one by Wazir Singh Daftriwala, a prominent Praja Mandalist, promising emancipation of tenants from the control of landlords and the freeing of Rajas and Maharajas from the control of the British. Here, too, an attempt was made to disrupt the meeting and a fight ensued; the police party which tried to enter the Gurdwara was obstructed by armed Akali sewadars and

38. Ibid.

39. The biswedars adopted the practice of crowding these dewans with their own supporters and disrupting the proceedings. Intimidation of Akali-Praja Mandal sympathisers was also tried. Ibid. Walia comments: "A new method now used was the mobilisation of the Biswedars (feudal-lords) and their men on a large scale to intimidate the Praja Mandal workers inside the state and disrupt the Praja Mandal conferences in British territory. With tenants joining the Praja Mandal movement the Biswedars rallied round the Maharaja and his administration. They were giving assurances of their loyalty and placing their services at the disposal of the state." Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.108.

then belaboured and badly mauled. Finally, arrests were made, which included those of Wazir Singh Daftriwala and Harnam Singh Dharamgarh (who later became one of the prominent leaders of the tenants' struggle). All the meetings held above were attended by Sewa Singh Thikriwala and were part of the campaign leading up to the third annual conference of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal held at Simla in July 1931.⁴⁰

Reports of refusal to pay batai had also been received in 1931 from Qila Hakiman, a village that was to become famous later as a centre of the tenants' movement.⁴¹ The agitation here was against the new biswedars, Jai Singh, who had purchased the biswedari rights from absentee landlords and was enforcing his claims with the aid of mukhtiars (agents) who had become notorious in the village for their overbearing attitude.⁴² Attempts to enforce decrees against some tenants had resulted in a violent clash⁴³ and the institution of an enquiry after the tenants went in a body to complain against the biswedars.⁴⁴

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40. This account is based on the IGP, Patiala's confidential note contained in Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 655, 1931, and Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.95, 105, 107.
41. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 6157, 1931.
42. Confidential D.O. letter no.20/C dated 5.6.31 from the Minister of Law and Justice to the Prime Minister, Patiala, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 6157, 1931.
43. The biswedars' mukhtiars opened fire on tenants who were obstructing the attachment of certain property. Ibid.
44. Petition submitted by the biswedars of Qila Hakiman to the Prime Minister, Patiala on 8.2.1936. Ibid.

A preliminary enquiry resulted in the return of 300 bighas of land to the tenants but, since the government made no arrangement for biswedars' share to be collected by an official receiver, it seems no batai was paid by the tenants till at least 1936.⁴⁵

These early stirrings did not, however, go very far in the direction of a widespread movement. For one, between 1931 and 1933, till Sewa Singh Thikriwala was arrested, the Praja Mandal largely concentrated attention on the agitation against the autocratic rule of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, and on the question of introduction of responsible government in the State.⁴⁶ In the meantime, of course, the promulgation of the Royal Hidayat in January 1932 had made political activity within the State even more difficult. With Sewa Singh's arrest in August 1933, and his consequent hunger-strike (which ultimately led to his death in jail in 1935), all concern had shifted to efforts to secure his release.⁴⁷ After Sewa Singh's death, the despair and disillusionment among the Praja Mandal workers was further enhanced by Master Tara Singh's pact with Maharaja Bhupinder Singh in early 1935.⁴⁸ The deal was struck with the objective of securing for the Akali leader the support of the

45. Ibid.

46. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.109-16.

47. Ibid., pp.116-21.

48. Ibid., pp.123-4, p.129.

Maharaja against his opponents in the Shiromani Akali Dal (who had earlier enjoyed the confidence of the Maharaja), and for the Maharaja a respite from the agitation of the Praja Mandal, in which the Akalis had a predominant influence.⁴⁹ The pact was, however, roundly condemned by all shades of opinion within the Praja Mandal, including the group led by Harchand Singh Jeji, a close friend of Master Tara Singh.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it resulted in the release of large numbers of Praja Mandal leaders and workers, including Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, now fired with a new determination to avenge Sewa Singh's death by carrying on an uncompromising struggle for the removal of the Maharaja.⁵¹

Another significant development was the appearance of the communist-led Kisan Committees under the influence and direction of Praja Mandal leaders such as Bhagwan Singh Longowalia and Jagir Singh Joga, who had increasingly come to identify themselves with the communist current and its new emphasis on the organisation of Kisan Sabhas.⁵² Their own ideological shift

49. Ibid., pp.125-6. Allegations of having accepted money (Rs.2 lakhs) from the Maharaja were also made against Master Tara Singh. Ibid., p.128.

50. Ibid., pp.126-8.

51. Ibid., pp.125-8.

52. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1544 and 1546, 1937. The IG, Police, Patiala issued a circular order to all Nazims and SPs to submit regular weekly reports in view of the recent activities of the Praja Mandal, their identification with communist and socialist tendencies, and plans to form kisan committees and Praja Mandal branches. Circular Order No.15, dated 28.8.37, Ibid., File 1546.

towards the left and their growing hold over Praja Mandal workers was no doubt influenced by their disillusionment with the Akali current and Master Tara Singh's pact with the Maharaja.⁵³ From 1936 onwards, Punjab communist and socialist leaders were to be seen addressing Praja Mandal conferences in and outside the Punjab States.⁵⁴ At Praja Mandal conferences peasants were asked to enroll themselves as members of Kisan Committees in response to the call of the All India Kisan Sabha.⁵⁵

The situation took a new turn at the end of 1937 when a violent clash broke out between the tenants and the police on

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53. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 30.6.37, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546. This is a report on the 5th annual conference of the Riasti Praja Mandal held at Amritsar from 8-10 June 1937 and it notes the intermingling of people attending this conference as well as the conferences of the Punjab Provincial Congress Socialist Party and the Civil Liberties Union being held on 6 and 7 June.
54. Confidential weekly report from IGP, Patiala, dated 13.8.37, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546, 1937; Copy of report, dated 20-4-93 (August 1936) from Inspector, C.I.D., Patiala, on proceedings of a Praja Mandal meeting held at Khanna on 2.8.1936 under the presidency of Sohan Singh Josh, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 740, 1936; Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.134-5. Sohan Singh Josh, B.P.L. Bedi, Arjan Singh Gargaj, Karam Singh Mann and Baba Rur Singh are mentioned as the more important communist leaders invited to speak. Ibid.
55. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 13.8.37, 21.10.37, 1.1.38, etc., Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546 and 1547; Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.131-2.

25 November, 1937 at village Qila Hakimian over the payment of batai.⁵⁶ Two died and nine were wounded in this encounter -- the tenants maintained that they were peacefully urging the police and the landlords not to take away their crops whereas the official version was that the police fired in self-defence when attacked with brickbats by a mob of three or four hundred tenants. The tenants further alleged that the landlords had also participated in the firing.⁵⁷ However, this development was by no means sudden or unexpected, for Qila Hakimian had been contesting the biswedars' rights for a long time, and earlier in the year, in June 1937, the Nazim had spent a week in the village forcing the tenants to pay batai.⁵⁸ This had resulted in the tenants' arrival at Patiala, in 30 bullock-carts, to protest against the forcible realisation of batai.⁵⁹ Six other villages had followed suit, and had paid up the batai only under police supervision.⁶⁰

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56. "Practically the whole village had turned out to oppose batai." Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.12.37, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546, Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.132.
57. This account is based on the Confidential Weekly Report by the IGP, Patiala, dated 20.12.37, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546, and Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.132-3.
58. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 26.5.37, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546. The Nazim had reported that the tenants, along with their women, had gathered armed with stones and sticks but had been persuaded to disperse. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. The villages concerned were Kishangarh, Khewa, Gurthari, Rampura, Bhadaur and Dhepai. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 21.6.37, ibid.

The November clash attracted a lot of attention. An official enquiry was conducted by J.N. Mukherji, Special Magistrate, who, predictably enough, condemned the peasants for their "defiance of authority" and exonerated the police of the charge of having used too much force.⁶¹ The Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal appointed an enquiry committee consisting of Master Hari Singh, MLA, Lala Achint Ram of the Servants of People Society and Wazir Singh Daftriwala, a Praja Mandal leader of Patiala.⁶² This committee upheld the charges of unnecessary use of force, unlawful firing by landlords, and believed that the tenants were unarmed and peaceful.⁶³ The publicity received as a result of all this activity brought the tenants' question to the centre of the stage, so to speak, and provided a new momentum to the movement for redressal of their grievances.

Throughout 1938, for a variety of reasons, the issue of the tenants' agitation came increasingly to the fore. The process of realignment within the Praja Mandal, begun after the Master Tara Singh-Bhupinder Singh Pact, finally matured

61. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.12.37, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546; Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.132.

62. Many other Praja Mandal leaders and activists also visited the village and took interest in the affair. In fact, this so worried the authorities that special police was posted to prevent 'outsiders' from talking to the people. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.12.37, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1546.

63. Ibid., Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.133.

into an almost open split.⁶⁴ The death of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh in February and the accession to the throne of Yadavindra Singh and his marriage with Harchand Singh Jeji's daughter weaned away the section of the Praja Mandal under the latter's influence to a policy of moderation. This also had the effect of making it easier for the group with socialist leanings to establish their hold on the movement, an attempt they had been making for some time now, and to guide the movement towards a more militant path. New links were forged with the existing discontent among the tenants, and efforts made to speed up the formation of kisan committees and Congress committees in the biswedari villages.⁶⁵ The effects were soon visible; it was reported that some tenants had been to see Master Hari Singh, the Kapurthala kisan leader, and S. Gopal Singh, M.L.A., to ask them for help in their struggle.⁶⁶ Pamphlets were brought out on the Qila Hakiman incident⁶⁷ and the tenants of this village were urged to appeal

64. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.134; Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10.8.38 and 28.9.38, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1547.

65. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 1.1.38, 28.2.38, 8.8.38, 22.8.38, 10.10.38, 27.11.38, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1547. In the view of the IGP, Patiala, Praja Mandal, Kisan organisations and Congress committees were all the same. This probably reflects the increasing influence of the socialist and communist elements. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27.11.38, Ibid.

66. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 28.2.38, ibid.

67. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, ^{Patiala} dated 8.8.38 and 20.2.39, ibid.

to the Punjab Kisan Committee, Amritsar.⁶⁸ Official sources reported that tenants were becoming inclined to attend kisan and other political conferences held outside the state.⁶⁹ In December 1938, the Muzara Committee was formed to undertake the task of coordinating, guiding, and doing propaganda on behalf of the movement.⁷⁰ The formation of this committee signified that a certain decisive moment in the development of the movement had arrived. The rapid pace at which the movement developed and spread in 1939 is proof that this was indeed so.

IV

The first half of 1939 witnessed a rapid horizontal widening of the muzara movement. Refusal to pay batai became common in villages located in the Patiala, Sunam and Barnala

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68. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 8.8.38, ibid. Meanwhile, the Qila Hakiman tenants continued to refuse batai and their crops were harvested by the forced labour of neighbouring village servants. A dewan was held at which protests against this forcible harvesting of crops was voiced. The tenants also went to Pariala to protest. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 17.7.38, ibid.
69. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 28.2.38, ibid.
70. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 1.3.39, ibid.

districts of the State.⁷¹ There were reports of violent clashes between biswedars and muzaras.⁷² In some places, tenants tried to take forcible possession of land from which they had been dispossessed.⁷³ In others, muzaras ploughed over standing crops to avoid giving batai.⁷⁴ The government

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71. Ibid.; Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29.3.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1547; Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.4.39, 1.5.39, 19.5.39, 31.5.39, 2.6.39, 9.6.39, 30.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1554 and 1555. In village Bhadaur, the tenants along with their women collected in large numbers on 14.5.39 to take "an oath in the presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib to be loyal and true to their cause and to stick to non-payment of batai till death. They have opened a common 'langar' in which their helpers and advisers coming from outside and within the State take their meals freely. On 15.5.39 the Muzaras pledged themselves in the presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib not to also sow the forthcoming cotton crop and leave the already leased land of the Biswedars." C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 May 1939, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1554.
72. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 31.5.39, 2.6.39 and 9.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1554.
73. Kishangarh and Dila Hakimian were particularly noted for this. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 2.6.39 and 9.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1544.
74. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 30.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.

retaliated with arrests of political workers, institution of cases against tenants, physical prevention of muzaras from attending political meetings, and detailing of additional police to help in recovery of batai and open repression.⁷⁵

Punitive police was posted in the two most notorious villages -- Qila Hakimian and Kishangarh.⁷⁶

There were clear indications that the Praja Mandal had close links with and was playing an important role in the organization of this movement.⁷⁷ The annual session of the

75. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 29.3.39, 20.4.39, 1.5.39, 19.5.39, 31.5.39, 2.6.39, 9.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1547 and 1554. The SP of Barnala proudly recounted how he got the tenants of Kishangarh, Pharwahi and Chokerian to start paying up batai by using threats of beatings and confiscation of pensions and by arrests. D.O. letter No.199/C dated 8.5.39 from the Superintendent of Police, Barnala to the Inspector General of Police, Patiala, File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedari Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.
76. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.4.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1554.
77. The Inspector General of Police, Patiala, observed that "the Kisan, Congress and Praja Mandal agitators, a few local but most of them from outside, have, for some time past, been trying to get at the tenants of Biswedari villages and inducing them to refuse to give Batai on one pretext or another.... The result of this was that the trouble, which was hitherto confined to a few villages here and there, spread to many other villages too...." Letter No.6742-X-C dated 30.6.39 from Khan Bahadur S. Rana Talia Muhammad Khan, Inspector General of Police, Patiala to the Foreign Minister, His Highness' Government, Patiala, File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedari Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.

All-India States' People Conference held at Ludhiana in February 1939 was attended by about 350 state subjects.⁷⁸ Speeches made at a fair held at Gharachon in February exhorted a peasant audience of 1500 to join the Praja Mandal and kisan committees⁷⁹ and, at another fair held in March, in spite of stern police measures, a meeting of tenants was held at which muzara demands were raised.⁸⁰ The connection with the Ludhiana Kisan Committee had become very clear at the Jethuke Muzara Conference (which, according to the I.G.P., Patiala, was "mainly responsible for the whole Muzara trouble") held on 22nd and 23rd April 1939, at which Master Gajjan Singh of Gobindgarh, President, Kisan Committee, Ludhiana district, had been the president.⁸¹ The Central Kisan Organization at Amritsar (obviously a reference

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78. About two thousand were expected to attend this Conference from Patiala State, but arrests of certain leaders frightened them and only 350 turned up. It seems also that Patiala political workers were somewhat disappointed with the Conference as Patiala problems did not receive the prominence they desired. There was talk of turning to S.C. Bose for help, as Nehru (the President-elect to the conference) had proved disappointing. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 24.2.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1547. Posters brought out by Satpal Azad, General Secretary, Patiala State Congress Committee, on the Qila Hakiman incident were distributed at the Ludhiana Conference. Ibid.
79. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.3.39, ibid.
80. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29.3.39, ibid.
81. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence dated 9.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1554; The Tribune, 3 May 1939.

to the Punjab Kisan Committee, Amritsar) was also reported to be taking a "keen interest in intensifying the tenants agitation."⁸² A conference of 100 muzaras of some 10 villages was held at Shehna in Ludhiana district on 19 May where it was decided to send petitions to the Maharaja demanding abolition of the batai system and realisation of land revenue in cash instead.⁸³ The Praja Mandal also appointed an enquiry committee to investigate the grievances of the tenants of village Kishangarh.⁸⁴

While continuing to refuse batai,⁸⁵ the tenants soon began to adopt other methods as well to bring their problems

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82. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10.6.39, ibid. The IGP, Patiala, also commented that "the chief and more strong wire-pulling has been emanating from the Kisan, the Socialist and the Congress organization in the neighbouring territory of the Ludhiana district." Ibid.
83. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2.6.39, ibid.
84. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19.5.39, ibid.
85. The Revenue Minister noted that "the unrestricted preaching by certain Jathas and individual agitators from outside and inside the state has resulted in tenants in many villages, particularly on the border, resolving not to pay Batai to land-lords. The movement has not been confined to occupancy tenants only but has spread to tenants-at-will as well. The result has been that in villages, such as Kot-Duna, Pharwahi, Bhadaur, Karamgarh where there had never been any difficulty in the payment of Batai by tenants to land-lords, the tenants have refused to pay Batai on any account.... It (the muzara movement) has begun to assume the shape of a mass movement" (emphasis added). Confidential note on 'The Non-Payment of Batai Movement' by Hari Kishan Kaul, Revenue Minister, Patiala, dated 2.6.39, Camp Westfield Simla-E, File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-

into public notice. Some went to see the I.G. Police, Patiala,⁸⁶ others the S.P. and Nazim of their area,⁸⁷ and still others went all the way to Chail in the Simla hills to meet the Maharaja.⁸⁸ Finally, it was decided to send a deputation or jatha of 100 muzaras on foot to Simla to meet the British Resident. This jatha started from Takhtpura in Ferozepore district on the 1st of June 1939, and marched through various villages on way to Ludhiana, stopping at many points where prominent kisan leaders would address the gathering.⁸⁹ The jatha repeatedly raised the slogans, 'Muzara Committee, Zindabad' and 'Biswedari system, murdabad' -- and distributed posters describing the oppression of the biswedars and the suffering of the muzaras.⁹⁰ At Ludhiana, the jatha was

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Biswedari Movement in Patiala State, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.

86. Tenants of Village Kishangarh came to see the IGP on 29 April to protest against the imposition of a punitive police post and police highhandedness, those of villages Kharaksinghwala and Karamgarh came to express their inability to pay batai. Bhadaur tenants also came to the IGP on 19 May. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 1.5.39, 31.5.39 and 19.5.39, ibid.
87. 300 muzaras of Bhadaur met the Nazim and SP, Barnala, and laid their grievances before them and stated that they were on no account prepared to pay batai. They were followed by 200 muzara women who also met the district authorities. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.5.39, ibid.
88. 34 muzaras of village Kishangarh reached Chail on 12.5.39 and five of them met the Maharaja. Ibid.
89. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9.6.39, ibid.
90. Ibid. The posters in Gurmukhi were titled - 'Nirdai Biswedaran de zulman da shikar hoke ufre hoe mazlooman di rawanqi' (the departure of the ruined victims of heart-
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'persuaded' by the authorities to send a deputation of five persons to Simla to meet the Resident.⁹¹ Trouble arose, however, over the inclusion of Pandit Muni Lal Kalia, an M.L.A. and prominent Congressman of Ludhiana district, in the deputation of five. The Resident refused to meet Pandit Kalia on the ground that he was not a Patiala subject and the deputation refused to meet the Resident without Kalia.⁹² Public meetings were held in Simla under the auspices of the Praja Mandal at which the attitude of the Resident was condemned and the demands of the Patiala kisans elaborated.⁹³

The deputation left Simla without seeing the Resident and the jatha of 100 tenants again resumed its march to Simla.⁹⁴ Again, the jatha stopped en route at many villages and was extended full support by the local Congress committees, welcomed enthusiastically by villagers and addressed by numerous Congress and Kisan leaders.⁹⁵ The members of the jatha were

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less biswedari oppression) and 'Zalim ate nirdai Biswedaren di Nadarshahi' (the terror of cruel and heartless biswedars).

91. FR(1) June 1939, H.P. F.18/6/39; The Tribune, 13 June 1939; CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1554.
92. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555; FR(1) June 1939, H.P. F.18/6/39; The Tribune, 13 June 1939.
93. The Tribune, 14 June 1939; CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.
94. Ibid.
95. The Tribune, 16 June 1939; CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.

asked to form a Kisan Committee in Patiala and get it affiliated to the Punjab Kisan Committee.⁹⁶ After a few days march through the Ludhiana and Ambala districts, the jatha was again stopped by a police party at village Chuhr Majra in Ambala district and five of their members were escorted to Simla while the rest were taken to village Shehna in Ludhiana district.⁹⁷ The Resident had a long interview with the five representatives in which they put forward all their demands as well as expressed their apprehension that they would be attacked by the Patiala authorities on their return.⁹⁸ The Revenue minister, Patiala State, also met the deputation in Simla and assured its members that they would not be punished for their participation in ^{the} jatha.⁹⁹

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96. This appeal was made by Master Gajjan Singh, President, Kisan Committee, Ludhiana district, CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.
97. The Tribune, 25 June 1939; Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.
98. Ibid. The tenants complained to the Resident about the manner in which they had been deprived of their proprietary rights to the land some thirty years ago, the high pitch of existing rents and the objectionable methods used for their realization, The Tribune, 25 June 1939.
99. Commenting on this, the IG Police, Patiala, noted that since some of them were already wanted by the Police in connection with cases registered against them, he had instructed the district authorities not to arrest them at once, but to delay the completion of investigation in such cases by a week or two. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27.6.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.

The deputation then returned to Ludhiana where it discussed the implications of their meeting with the Resident with the local leaders, and from there it went to Shehna where the bulk of the jatha was awaiting them, and then dispersed.¹⁰⁰

The Simla deputation had a wide ranging impact. For one, it gave the muzara movement a province-wide publicity; secondly, it established clearly and publicly the links with the Congress and Kisan leadership; thirdly, it gave an opportunity for propaganda among villages lying on the route of the jatha; and finally, the pressure of the Resident secured in July 1939 the appointment of an Enquiry Commission¹⁰¹ by the Maharaja to investigate the grievances of the muzaras. Although the Enquiry Commission was immediately condemned by the Praja Mandal for being an eye-wash as it contained only official members,¹⁰² yet its appointment was seen as a distinct victory by the muzaras.¹⁰³ The chief lesson that

100. Ibid.

101. Order No.23 of Ijlas-i-Khas, Patiala, dated 17 July 1939, File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-Bisweddar Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077. The Commission was "to enquire into the causes of disputes between the Biswedars and occupancy tenants generally and with particular reference to those in villages (a) Kishangarh Sedhasinghwala (b) Raipur Qila Hakiman (c) Rajomajra (d) Bhadaur (e) Karamgarh (f) Rampura (g) Dhansingh Khana (h) Khewa Shahzadsinghwala (i) Kot Duna (j) Pherwahi Kishangarh". Ibid.

102. The Commission consisted of the following: Captain Sardar Madanmohan Nath Raina, Minister of Law, Chairman; Sirdar D.K. Sen, Foreign and Education Minister, Member; Major S. Harbans Singh, Revenue Commissioner, Member; and Sirdar Fazal-I-Hamid, Assistant Secretary, Constitution, Secretary. Ibid.

103. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated contd...

appears to have gone home was that agitation produces results, for, far from waiting for the report of the Enquiry Commission, the muzaras continued with their refusal to pay batai and more and more villages began to join the movement.

Throughout the second half of 1939, reports of heightened muzara activities continued to pour in. The SP, Barnala, wrote in to say that the muzaras of the district had resolved to take back mortgaged lands from creditors, and that 80 or 90 of them had already done so. He also reported that the muzara movement continued to grow in his district.¹⁰⁴ The muzaras of village Qila Hakiman took over the biswedars' lands of which they had been dispossessed, and began to till them.¹⁰⁵ The IG Police, Patiala, observed in his weekly report that, though batai had been effected in some important villages, "the attitude of the tenants generally continues to be somewhat truculent and obstinate."¹⁰⁶ The hope of early settlement of the dispute, spread by the participants in the Simla jatha who had returned to their villages, was considered by the IG as being largely responsible

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12.8.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.

104. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 30.6.39, ibid.
105. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 14.7.39, ibid.
106. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16.7.39, ibid.

for this continuing defiance.¹⁰⁷ He also noted a change towards a hostile attitude among tenants who had already given some batai and had been inclined to give more.¹⁰⁸ He concluded that "indications are that in most of the Biswedari villages 'batai' will have to be taken practically by force and on each such occasion there are bound to be unpleasant incidents."¹⁰⁹

Later developments conformed to this assessment. This was in no small measure a result of the hectic pace of political activity kept up by the Praja Mandal workers and muzara leaders. Numerous posters were printed and distributed, some stating the muzara demands and recounting stories of biswedars' oppression while others announced dates and venues of political meetings being held in British districts just across the Patiala borders.¹¹⁰ Tenants were flocking to these meetings in increasing numbers in spite of the efforts of local authorities.¹¹¹ Many such

107. "The tenants at large have been led to believe that they will be declared owners of land very shortly and that if no satisfactory decision is announced within a month of the Jatha's return from Simla, the tenants should be prepared to organize more jathas to intensify further agitation." Ibid.

108. This observation related to village Bhadaur. Ibid.

109. Ibid.

110. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 14.7.39, 28.7.39, 8.9.39, 15.9.39, 6.10.39, 13.10.39, 27.10.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555 and 1553.

111. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 12.8.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.

meetings were reported to have been held in the adjoining Ferozepore, Hissar and Karnal districts at which muzara demands were raised, release of political workers demanded and the State asked to fulfil the promises made by the Resident.¹¹² The tone of these gatherings soon began to get sharper; at an important meeting of 150 tenants, held at Budhlada in Hissar district from August 14 to 16, resolutions were passed which said that no batai was to be paid at all in the current kharif crop, tenants were not to give evidence before the Enquiry Commission and a propaganda committee was to be formed in each tehsil to preach non-payment of batai.¹¹³ A later meeting, on 26 September, at the same place, decided in favour of a tougher line of action -- no batai, no social contact with biswedars, crops to be destroyed if police tries to enforce batai, no fines to be paid, kamins or village servants to be told not to work for biswedars or else face the prospect of being thrown out of the village.¹¹⁴

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112. Meetings were held at Dodra in Hissar district on 13.7.39, at Chak Ramsinghwala in Ferozepore district on 25.7.39, at Khadial in Karnal district on 5.8.39, at Bhadaur in Patiala on 2.8.39, at Assarpur in Karnal district in October, at Alampur Mandran in Patiala on 25.8.39, at Dhabali in Ludhiana district on 6.10.39, at Dharamgarh in Patiala on 8.10.39 and 10.10.39, at Qasaiwara in Patiala on 29.9.39, besides many others. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 14.7.39, 28.7.39, 11.8.39, 6.10.39, 13.10.39 and 20.10.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555 and 1553.
113. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 25.8.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.
114. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence dated 6.10.39 and Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10.10.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553. Budhlada in Hissar district soon became the headquarters of the Muzara Committee and a refuge for muzaras who fled from the State either to avoid paying batai or to escape from the law. It had long served as the headquarters of the Praja Mandal as well.

The intensification of the movement also attracted more and more political workers to its fold.¹¹⁵ Many were reported to be moving around the villages encouraging those tenants who tended to hesitate.¹¹⁶ Besides, a gradual change in the political complexion of those leading the movement seemed to be taking place. While in the earlier phase, Ujagar Singh Bhaura, who was identified with the loyalist Akali group led by Jeji, had been more active, the fear expressed by the IG that as the movement grows stronger it might slip out of his grasp¹¹⁷ appeared to have been justified.¹¹⁸ For example, Ujagar Singh Bhaura's appeal on behalf of the Akali Jatha, Patiala, asking muzaras to take to a constitutional path seems to have fallen on deaf ears.¹¹⁹ People with more radical views were seen to

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115. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19.9.39, ibid.
116. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 28.7.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.
117. The IG had noted that the object of the loyalist Akalis of Ujagar Singh Bhaura's party appeared to be to build up opposition, by means of involvement in muzara activities, to the Longowalia group, which held extreme views. But, he said, this involved "two grave dangers. One is that by this method Ujagar Singh Bhaura's party is endeavouring to acquire some political power which could be used in time of need as a threat to the Administration. The second is that when this agitation assumes great proportion the tenants may get out of their hands too... this seems to be playing with fire...." Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 1.3.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1547.
118. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6.10.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.
119. Proceedings of a meeting of the Working Committee of the Akali Jatha, Patiala State, held at Dhuri on October 1, 1939, C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6.10.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.

be moving into the leadership - Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Jagir Singh Phaguwalia, Wazir Singh Daftriwala, Pritam Singh Gujran and others.¹²⁰ Another index of this change was, in the words of the IG, that "a gradual fusion of the so-called Praja Mandal, Congress and Kisan workers appears to be in the course of making...although retaining separate outside entities."¹²¹ The name of the Muzara Committee, too, was soon changed to Kisan Muzara Committee.¹²²

As a result, a further stiffening of the tenants' attitude was noticed. Batai of autumn crops, it was reported, was "generally not being given."¹²³ From August to November

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120. Of these, Wazir Singh Daftriwala and Jagir Singh Phaguwalia moved towards setting up a new States' Akali Dal, later called Shiromani Malwa Riasti Akali Dal, to counter the collaborationist Akali Dal led by Bhaura and Jeji which was affiliated to Shiromani Akali Dal, Amritsar, then under the control of Master Tara Singh, Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 23.6.39, 30.6.39, 8.9.39, 29.9.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555 and 1553. Harnam Singh's connections were with the Punjab Kisan Committee, and he subsequently became President of the Patiala Kisan Committee.
121. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19.9.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.
122. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6.10.39, ibid. The inclusion of the word 'Kisan' in the name of the organisation was a sure indication of communist influence; this is precisely what happened in British Punjab in the early '30s when under Communist and Kirti influence Zamindar Sabhas changed their names to Kisan Sabhas.
123. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19.9.39, ibid. Petitions from tenants of different villages 29.5.39, 3.8.39, 31.1.39, 14.9.39 expressing inability to pay batai. Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 5982.

1939, police reports repeated ad infinitum; 'situation is worsening', 'further deterioration in situation', 'further villages refusing batai', 'new villages refusing', 'more villages refuse to pay batai'.¹²⁴ It was also reported that biswedars were finding it difficult to live in the villages any more¹²⁵ and that almost all batai was being done under police supervision.¹²⁶ Kishangarh tenants, while withholding batai, further refused to pay the punitive tax and took possession of biswedars' land.¹²⁷ A clash occurred again at Jila Hakiman when biswedars Jai Singh's men tried to take away crops from disputed fields.¹²⁸

The government took serious note of the situation, which "appear(ed) to be gradually, though slowly, worsening."¹²⁹

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124. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 16.7.39, 28.7.39, 12.8.39, 13.9.39, 19.9.39, 29.9.39, 3.10.39, 10.10.39, 21.10.39; C.I.D. Secret Abstracts of Intelligence dated 4.8.39, 11.8.39, 13.10.39, 20.10.39, 27.10.39, 3.11.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555 and 1553.
125. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, 29.9.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.
126. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.11.39, ibid.
127. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 4.8.39, and Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 13.9.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.
128. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 3.10.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.
129. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29.9.39, ibid.

The institution of security cases did not seem to be having much "effect in imposing a check on the feelings of hatred, which appear to be spreading amongst the Muzaras of so many Biswedari villages."¹³⁰ The provision of more and more additional police for assisting in batai operations was also not a permanent answer; besides, it was expensive. Earlier policy advocating 'stern action' and 'prompt measures' had not produced the desired ends,¹³¹ and though even "His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur" had indeed been pleased to command "that this tenants' Movement must be stopped and strong action taken",¹³² events failed to conform to his royal wish. In the same vein, the Revenue Minister informed the Prime Minister that he had ordered the collection of the cost of punitive police from Kishangarh tenants even if it involved

130. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19.9.39, ibid.

131. Confidential letter No.733/H dated 24.4.39 from the Private Secretary to His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur Patiala to the Revenue Minister, Patiala, and copy of Telephonic Message dated 14.5.39 from the Inspector General of Police, Patiala to the Private Secretary to His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur, reporting on a conference, attended by the Revenue Commissioner, Nazims and Superintendents of Police, held to discuss the Muzara Movement, File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedari movement in the Patiala State', Patiala State Records, FM's Office File 2077.

132. Letter No.67/C dated 3.5.39 from Secretary to the Prime Minister, His Highness' Government, Patiala to the Inspector General of Police, Patiala, ibid.

selling movable property, house property and occupancy rights.¹³³ Nevertheless, at the high level meeting called by the Revenue Minister on September 26, and attended by the Law and Agriculture Ministers, the Revenue Commissioner, the IG Police, Nazims and Sps,¹³⁴ ^{to} discuss the muzara movement, no new departures in policy were conceived. It was proposed to raise 200 extra police immediately, take strong action in six or eight villages and put 'ringleaders' on heavy security.¹³⁵ The meeting also noted that the landlords were the bulwark of the administration, a loyal element, and hence must be protected; the fear was expressed that the movement, if not checked, would grow into a kisan movement.¹³⁶ The Maharaja approved¹³⁷ and the policy

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133. Letter No.1089/C dated 18.8.39 from the Revenue Minister, His Highness' Government, Patiala to the Prime Minister, His Highness' Government, Patiala, 'Subsidiary File regarding Kishangarh Affairs', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 5804.
134. Confidential Weekly Report dated 29.9.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.
135. Confidential letter No.1515/C dated 27.9.39 from the Revenue Minister, His Highness' Government, Patiala to the Prime Minister, His Highness' Government, Patiala enclosing notes of proceedings of the Conference. File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedhar Movement in the Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.
136. Ibid. The reference to 'kisan' here is obviously to a movement led by communists.
137. Note by Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur, dated 5.10.39, on the proceedings of the Conference held on September 26, 1939. Ibid.

was pressed into action - cases were instituted against tenants on complaints by biswedars, additional police force was recruited,¹³⁸ and the SPS ordered to keep notes ready on all leading agitators for preparing strong cases.¹³⁹

Despite all such efforts, collection of batai continued to pose a serious problem.¹⁴⁰ A police conference, held at Patiala on October 23, and subsequent consultations between the IG and some Nazims and SPS seem to have led to a change of tactics.¹⁴¹ While continuing to take strong action to hold agitators at bay, the emphasis shifted to bringing about compromises between biswedars and tenants at the village level by means of pressurising biswedars to be generous and not realise more than their due and urging tenants to respond by not encroaching on biswedars' rights.¹⁴² The Nazim of Barnala, who was probably the most successful exponent of this method, warned, however, that though the additional police was very helpful there would be trouble again if the report of the Enquiry Commission did not come by the next batai season, for batai had been effected this time by personally assuring tenants that the

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138. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10.10.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.
139. Secret D.O. letter No.6655/67-C dated 3.10.39 from the Inspector General of Police, Patiala to all Superintendents of Police, Patiala State, ibid.
140. C.I.D. Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 13.10.39, 20.10.39, ibid.
141. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27.10.39, ibid.
142. C.I.D. Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.11.39, 10.11.39, ibid.

Commission was looking into the problem and that a decision would come soon.¹⁴³

The government was not alone in its efforts to suppress the muzara movement; it was encouraged by and received the full cooperation of the biswedars. The biswedars had been active as early as 1931, when the movement had first raised its head, assuring the Maharaja of their loyalty and offering to put their services at his command as well as taking measures to prevent the holding of meetings in which tenants' problems would be raised.¹⁴⁴ In 1938, when the movement threatened again, biswedars began to discuss the possibility of joint action against muzaras.¹⁴⁵ In the early part of 1939, when large scale refusal of batai became common, and tenants assumed an aggressive attitude, the Maharaja's government was bombarded with telegrams from biswedars of affected villages, asking for police help and protection on the plea that their life and property were in danger, and urging strong retaliatory action.¹⁴⁶ When

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143. Ibid.; Undated letter (probably written sometime in December) from the District Nazim, Barnala to the Revenue Minister, His Highness' Government, File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-Bisweddar Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.
144. See above, f.n.39, in this chapter.
145. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 12.8.38, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1547.
146. Telegrams to Maharaja from biswedars of Barnala district 17.5.39, from biswedars of Bhadaur dated 17.5.39, from Harnarain Singh, Propaganda Secretary, Landlords Committee, dated 21.5.39, from biswedars of Bhadaur dated 20.5.39, from biswedars of Barnala district 21.5.39, from President, Zimindari Sabha, Barnala district dated 24.5.39, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Bisweddar Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.

the repressive policy swung into action, it elicited numerous congratulatory messages expressing the gratitude of biswedars.¹⁴⁷

As the muzara movement assumed a more organized form and especially when it decided to go in for wider publicity and take a jatha to Simla, the biswedars were put on the alert. In June 1939, the 'Landholders' Association' was formed at Patiala with the primary aim of safeguarding the interests of the landlords.¹⁴⁸ At its first meeting, two important resolutions were passed: one expressing landholders' strong disapproval of propaganda in a certain section of the Press by the tenants and urging upon the public not to be led astray by it, and the second offering their services to the government in combating the subversive activities of the misguided and mischievous people in the state.¹⁴⁹ The speakers at this meeting also said that they were prepared to give all kinds of facilities to tenants and redress all their grievances provided the tenants agreed to pay batai.¹⁵⁰

Following the formation of this association, frequent meetings of biswedars were held to discuss the situation as it developed and to decide on forms of collective action. At one such meeting of biswedars of Barnala district held at Mansa Mandi on June 25, 1939, in which biswedars of affected villages

147. Ibid.

148. The Tribune, 20 June 1939.

149. Ibid.

150. Ibid.

were prominent,¹⁵¹ Rs.100 was collected and a Gurmukhi poster, brought out by the Propaganda Secretary, Biswedari Committee, Patiala,¹⁵² condemning the lies and rumours spread by selfish agitators was circulated.¹⁵³ Another meeting of nearly 30 biswedars from all over the State was held under the auspices of the Biswedari Committee at Bhatinda on July 26, 1939, to discuss the situation arising out of the appointment of the Enquiry Commission.¹⁵⁴ This meeting appointed a committee of five biswedars to fight the biswedars' case before the Commission and decided to collect Rs.2000 for this purpose.¹⁵⁵ It was also decided that copies of judgements and pattas that might be helpful in proving the biswedars' claim should be secured from the courts.¹⁵⁶ The Maharaja was to be urged to include the Revenue Minister among the Members of the Commission

151. Biswedars of villages Kot Duna, Karamgarh, Talwandi Sabo, Chokerian, Nangal Khurd, Pharwahi, Dalelsinghwala and Gurthari were present. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 7.7.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.

152. Biswedari Committee, Zamindar Committee, were the other names the Landlords Association was known by.

153. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 7.7.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1555.

154. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 4.8.39, ibid. Biswedars of villages Bhadaur, Karamgarh, Kot Duna, Talwandi Sabo, Kishangarh, Chinarthal, Qasaiwara Bhoondar, Mansa, Jeondan, Bangi Rugho and Chokerian, many of them mentioned in police reports at one time or another for being 'bad' villages, attended this meeting. Ibid.

155. Ibid.

156. Ibid.

and also appoint two counsels, one for the biswedars and the other for the muzaras for defending their case before the Commission.¹⁵⁷ Three days later, a dozen biswedars met at the house of an ex-Minister, himself a bisweddar, and resolved that the activities of the muzaras, "who are carrying on a nefarious propaganda", should be stopped.¹⁵⁸

Far from stopping, however, the movement for tenants' rights intensified and the biswedars grew desperate. The President of the Zamindari Sabha, Barnala district, wrote to the Maharaja informing him of meetings held by muzaras at which they criticized not only the biswedars but the Maharaja as well.¹⁵⁹ He went on to add that due to the "general economic depression and the behaviour of the tenants in depriving the landlords of their share of the produce, the condition of the

157. Ibid.

158. Ibid. Around this time, another poster published by a bisweddar of Bhatinda and condemning the lawlessness of the muzaras was also circulated. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 31.7.39, ibid.

159. To quote: "Not only have they showered unlimited abuse on the Biswedars and all Revenue Officers from the lowest up to the Hon'ble Revenue Minister of your Highness' Government, but they have tried to throw mud on Your Highness' great and unsullied name as well." Letter from Balwant Singh, President, Zimindari Sabha, District Barnala to His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohinder Bahadur, Patiala, dated 28.8.39, File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-Bisweddar Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.

landlords has become most miserable" and it will soon "become impossible for them to meet the State Revenue and other dues."¹⁶⁰ He urged the Maharaja, in view of the approaching kharif harvest, to "issue further commands...with instructions to all the Revenue and Police officers to carry out the provisions of Law and render all due and just assistance to both sides without favour or hesitation to maintain their existing rights."¹⁶¹

The biswedars' position continued to be precarious, however, and at the end of September the IG noted that it was becoming impossible for them to live in the villages any more.¹⁶² A meeting of biswedars of Barnala district held on October 19 struck a similar despondent note.¹⁶³ One of the biswedars present, S. Chattar Singh of Kishangarh (one of the most stubborn villages) lamented: "When the tenants have become so courageous as to violate the orders of our gracious Master and the Police and the Revenue authorities do not take any action in this connection, there is no hope of our, Biswedars,

160. Ibid.

161. Ibid. He also pointed out that the tenants had interpreted the appointment of the Enquiry Commission as "a triumph of their agitation" and further "that it means the stoppage of all Batai" till the Commission gives its decision. Ibid.

162. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29.9.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.

163. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27.10.39, ibid.

receiving payment of Batai."¹⁶⁴ However, he added, the biswedars should not show any slackness in payment of land revenue whether they received batai or not.¹⁶⁵ The biswedars also decided at this meeting to continue to raise subscriptions for fighting their case before the Commission and to reach Patiala in a body to personally lay their grievances before the Maharaja.¹⁶⁶

A rapid change appeared to have come about. A few months earlier biswedars were content to send telegrams from their villages complaining to the Maharaja and asking for protection; now they were no longer so sanguine and were even ready to emulate the muzaras and take a deputation to Patiala. The strength of the Muzara Movement had reduced the biswedars to a position where they felt they could no longer, as in the past, count on the automatic support of the State. They were also willing to give proof of their loyalty by continuing to pay land revenue while not receiving rent. The State was also forced, though it recognised the biswedars as a loyal element, to assume a position of mediator between the two contending parties and could no longer afford to be seen as synonymous with biswedars' interests.

164. Ibid.

165. Ibid.

166. Ibid. The Secretary of the meeting Sardar Gurbakhshish Singh of Karamgarh, also read out a telegram received from the Maharaja expressing thanks for the offer of services in the War made by the Barnala biswedars. Obviously the biswedars were quick to take the opportunity of demarcating themselves from the tenants who had begun to talk of non-cooperation in the war effort.

The tenants, too, made further attempts to bring their problems to the notice of the State government as well as the Resident. A number of them from Bhadaur and surrounding villages came to Patiala and submitted petitions to the Prime Minister.¹⁶⁷ A bigger demonstration was planned at Lahore under the inspiration of Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh (President, Patiala Kisan Committee), Ajmer Singh Tamkot and other muzara leaders. A batch of 30 muzaras collected at Budhlada in Hissar district (which had by now been well established as the centre of muzara activities) where Muni Lal Kalra, the Ludhiana Congress leader who had accompanied the Simla deputation as well, visited them and saw them off to Amritsar. The jatha, reaching Ferozepur by train, marched for three days before reaching Amritsar on November 9, 1939.¹⁶⁸ Now numbering about 70, this jatha held a muzara jalsa at Jallianwala Bagh, with Ajmer Singh Tamkot in the chair and Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Wazir Singh Daftriwala, Jagir Singh Phaguwalia and Pritam Singh Gujran among those prominent in the audience.¹⁶⁹ Resolutions were passed requesting the Maharaja to expedite the report of the Enquiry Commission, to hold an enquiry into the conduct of state officials who had perpetrated atrocities on muzaras at the instance of biswedars, and to help in resettling tenants of villages that had been the target of official and

167. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 15.11.39, ibid.

168. Ibid.

169. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17.11.39, ibid.

biswedat wrath which resulted in many of them having to leave their villages.¹⁷⁰

After waiting in Amritsar for a few days, as the Resident was out of town, the jatha went to Lahore. Its attempts to meet the Resident were, however, thwarted by the imposition of Section 144 in the Civil Lines and the Resident's refusal to meet any deputation before the Enquiry Commission submitted its report.¹⁷¹ The jatha made some contact with Congress leaders and other members of the Opposition,¹⁷² but on the whole "nobody in Lahore took much notice of it,"¹⁷³ and eventually it dispersed.¹⁷⁴

Meanwhile, those tenants that had gathered at Patiala to meet the Prime Minister called in more of their compatriots from the villages and made attempts to see the Maharaja. They maintained that they had decided not to leave till the Maharaja met them in person, and were planning to call their families including old men, women and children from the villages to join them. The Maharaja, however, was in no mood for an audience, and ultimately the tenants made a desperate bid

170. Ibid. The villages mentioned in the resolution are Dharamgarh, Bir Khurd and Pharwahi.

171. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16.12.39, ibid.; The Tribune, 29 Nov. and 30 Nov., 1 Dec. 1939; FR(2) November 1939, H.P. F.18/11/39.

172. The Tribune, 29 and 30 Nov. 1939.

173. FR (1) Dec. 1939, H.P. F.18/12/39.

174. Ibid., Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16.12.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.

to throw themselves before his car when he was on his way to a public function.¹⁷⁵

The new policy of combining repression with conciliation at the village level had meanwhile begun to show results. Reports of increasing payment of batai began to slowly pour in¹⁷⁶ and, by the end of December 1939, it was claimed that about 80-85 per cent of batai had been effected.¹⁷⁷ The outstanding dues were from those that were "still absent from the State."¹⁷⁸ This referred to those tenants who had fled to British territory (mostly to Budhlada)¹⁷⁹ to escape the "show

175. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17.11.39, ibid. The Nazim, Patiala, obviously vexed by the problem of controlling these tenants who wandered around Patiala town, remarked: "This evil must be nipped in the bud. The tenants have no justifications whatsoever to adopt coercive measures and harass the Government unnecessarily by resorting to a kind of mass civil disobedience.... If necessary measures are not adopted... to stop the influx of these miscreants into Patiala city... these persons will be a constant source of nuisance to the Ministers and even His Highness." (Emphasis added.) Ibid.
176. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 3.11.39, 17.11.39, 24.11.39, 1.12.39, 8.12.39, 15.12.39, ibid.
177. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 22.12.39 and 4.1.40 and CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 22.12.39, ibid.
178. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 22.12.39, ibid.
179. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 1.12.39, ibid., Letter dated 15.12.39 from Darbara Singh, Propaganda Secretary, Kisan Committee with Head quarters at Budhlada, district Hissar to the Office of the All-India States People Conference, saying that thousands of tenants, leaving their families at the mercy of the police and biswedars, had fled the state to escape the merciless repression they were subjected to, which included raping of women in front of their parents, beating up of young boys, keeping stubborn tenants in unlawful detention in the villages, etc. AISPC Papers, File 139, Part I, 1937-42, folio 295-303.

of force" that had gone hand in hand with "tact and other methods".¹⁸⁰ These exiled tenants, mostly from Barnala district, were also reported to have made armed forays into Patiala territory with the intention of attacking biswedars and loyalist tenants.¹⁸¹

However, with the virtual dying out of the resistance to the payment of batai in the majority of villages, the scene of muzara activities moved out of the State. The General Secretary of the Muzara Committee called for a boycott of recruitment unless batai was abolished, a social boycott of those who pay batai, a revolt by tenants who were in jail and refusal to pay respect to officials.¹⁸² A meeting of the Muzara Committee in which 40 people participated, including Harnam Singh Dharamgarh, Ajmer Singh Tamkot and Pritam Singh Gujran, resolved that since the Enquiry Commission had done nothing so far, complaints in registered covers should be submitted to the Maharaja and the Resident.¹⁸³ Other meetings held in Hissar and Karnal districts demanded abolition of batai,^a proper treatment to women arrested from village Dhan Singhkhana, and early report by the Enquiry Commission.¹⁸⁴ A meeting at

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180. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 22.12.39, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1553.
181. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 1.12.39, ibid.
182. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 22.12.39, ibid.
183. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 5.1.40, ibid.
184. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.1.40, Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 26.1.40, ibid.

Budhlada decided that no 'kankuts' be accepted till the Enquiry Commission gave its report and a muzara jalsa be held at the annual Hola fair at Anandpur in Hoshiarpur district.¹⁸⁵ The Punjab Kisan Committee, Amritsar, expressed its sympathy with the tenants and condemned the Maharaja for his collusion with biswedars and repression of tenants.¹⁸⁶ Narain Singh Bhadaur, Secretary, Muzara Committee, issued a poster urging the Maharaja to take a sympathetic decision on the muzara question.¹⁸⁷ The tenants of village Kishangarh came to Patiala with petitions addressed to the Prime Minister and the Revenue Minister complaining against the punitive police post and demanding an early decision on the Enquiry Commission's findings.¹⁸⁸ However, no

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185. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 1.3.40, Patiala State Records, FM's Office File 1564.
186. This meeting held on February 28, 1940, was attended by 35 of the 42 delegates of the Patiala Kisan Committee, among whom Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia and Darbara Singh were prominent. Bhagwan Singh Longowalia was elected Cashier of the Punjab Kisan Committee and from the Patiala State Kisan Committee, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Wariam Singh of Jaleldiwal, Dharam Singh of Dalelsingh-wala, Jagir Singh of Joga (then in jail) were taken on the General Committee of the Punjab Kisan Committee.
Ibid.
187. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.4.40, Patiala State Records, FM's Office File 1559.
188. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 25.3.40, Patiala State Records, FM's Office File 1564.

immediate effect of all this activity was visible and the batai for Rabi 1940, due in April and May, was collected with relative ease,¹⁸⁹ though only with the aid of the additional police force and the revenue staff, which moved from village to village.¹⁹⁰ There were a few cases of non-payment, and these were left to the care of the courts.¹⁹¹

This sudden subsiding of the movement came about for a variety of reasons. The will to resist declined (except in some pockets) almost as sharply as it had risen. The success of the Simla deputation, coming at the height of the movement for non-payment of batai and resulting in the Maharaja's appointment of the Enquiry Commission, had strengthened the determination to fight for more in spite of heavy repression, and raised hopes of an early settlement of the dispute. The change in policy on the part of the State from pure and simple repression to one of separating the political agitators and

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189. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 5.5.40, 21.5.40, 8.6.40; CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 3.5.40, 24.5.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1559.
190. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.4.40, 5.5.40, 21.5.40, 8.6.40, ibid. Outlining the policy at the beginning of the batai season, the IG observed: "It is expected that a show of force, coupled with tactful methods which are to be adopted by the Police and Revenue authorities, will achieve the desired end... the Additional Police is being brought up to its full strength of 200, as during the next month or so the Police force will have to work under great pressure... for the tactful enforcement of Batai in a large and widespread area...." Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20.4.40, ibid.
191. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 8.6.40; ibid.

the more stubborn villages from the mass of the tenants and then crushing the former and conciliating and frightening the latter into submission, the slow pace of the working of the Enquiry Commission which dashed all hopes of quick success, the failure of the Lahore deputation -- all these contributed to the inherent inability of the mass movement to sustain itself for a prolonged period of time, based as it was on a peasantry with relatively meagre resources ranged against the organised might of the biswedars and a state becoming increasingly adept at the subtler art of political manipulation while simultaneously willing to use all the force at its command.

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The fate of the muzaras was further sealed, though temporarily, by the large-scale arrests of the Punjab socialists and communists in June 1940 in consequence of their opposition to the war effort.¹⁹² This cut off a crucial and vital link and source of support. Soon after, the Patiala police arrested Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, the prominent leader of the Patiala Kisan Committee, when he was on a secret visit to the state.¹⁹³ With his arrest, the muzara workers who were moving around the state trying to whip up agitation were thrown

192. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 5.7.40, ibid.

193. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 12.7.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1565.

into disarray.¹⁹⁴ The extent of inactivity was revealed when muzara prisoners, on their release from jail, found neither a big welcome nor a triumphant procession.¹⁹⁵ Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh's own conviction elicited not a whimper of protest.¹⁹⁶ Attempts by recently released muzaras ^{to} stir up some protest in Bhadaur met with a limited response.¹⁹⁷ There was even some talk of a march from Bhadaur to Patiala, but nothing appears to have materialised.¹⁹⁸ Batai payment in kharif 1940 was enforced without trouble, the only defaulters being those who had cases pending in court.¹⁹⁹

There was a renewed attempt in the beginning of 1941 to start an agitation. The people mainly responsible for this were the Akalis Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur, who belonged, at that time, to the Master Tara Singh group.²⁰⁰

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194. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16.7.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1559.
195. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.7.40, ibid.
196. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 21.8.40, ibid.
197. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala dated 2.10.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1561.
198. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 8/9.10.40, ibid.
199. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.1.41, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1560.
200. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 14.2.41, ibid. We emphasize "at that time" because keeping track of the rapid changes of alignments of Akali leaders is one of the most vexing problems encountered in the course of this study. Bhaura and Bhadaur, the two leaders mentioned here, later changed over: Bhaura went to the anti-Master Tara Singh and pro-Communist Akali group and Narain Singh Bhadaur was listed in 1943 as one of the Communist leaders.

Taking advantage of the absence of socialist and 'kisan' elements, this group made a bid to regain a foothold among the muzaras, which it had lost due to the more militant tactics adopted by the former and its own stand in favour of a constitutional path after the Maharaja had appointed the Enquiry Commission.²⁰¹ As a result of their new activities, Ujagar Singh and his associates drew towards them the more militant Akalis, such as Jagir Singh Phaguwalia and Wazir Singh Daftriwala,²⁰² who had, at the height of the muzara movement, when socialist influence was at its strongest, tended to come closer to the Praja Mandal group led by Jagir Singh Joga and the Patiala Kisan Committee whose President was Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh.²⁰³ A symbol of the militant Akalis' attempt to establish their independence from the collaborationist and loyalist Akali Dal had been the setting up of the Malwa Riasti Akali Dal or States' Akali Dal.²⁰⁴ Of this group, Pritam

201. See above, pp. 781-2.

202. Their change of stance, and their moving closer to the Master group, was becoming apparent by mid-1940, when they supported Master Tara Singh's candidature for Presidency of Shahid Sikh Akali Conference to be held at Bhawanigarh. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 12.7.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1560.

203. See above, pp. 781-2, esp. fn. 120.

204. Ibid.

Singh Gujran and Wazir Singh Daftriwala were by mid-1941 definitely won over to the side of the loyalist Akali Jatha, Patiala State.²⁰⁵

This polarisation had occurred as a result also of the new position taken by the Akali Dal in national politics on the side of the British in supporting the War effort²⁰⁶ -- a position born out of the increasingly communal and therefore compromising tendency of the Shiromani Akali Dal. In this new situation, the Congress, the Praja Mandal, and Communists were ranged on one side and the communal and pro-imperialist elements such as Akalis, Muslim League and Unionists on the other. The lines were drawn sharp and clear, and for the first time the Akali workers and cadre at the lower levels were forced to take a clear position either with or against the Praja Mandal,²⁰⁷

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205. The Senior SP, CID, Patiala in his "note regarding Political Situation", said: "Kartar Singh Dewana, a member of this party (loyalist Akalis) has won over Pritam Singh of Gujran and Wazir Singh of Daftriwala, Praja Mandal Akalis, in order to keep them back from identifying themselves with the Praja Mandal movement by getting them to hold important offices of the Akali Jatha, Patiala State. Pritam Singh of Gujran is the Vice-President of the Shiromani Akali Dal, Amritsar, and Wazir Singh of Daftriwala is the General Secretary of Akali Jatha, Patiala State." Note dated 7.5.41, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1574.
206. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.155. Baldev Singh joined the Unionist ministry in Punjab and a Sikh Defence League was organised. Ibid.
207. "An ordinary Praja Mandalist had never had the occasion to differentiate between the Congress and the Akali Party. Now Master Tara Singh's new policy was forcing him to make a choice." Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.150.

now completely dominated by secular nationalists and Socialists and Communists.²⁰⁸

Because of the peculiar conditions prevailing in Patiala, where open political activity had been virtually impossible, the Praja Mandal message had largely been spread through dharmic Akali dewans, which even the State could not prevent. Therefore, as Walia points out, in the minds of the masses, the Akalis were still identified with all their protest against oppression,²⁰⁹ a task that had in reality been more effectively performed by secular Praja Mandal workers and by militant Akalis going against the directives of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Therefore, when the time came to clinch the issue, Master Tara Singh was able to draw towards him even those sections of Akalis who had in fact been contravening his policy in the States but who still retained their attachment for and belief in the Akali cause.²¹⁰ By now this 'cause' was increasingly identified in terms of separate 'Sikh' interests, leading to demands for more jobs for Sikhs, maintenance of the Sikh position in the Army, and finally a separate Sikh State and, in the case of the Sikh Princely States, identification of Sikh interests with the

208. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence dated 26.4.40, Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala dated 19.6.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1559.

209. "For many the Akali Dal was a concrete historical reality, whereas the Praja Mandal was merely an abstraction". Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.156.

210. Ibid.

interests of Sikh rulers. It is within this larger context of the clear polarisation (born out of the logic^{of}/communal politics) between Akalis on one side and Praja Mandalists including Congressmen and socialists on the other that the next important stage in the muzara movement can best be understood.

Between January and June 1941, Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur organized a number of meetings in British territory at which protests against the dealying tactics adopted by the Maharaja were voiced and demands raised for making the report of the Enquiry Commission available to the public at an early date.²¹¹ Speeches at these meetings also referred to the atrocities committed on the muzaras by the subordinate officials, which had resulted in the desertion of many villages by the male population.²¹² However, no call was given for non-payment of batai and the administration continued to enforce batai payment successfully.²¹³

Though this activity did not lead to widespread non-payment of batai,²¹⁴ yet it was considered too serious to be

211. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 14.2.41, 28.2.41, 28.3.41, 30.3.41, 7.5.41, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Files 1560 and 1574.

212. Ibid.

213. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, 4.7.41, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1563.

214. Kishangarh and Dipgarh were the 2 villages that caused problems over payment of batai. Kishangarh muzaras attempted forcible seizure of land, whereas Dipgarh tenants ran away on hearing of police arrival so as to avoid paying batai. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 20.6.41, 27.6.41, and 4.7.41, ibid.

ignored. The danger of the movement, pushed forward by its own momentum, getting out of the relatively 'safe' hands of the present leaders or of the leaders becoming so powerful that they could use their strength against the state itself, thus destroying their usefulness to the administration which was based on their being popular as well as loyal, was recognized as early as 1939.²¹⁵ Therefore, when it seemed that these leaders were succeeding too well in carving out a niche for themselves in muzara politics,²¹⁶ the administration decided to strike and Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur were arrested in British territory.²¹⁷

Meanwhile, their attempts at political action combined with the new turn in national politics had succeeded in winning back an important part of the Akali cadre to the loyalist Akalis, thus forestalling a realignment of forces when the Socialists and Communists, after their release in 1942, resumed political activity. Such a combination could have posed a very serious threat indeed, for it would have brought together, in the muzara movement, a sizeable section of the militant Akalis with their popular image as steadfast fighters against oppression and the Socialists and Communists with their superior

215. See above, p.78', esp. f.n.117.

216. See CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 14.2.41, 28.3.41, 7.5.41, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1560, 1574 and 1563.

217. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 13.6.41, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1563.

organization, commitment to the 'kisan' cause, and secular ideology. The presence of the Akalis in this combination would have made it difficult for the state to project itself as a champion of 'Sikh' interests, which it did most successfully in later years with the active help and encouragement of Master Tara Singh and his communal Akalis.

This help came in various forms. The retirement of the non-Sikh Prime Minister was openly claimed as a success of the Akali agitation. The Maharaja was congratulated on the appointment of a Sikh Prime Minister²¹⁸ and urged to have more Sikhs in his Cabinet for a 'Sikh atmosphere' around him.²¹⁹ He was further told not to arrange the marriage of his sister in a non-Sikh family in deference to the feelings of his Sikh subjects, and prohibit smoking in and around the palace area.²²⁰ Other demands included 60 per cent reservation of jobs for Sikhs and the acceptance of Punjabi as the official language of the state.²²¹ The Maharaja was all too happy to make a few concessions of this nature, which helped in his staying on the right side of the Master Tara Singh group.

Master Tara Singh's increasing hold on the Patiala Akalis did not, however, go unchallenged. A rival group owing allegiance to Baba Kharak Singh sprang up, and carried on a campaign

218. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27.4.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1559.

219. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.7.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.

220. Ibid.

221. Ibid.

seeking to expose Master Tara Singh's corruption, hypocrisy and superficial allegiance to Sikhism.²²² However, the propaganda of this group remained only at the level of defaming Master Tara Singh, and did not attempt at building up an alternative base of support through serious participation in any movement. If anything, they tried to project themselves as more steadfast champions of 'Sikh' interests, and concentrated the brunt of their attack on the spurious Sikhism of the rival group²²³ - a charge difficult to sustain for the Master group had gone as far as it was possible to go in demanding special rights for Sikhs.

Besides, the Master group was careful not to alienate the muzaras, and kept up its image by occasional resolutions in favour of muzaras.²²⁴ The presence of old muzara workers, Pritam Singh Gujran and Wazir Singh Daftriwala, in the leadership of the Master group also helped to keep the muzaras' hopes

222. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17.7.42, ibid.

223. "It was openly declared that it was Master Tara Singh who had allowed the Sikhs to use caps and attend religious dewans wearing boots." Ibid.

224. For example, of the 40 odd resolutions passed at an Akali Dewan (Master party) held on 27 June 1942, one stated that concessions be given to muzaras and the disputes settled amicably. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.7.42, ibid.

of securing Akali support alive, for sometime at least. Also, the well publicized rumour that the Master had the ear of the Maharaja led at least some tenants to believe that he would be able to exert some pressure in their favour.²²⁵ And the Akalis were also conscious that their position in the state and the goodwill of the Maharaja depended on their being able to render some service in keeping the Sikhs of the state out of the hands of more extreme political groups. That the state administration was willing to allow Akali activities among the muzaras is clear from the following comment made in the margin of a Secret Abstract of Intelligence reporting such activities:²²⁶

Master Tara Singh's party, in view of its past record, cannot be suspected (in regard to the Muzara agitation) of doing anything detrimental to the State. Their object must be to wean away peasants from communists who have just been liberated from the ban and must be trying to seize this opportunity of capturing the support of the masses. It is, therefore, with a view to detract the peasants from the lure of communists that the Akali party seems to have initiated its Amrit Parchar campaign. Therefore, even if Akali contact with muzaras is an evil, it is a lesser evil (emphasis added).

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225. An Akali Conference at Mansa was attended by many muzaras from Kishangarh and other villages and a resolution passed in their favour. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24.7.42, ibid.
226. Abstract dated 24.7.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 770. This note is likely to have been made by either the IGP or the Maharaja.

That the Akalis were fully aware of this, and jealously guarded their position as the Maharaja's major allies, becomes clear from their wary reaction to the attempts of the Landlords' Association to reactivise itself towards the end of 1942. The possibility that this Association might, if it really took to active populist politics, emerge as a viable alternative ally of the State -- an ally much more stable in that its very survival was tied up with that of the State (unlike the Akalis whose aim was to use the State to consolidate their own position in Punjab politics) -- was viewed with grave apprehension by the Akalis.²²⁷

The anti-biswedari movement began meanwhile to return slowly to its feet. For, as the police reports showed, although the resistance to payment of batai had died out for some time,

227. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 25.12.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573. The Senior SP who reported this development, after noting that the Association had "started its work afresh", wrote that the Association was loyal to the government and the person of His Highness, and that "keeping in view their position it cannot be suspected that the zamindars will oppose the administration at any time." He then added: "But I was surprised to learn that notwithstanding this, the Akali party (Master Tara Singh party) sees the programme of the zamindars with suspicious eyes and believes that these people will oppose them which is, as far as my information goes, wrong. However, if the Akali party or any other party proves to be harmful to the Government... these zamindars cannot be their friends, for their chief aim is to render loyal services to the Government and their benefit, too, lies in this because of the fact that their existence depends on that of the State." (Emphasis added.) Ibid.

the muzaras remained "inimical at heart" to biswedars.²²⁸

The activities of Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur, in the first part of 1941, had helped keep the issue politically alive. The isolated but tough and continued resistance offered by some villages, especially Kishangarh,²²⁹ also kept the banner flying. The absence of any sign of the appearance of the Enquiry Commission's Report added to the impatience -- this in spite of another deputation of five muzaras from Budhlada having visited Lahore in December 1941 and obtained an assurance from the Secretary to the Resident that a decision would be taken soon.²³⁰ Soon after, in January 1942, there were reports from Kishangarh that, in the event of the discontinuance of the punitive police post there, the danger of the tenants taking forcible possession of land might well have to be faced.²³¹ Some other villages showed reluctance to pay batai.²³² Around the same time, the SP, Barnala, on

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228. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2.8.40, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1559.
229. See Files regarding Kishangarh Affairs, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1263, 1938, and 5804.
230. Confidential Weekly Reports, dated 5.12.41 and 19.12.41, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1563.
231. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2.1.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 763.
232. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 10.1.42, ibid.

his tour of the district, noticed a large number of illicit arms with the villagers, and immediately ordered their confiscation on an emergency basis.²³³ A few days later, on January 25, 1942, five muzaras went to Lahore from village Takhatpura in Ferozepore district to seek an interview with the Resident. They were told that the Resident was reaching Patiala on February 7, 1942, to settle their case.²³⁴ Consequently, on February 6, 50 muzaras collected in Patiala to meet the Resident who, however, returned to Lahore without seeing them.²³⁵ Some of them followed him to Lahore and were informed that he had spoken to the Foreign Minister, Patiala, and that the latter would now look into the matter.²³⁶ Subsequently, amidst rumours that the biswedari system had been abolished in 27 villages, a deputation of five muzara agitators (including Dharam Singh Fakkar of Dalel-singhwala, a well-known Communist and 'kisan' worker) was reported to be touring the Barnala and Sunam districts to raise money for the muzara agitation, and succeeding in causing a lot of worry to the local authorities.²³⁷ In March, about a dozen

233. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24.1.42, ibid.

234. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.2.42, ibid.

235. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 18.2.42 and 15.2.42, ibid.

236. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 15.2.42, ibid.

237. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 21.2.42 and 2.3.42, ibid.

muzaras tried to seek an interview with the Maharaja at Patiala, using the excuse of the birth of an heir to the throne, but to no avail. In utter desperation, they even tried to stop his car, but were successfully thwarted by the police.²³⁸

In this general mood of disappointment and impatience, the Muzara Committee held a meeting in village Jethuwal in Ludhiana district to decide on the future course of action.²³⁹ It was resolved that muzaras refuse to pay batai till such time as the decision of the Enquiry Commission was made public, the office of the Muzara Committee be shifted to Ludhiana district for better coordination, the accounts of the committee be audited, muzara propoganda be carried on through the 'Phulwari' weekly of Lahore, and a deputation be sent to meet the Prime Minister, Patiala.²⁴⁰ In practice, no deputation materialised, few muzaras withheld batai, and there were few takers for Narain Singh Bhadaur's advice to muzaras to remove the corn from their barns surreptitiously.²⁴¹ This did not mean however that the tenants had either lost interest or hope. An Akali dewan, held by Master Tara Singh's party at Mansa in Patiala State, attracted a large number of muzaras who went to attend it while others

238. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 21.3.42, ibid.

239. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17.4.42 and 24.4.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Files 770 and 1573.

240. Ibid.

241. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17.4.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.

sent contributions of grain in the hope that they could get support for their cause.²⁴² Their efforts did not go entirely waste, for the dewan did pass one resolution extending support to the muzara cause.²⁴³

VI

The situation in mid-1942 can be summed up best in the words of the Superintendent of Intelligence, Patiala:²⁴⁴

The estrangement of relations of muzaras with Biswedars in the state has reached its climax. As the Muzaras form a very large number, although they are not well organised, every political party is after enlisting them in its own ranks in view of their large numerical strength. But as yet no political party has succeeded in enlisting them as a body.

He went on to add, however, that the "Kisan and Kirti Movements are their great favourites" and though these movements which "are identified with the communists...could not grow stronger after communist leaders had been detained," now that "the Punjab Government have released eight communist leaders, Sohan Singh Josh and others, who have started reorganising the communist movement under the pretext of accelerating war efforts... it is not an impossible thing that the Muzaras

242. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24.7.42, ibid.

243. Ibid.

244. Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.6.42, under the heading 'Muzara Movement', ibid.

of the State may join this movement, as a body, sooner or later." The Superintendent's tour of Amritsar, Lahore and Taran Taran also confirmed his assessment of the communist danger.²⁴⁵ He pointed out that "at present there are two strong rival political parties in the Punjab, Akalis and Communists...[and] the strength of the communists is larger than that of the Akalis... despite the fact that the Punjab Government had detained prominent communist leaders...[and] the Shiromani Akali Dal has been making efforts at check-mating the advance of the Communist movement," and further that "in case the cooperation of the Communists with the Government continues and the rest of the communist leaders now in jail are released, the Communist party will get much stronger... [and] the communist movement may grow into the strongest one." He then went on to note that "the communist leaders have started reorganising communists in the right earnest... and are holding jalsas in large numbers [hence] the Kisan and Kirti Movements are receiving a largersupport [and] the Muzaras of the State, too, have received a sufficient backing." He concluded that this "may result in the intensification of the Muzara movement" and therefore "we must

245. Confidential Note on Tour of Amritsar, Lahore and Taran Taran from June 8 to 12, 1942, by Superintendent, Intelligence, Patiala, dated 24.6.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1577.

need work very cautiously with respect to this movement" for "the communists think it their duty to support the muzara movement."

Thus it appears that though "other political parties, too, Akalis, etc. [had] always shown and [were] out to show their sympathies [sic] towards the Muzaras' cause,"²⁴⁶ "the Kisan and Kirti Movements" were emerging as "their great favourites."²⁴⁷ This process was helped by the virtual abandonment of the muzaras by the Akalis under Master Tara Singh, whose political position is best expressed in his query to an Akali Conference: "When Maharaja Patiala listens to us, why fight against him?"²⁴⁸ The Akalis increasingly shifted their political base to the towns and the newly-emerging Sikh intelligentsia attracted by their demands for reservation of jobs and the like,²⁴⁹ preferring to retain whatever rural support they could on the basis of their religious appeal rather than the more explosive issues raised by the class demands of the peasants, which were becoming incompatible with the greater necessity of the loyalist posture.

246. Ibid.

247. Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.6.42, under the heading 'Muzara Movement', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.

248. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.156.

249. Ibid., p.158. Master Tara Singh's own base in Punjab was in the towns; he was not a Jat but an Arora Sikh.

The impotency demonstrated by the biswedars who, after the initial spurt of activity in 1939, had been lulled into a false sense of security because of the temporary decline of the movement, also aided the re-emergence of the muzara movement. "The Government of His Highness", observed the Superintendent of Intelligence in June 1942,²⁵⁰ "is receiving no help from the Biswedars in the matter of checking the Muzara Movement. So disorganised they are that... they cannot even manage their own household affairs." In his view "they have all the more been remiss in the discharge of their legitimate duties because of the fact that their Batai is officially effected", but this did not surprise him "because in fact they do not possess so much sense" that they could have used this "god send opportunity... to stand upon their own legs." The reasons for this were that "a majority of them are illiterate... addicted to drinks and... of loose morals. They have not been imparted such a training as may enable them to keep their muzaras under control." Apart from being incapable of handling the situation, "the biswedars do not take the muzaras as human beings and are out to exercise their full sway over them, legitimately or illegitimately and that, too, mostly through their inefficient 'Mukhtars'." Therefore, when "the system of carrying out Batai operations through the Police...is withdrawn, the Biswedars can enjoy no position." The situation was further complicated by the fact that "on the one hand, political bodies and

250. Extract from the CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.6.42, under the heading 'Muzara Movement', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.

communists in particular are trying to win over the Muzaras... [and], on the other, the Biswedars are not making any efforts at keeping the Muzaras under control."

The Government, too, seemed to have exhausted all its political and ideological resources in that no new policy seemed to be emerging. While, as noted above, it was fully aware of the possibilities of a new outbreak, of the Communist efforts at rebuilding their base and their interest in the muzara cause,²⁵¹ the only policy that emerged was one that, apart from supporting communal forces under the Akalis, relied almost totally on repression. The Maharaja, with all his royal authority, commanded "that as a matter of policy outsiders should not be allowed to hold meetings in Patiala [and] the muzara agitation be dealt with a strong hand."²⁵² The Inspector General of Police, too, could not think beyond asking the superintendents of police "to collect information about the ringleaders" and contemplating action against them under the Defence of India Rules.²⁵³ The SP, Barnala, also contributed to the collective wisdom: "so long as political parties continue to enter the state, there is not only the likelihood but

251. See above pp. 813-5

252. Letter from Hari Sharma, Private Secretary to the Maharaja, to Colonel Sirdar Gurdial Singh Dhillon, Inspector General of Police, Patiala, dated August 3, 1942, conveying His Highness' orders, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 770.

253. Margin note by IGP on CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17.6.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.

certainty of the Muzara Movement assuming a very dangerous form."²⁵⁴

Only the Superintendent of Intelligence seemed to have grasped the significance of the various policy measures tried out in 1939, when the movement had first raised its head, and drawn the right conclusions. His own recommendations were very similar to the line of policy followed with great success in late 1939 -- a policy that had combined conciliation at the level of the village between biswedars and muzaras with a wider policy of isolation and repression of political elements.²⁵⁵ In his own words: "With a view to bind both the Biswedars and Muzaras down to stick to their respective rights, it is very essential that they are administered full justice and that, too, by the shortest possible procedure."²⁵⁶ To facilitate this he recommended that "a Board of three Gazetted officers of the Judiciary, Police and Revenue, one each, be set up and a reasonable strength of the Additional Police force placed at its disposal. The Board be ordered to visit every Biswedari village, summon before it contending parties, pronounce its judgement in respect of their disputes, basing on facts and

254. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27.7.42, ibid.

255. See above, pp. 786 and 795.

256. Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.6.42, under the heading 'Muzara Movement', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.

after satisfying them before responsible Village Panchayat officers and get it acted upon [at] the spot. False facts cannot stand before responsible officers and Panchayats on the spot.... Thus a decision of disputes pending for years will be expedited and the Muzaras will not stand in need of running to any other place." Showing a perception lacking among his colleagues, he emphasized that "the tendency of the said Board should be towards effecting an amicable settlement between Biswedars and Muzaras; for if a Muzara is rendered homeless,²⁵⁷ he will naturally join a hostile agitation."

Commenting on the existing state of affairs, he lamented: "District authorities even are not using such tactics as are essential for patching up the strained relations between the Biswedars and the Muzaras except forcibly effecting Batai through police and revenue officials."²⁵⁸ More cautiously, he chided the "higher authorities" for not "adopting such measures as may suppress the Muzara Movement." Finally, he pleaded: "It is the crying need of the hour that officers, exercising their influence, have the people satisfied in order to maintain law and order" and that "such a line is chalked out as may make the Muzaras pay Batai willingly to the Biswedars and lead a peaceful

257. This is obviously a reference to those muzaras who had to flee their villages and homes to escape the tyranny of the police.

258. Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.6.42, under the heading 'Muzara Movement', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.

life." Needless to add, his appeal remained a cry in the wilderness, and His Royal Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mahendra Bahadur's Government continued to stumble along its suicidal path.

The period after mid-1942 witnessed the gradual re-emergence of the muzara movement and the simultaneous consolidation of the Communist position within it.²⁵⁹ Harnam Singh Dharamgarh, immediately on his release, began to activise the muzara front. A meeting of Praja Mandal Akalis of Barnala tehsil, over which he presided, passed resolutions asking the Maharaja to put a stop to the repressive policy of the state and publish the report of the Enquiry Commission.²⁶⁰ An anti-fascist kisan conference was announced to be held at village Ugrahan in Sunam district, but the police, with the aid of the biswedars, secured an application from some residents of the village

259. A general meeting of the Punjab Kisan Committee was held on 13.8.42, immediately after the Kisan school, at village Bhangali, Lahore district and was attended by all kisan workers present. It was decided "to revive and form new Kisan Committees in the Punjab States" and further to "form communist parties side by side the kisan committees in every district working under the instruction of the Punjab Communist Party." The Superintendent of Police, Incharge CID, who made the above report also noted that "the said kisan or Muzara Committees are now working under the instructions of the Punjab Communist Party." Note dated September 12, 1943, on 'Communist Movement in the State', submitted by the Superintendent of Police, Incharge CID, Patiala, File on 'Correspondence regarding Communist Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2226/100.

260. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19.6.42, ibid.

asking for the conference to be banned and issued notices to the organizers ordering them to refrain from holding it and threatening action under the Defence of India Rules.²⁶¹ The organizers protested by publishing posters (in Gurmukhi) condemning the action of the biswedars and the police.²⁶² Simultaneously posters appealing to the Maharaja, the Prime Minister and the Political Agent against biswedari oppression were brought out by Dharam Singh 'Fakkar' of Dalelsinghwala, Secretary, Kisan Committee, Patiala State, Ishar Singh of Tamkot, Joint Secretary, Kisan Muzara Committee, Patiala State.²⁶³ Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh was reported to be using his contacts among sympathetic Akalis to circulate these posters.²⁶⁴

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261. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 28.8.42, ibid.... Note dated September 12, 1943, on 'Communist Movement in the State', submitted by the Superintendent of Police, Incharge CID, Patiala, File on 'Correspondence regarding Communist Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2226/100. Another conference was planned at village Rar, but this was also banned and the organizers held it in village Chao in Ludhiana district and demanded early publication of the Enquiry Committee's report and equal distribution of land among peasants. Ibid.
262. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3.10.42, Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 1573.
263. Ibid.
264. Ibid.

The success of the Communists' efforts was reflected in the jatha of 40 muzaras that participated in the All India Kisan Conference held at Bhakna in Lahore district from April 12 to 14, 1943.²⁶⁵ This jatha went to Bhakna after collecting funds from the muzaras of the State, led by Dharam Singh 'Fakkar', Ajmer Singh of Tamkot and Chand Singh of Bhadaur.²⁶⁶ The President of the Reception Committee at Bhakna, in his welcome address, referred to the biswedari oppression in Patiala State.²⁶⁷

The rapid increase in Communist influence was also explained by their simultaneous attempts to struggle against the loyalist Akalis led by Master Tara Singh. In this effort, they cooperated with the Akalis group which had earlier formed the States' Akali Dal (and was consolidated under the name of the rival Akali Jatha, Patiala State) and which was unhappy over Master Tara Singh's collusion with the Patiala Maharaja and over the communal character of his politics. Communists participated in and were prominent in the dharmic dewans held by this group to condemn Master Tara Singh's anti-national and communal politics.²⁶⁸ Jagir Singh Joga, a leading Communist of Patiala, made it clear that though, out of expediency, the

265. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9.4.43, ibid.

266. Ibid.

267. Ibid.

268. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 13.3.43 and 2.7.43, Patiala State Records. PM's Office Case No.565/C of 2000 (1943-44).

Communists were then cooperating with the Government of India,²⁶⁹ when the "proper time comes" they would "make it impossible for the Government to function and shall favour the kisans and muzaras."²⁷⁰ He added: "Time will only show whether we -- the Communists -- or Master Tara Singh and his party have been leading the panth on the wrong path."²⁷¹ This projection of the Communists as the militant upholders of the Akali tradition of relentless struggle against oppression -- of therefore being 'better Akalis' -- was valuable ideologically in mobilising the muzaras. The Communist plan of holding counter-meetings wherever the Master Tara Singh party held its conferences was reported to have seriously disturbed the Master party and forced it to lie low²⁷² as it was suffering serious inroads into its popularity.²⁷³

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269. 'Expediency' here obviously refers to the necessity to take the side of the Allies once the Soviet Union was attacked by Hitler. Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.565/C of 2000 (1943-44).
270. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 23.4.43, ibid.
271. Ibid.
272. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24.9.43, ibid.
273. A Secret Agent from Lahore reported: "There is no programme at present for any mass conference or action in the Malwa or in any of the State, for the Akalis are growing conscious of their increasing unpopularity. The masses are not with them.... There is no programme and no possibility of direct action anywhere, and none in Patiala.... I have met leaders of parties hostile to the Akalis. As soon as the Akalis start a morcha anywhere, they will strongly oppose them. These parties are (1) Progressive Akali Party led by Durlab Singh, (2) Servants of Sikhs Society led by Kartar Singh of Campbellpur, Advocate, Lahore, (3) The Communist Party. These are the strongest amongst their opponents." CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 4.6.43, ibid.

Throughout 1943 and 1944, the Communist workers kept up a hectic pace of propoganda and mobilization of muzaras. The Patiala Kisan Committee organized a number of conferences, launched a membership drive, and district tours were undertaken by its leaders and workers.²⁷⁴ As a result, the district authorities began to experience difficulty in the realization of batai from tenants,²⁷⁵ though as yet there was no large-scale refusal to pay. Propaganda through ostensibly religious dewans also continued,²⁷⁶ though increasingly the ascendancy of Communists was becoming clear, and the administration referred to all such meetings as 'communist conferences'.²⁷⁷ A deputation of the Kisan Committee met various officials including the Prime Minister and the Inspector General of Police to press for a solution to the muzara problem.²⁷⁸ By July 1944, the

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274. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 9.7.43, 23.7.43, 20.8.43, 24.9.43, 29.10.43, 26.11.43, 10.12.43, 2.6.44, 9.6.44, 30.6.44, 28.7.43, 7.7.44, 11.8.44, 18.8.44, 25.8.44, 1.9.44, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.565/C of 2000 (1943-44), and CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944-45).
275. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 4.6.43 and 14.1.44, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.565/C of 2000 (1943-44).
276. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 13.3.43 and 2.6.44, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.565/C of 2000 (1943-44) and CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944-45).
277. From about mid-1943, this term became increasingly common when reference was made to muzara activities or other Communist organized meetings.
278. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2.6.44, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944-45).

Patiala authorities were seriously worried about the "daily increase" in Communist influence on the muzaras, and thought that it could only be checked by the settlement of the muzara-biswedat dispute.²⁷⁹

Despite attempts to ban meetings and conferences, the campaign continued, and the high point was reached with the holding of the Fourth Patiala Kisan Conference at Tungwali in Ferozepore district on September 6 and 7, 1944.²⁸⁰ Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh was in the chair, and the Conference was attended by Achhar Singh Chhina, President, Punjab Kisan Committee, Jagir Singh Joga, the Patiala Communist leader, Ajmer Singh Tamkot, Ishar Singh of Tamkot, Chand Singh of Bhadaur, Ghuman Singh of Ugrahan and other Communist and muzara leaders.²⁸¹ Muzara demands were voiced by almost every speaker at the Conference including Achhar Singh Chhina who

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279. Superintendent of Intelligence, Patiala's note on the Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 7.7.44, ibid. The note further said: "The programme which communist party propagates amongst the muzaras appeals [to] the latter very much and the result is that they [Muzaras] have alliance with the communist party. No effective measures are being adopted in the direction of preventing the propaganda carried [on] by the communist in the state. They are therefore having an opportunity of strengthening their movement... when they intend holding conferences in the state, it is banned... but the propaganda that they do individually and surreptitiously cannot be lawfully checked."
280. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 8.9.44, ibid.
281. Ibid.

said that he had been assured by the Prime Minister that they would be allowed to hold their conferences inside the state, but obviously the Prime Minister had gone back on his promise since the banning of meetings continued. He added that they (the Communists) were in favour of abolition of all biswedari and jagirdari rights and not merely in Patiala State. He called upon the kisans to organize, for the time was about to come when jathas of kisans would march from the villages and occupy the Moti Mahal (the Palace of the Patiala Maharaja) and a government of peasants and workers would be formed.²⁸² Other speakers condemned the repressive policy of the Patiala State, the confiscation of the property of communist workers, the lack of civil liberties, the backward condition of educational facilities in the State, etc.²⁸³ The Akali collusion with the Maharaja also came under heavy fire and the State was criticized for allowing the holding of Akali Conferences while imposing a ban on kisan meetings.²⁸⁴ The communist attitude towards the Akalis was stated succinctly by one speaker: "We want that the Akalis should exist but they should be like Akali Phula Singh who punished even Maharaja Ranjit Singh and not like the present-day Akalis."²⁸⁵ A more contemporary example given was that of Sewa Singh Thikriwala who starved himself to death in a Patiala prison, unlike Master Tara Singh who sold himself to the Maharaja of Patiala.

282. Ibid.

283. Ibid.

284. Ibid.

285. Ibid.

The self-confidence of the Patiala Communists was expressed at Tungwali in the demand for the recognition of kisan and communist organisations and student unions.²⁸⁶ This confidence grew out of the support that they had received from the muzaras - liberal contributions of grain and money were reported to have been made by the muzaras for the Tungwali Conference.²⁸⁷ That this confidence was not without basis was soon proved again by the popular response to the Bhog ceremony held to perform the last rites of Bhagwan Singh Longowalia at village Longowal on October 5, 1944.²⁸⁸ Kisan Sabhas of various villages and tehsils in Patiala, as well as of other States, sent deputations and contributed money.²⁸⁹ Also, significantly, each one of them presented a red flag in honour of the dead comrade.²⁹⁰ Achhar Singh Chhina and Jagir Singh Joga were the prominent leaders present, and the former made a speech in which he lauded Bhagwan Singh Longowalia's contribution to the Akali, Fraja Mandal, Congress and Kisan Sabha Movements.²⁹¹

It is obvious from the above account of the open participation of kisan sabhas and presentation of red flags that the

286. Ibid.

287. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 15.9.44, ibid.

288. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6.10.44, ibid.

289. Ibid.

290. Ibid.

291. Ibid.

Communists were increasingly becoming bolder and coming into the open. Meetings in villages were held in open defiance of the law and speeches made which in the view of the state authorities were highly objectionable.²⁹² This boldness was visible among the muzaras as well -- 50 of them from villages Dipgarh and Bhadaur met the Prime Minister in Patiala to seek information about the decision of the Enquiry Commission and warned him that if, on their return to their villages, they were harassed by the police, they would be back right away.²⁹³ The big show of strength was however made in February 1945 when 4,000 muzaras collected in Patiala to meet the Prime Minister.²⁹⁴ They maintained that the earlier group of 50 had been told by the Prime Minister to wait for one month and therefore, now that one month had lapsed, they had come to see him.²⁹⁵ On being asked as to why they had come in such large numbers when a few representatives could have easily stated their case, they replied that "they understand that the biswedars have told His Highness and the Prime Minister that only some handful of mischievous tenants are creating trouble, ...so to impress the Government

292. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27.10.44, and 26.1.45, ibid.

293. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 12.1.45, ibid.

294. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9.2.45, ibid. Some of the villages from which these tenants came were Kishangarh, Kot Duna, Bhadaur, Damdama Sahib, Dipgarh, Wasiawara, Mayiwal, Chanarthal, Kalbanhara, Talwandi Sabo, Dhakansuwala and Jangiana. Ibid.

295. Ibid.

about their unity and solidarity in this cause they have come in numbers."²⁹⁶ They were persuaded to leave Patiala on the assurance that a decision would soon be made and intimated to them.²⁹⁷

The biswedars of Patiala were reported to be extremely perturbed over the recent developments and feared that a decision favourable to the muzaras may be taken by the State.²⁹⁸ The seeming inability of the state to tackle the increasing strength of the movement made them justifiably nervous, as also the fact that the muzaras and their representatives appeared to be securing interviews with high officials with considerable ease. The biswedars warned that a pro-muzara decision would not only ruin them but would be equally harmful to the State in the long run because "the muzara movement...forms a part and parcel of the Kisan party in the British Punjab which is essentially communistic in character." They feared, too, that in the event of muzara success the loyalty of "some of the weak-minded Biswedars" may waver, and they may "join them in their nefarious activities" -- a state of affairs that "would surely bring about a big communist movement in the state resulting in serious consequences for the administration."²⁹⁹ Another argument offered, in fact a thinly-veiled threat, was that such a decision during the War would hamper the efficient

296. Ibid.

297. Ibid.

298. Ibid.

299. Ibid.

prosecution of the war effort.³⁰⁰ To finally clinch the issue, they gave the example of British Punjab where the same tenancy law was in operation and no concessions were being made to tenants, and wondered why Patiala wanted to take the lead in this matter.³⁰¹ Obviously apprehensive, the biswedars, thinking of all possible arguments which might appeal to the administration, sought to avert a decision which would cut at the very roots of their existence.

Meanwhile the muzaras, under the direction of the kisan and Communist organisations, stepped up their agitation. The Patiala Kisan Committee called on the tenants to remain firm in their resolve as very soon they would be able to do away with the biswedari system.³⁰² Reports of non-payment of batai began to come in;³⁰³ and by March the Nazim of Patiala reported that "the tenants' agitation has begun in full swing."³⁰⁴ Biswedars began to send in reports of tenants' refusal to yield batai and of evil intentions of seizure of land.³⁰⁵

300. Ibid.

301. Ibid.

302. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2.3.45, ibid.

303. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2.3.45 and 9.3.45, ibid.

304. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9.3.45, ibid. The Nazim added: "They (the tenants) are feeling very much encouraged by the belief that the government is showing communistic tendencies and are yielding ground to the agitators against the law abiding, peaceful section of the public.... The tenants are said to be collecting funds and arms to use according to their sweet will.... The landlords on the other hand are feeling shaky...."
Ibid.

305. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2.3.45, ibid.

Rumours were afoot that land was already being forcibly occupied in some parts of the State.³⁰⁶

A series of meetings was held and many posters circulated.³⁰⁷ The Communist-influenced Malwa Riasti Akali Dal (described in government files as just another name assumed by the Patiala Kisan Committee and Communist Party³⁰⁸) was active.³⁰⁹ A dharmic dewan was held in Nabha State attended by about 7,000

306. Ibid.

307. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 2.2.45, 16.2.45, 9.3.45, 16.3.45, 23.3.45, 25.5.45, 29.6.45, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case Nos. CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944-45) and 2002 (1945-46).

308. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, 12.1.45, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944-45). Elaborating on the relationship between these groups, the Abstract continued; "The political parties mentioned at Nos. 2, 3 and 4 [namely (1) The other Akali jatha, Patiala State also known as Ridha Singh of Ghagga party (2) Communist Party which is known by the name of Jagir Singh of Joga Party (3) The Patiala Kisan Committees which has got its other name as the Muzara Committee and is known by the name of Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh party] are in fact different names assumed by one and the same party which they have done to influence the general public and to make their task of propaganda easy at different situations with different kind of audience i.e., they hold dewans at religious places and name themselves as the Akali jatha while in the gathering of Kisans they name themselves as the Kisan and Muzara Committee. In the Gurdwaras the Ridha Singh party hold dewans... and usually all the speakers of their three parties gather and deliver speeches.... These three political parties are hostile towards the Patiala Government." Ibid.

309. The Dal, at its conference held at Pahewa Fair from March 11 to 13, 1945, and attended by about 2,000 demanded recognition of Kisan Committees and "showered rebuke" on Master Tara Singh, CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16.3.45, ibid.

people and addressed mainly by kisan workers and leaders including B.P.L. Bedi, a prominent socialist of Punjab, Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh and Jagir Singh Joga, in which muzara demands were raised and Akalis criticized. Increasing hostility between the Akalis and Communists was in evidence, and the Akalis were definitely on the defensive.³¹⁰ Harnam Singh Dharamgarh was touring the rural areas and telling the muzaras that the Maharaja was showing signs of weakening as a result of their campaign, and that the Communists would continue to gather more strength.³¹¹ By June 1945, non-payment of batai had become widespread, and this was clearly seen to be a result of the efforts of kisan workers.³¹²

The gravity of the situation became certain when, for the first time in all these years, the Maharaja decided to hold a Durbar at Bhadaur, one of the worst affected areas. The durbar, held on June 13, 1945, was attended by many, and muzaras and biswedars were given a patient hearing and advised to arrive at a mutual settlement of their disputes.³¹³ It seems, however, to have had little effect in the desired direction and served, if anything, as evidence of the weakness of the State in the face of the muzara upsurge.

310. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 23.3.45, ibid.

311. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16.3.45, ibid.

312. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 15.6.45, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No. CB-1-2 of 2002 (1945-46).

313. Ibid.

The movement intensified rapidly and developed into a confrontation between muzaras and the police. In Kot Duna, the tenants refused to pay batai in spite of the insistence of the tehsildar and the police, walked out of the joint meeting of muzaras and biswedars called by the district authorities and, arriving in Patiala in a body of 50, lodged a complaint against the tehsil staff and the police and tried to meet the Inspector General of Police.³¹⁴ A violent clash took place at Bhadaur between the biswedars and the muzaras, and the muzaras promptly marched off to Patiala to complain to the authorities but, not getting a sympathetic response, immediately proceeded to Simla.³¹⁵ In village Dharamgarh, the tenants began to forcibly take possession of land. To escape retaliation by the police many of them fled the village but their women and children were reported to be harassing the police.³¹⁶ Gurbuxpura and Dasondhasinghwala were also reported to be unduly 'stubborn' villages. In the former, the police guard was attacked in order to release from custody one person who had been arrested in connection with a case.³¹⁷ A jatha of tenants of village Dharamgarh, under the leadership of Harnam Singh, marched to village Ugrahan, red flags in hand, and was welcomed by the villagers and hosted for the night. This jatha was on its way to the big Kisan Conference

314. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 18.5.45, ibid.

315. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 8.6.45, ibid.

316. Ibid.

317. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 29.6.45, ibid.

being held at village Mauran in Jind State.³¹⁸

Summing up the situation at the end of June, a Sub-Inspector of the C.I.D., Political Branch, remarked: "The relations between biswedars and muzaras are becoming more and more strained. The Muzaras have organized themselves to fight for their claims, for which they are also collecting funds. They say, rather openly challenge not only the Biswedars but also the authorities, that they will kill or will be killed but would not give Batai."³¹⁹ Quoting recent incidents of clashes between police and muzaras, he added that this "shows that they are now preparing themselves to take up arms against the police." The situation in his view, would soon get completely out of control "if the flames of such like propoganda are spread in all other muzara villages". Biswedars, too, took an equally serious view of the agitation and at a meeting held on June 28 appealed to the Maharaja to take strong action against the muzaras, order the eviction of those who refuse batai, restore the seized lands to the biswedars, continue collection of batai through state agencies, stop the withdrawal of cases against muzaras and protect the biswedars from the "excesses" of the muzaras. They also resolved to take a deputation to acquaint the Maharaja with their difficulties. The general tone of the meeting reflected a feeling that they were being abandoned by the state and left at the mercy of the muzaras.³²⁰

318. Ibid.

319. Ibid.

320. Ibid.

The huge Kisan Conference held at village Mauran in Jind State in late June was reported to have "greatly excited...the feelings of the tenants...against landlords [and]...added to their impudence", as well as "very adversely affected the prestige of His Highness...and the Patiala Government in the eyes of the public."³²¹ Further, this conference had an "equally adverse effect...on the Akali movement in the States. It is feared that if two or three more such successful conferences of communists were held, the Akali Movement would totally die out in the States. The impression that the Akalis are the hired agents of Princes to strengthen their (Princes) hold on them and that the kisan workers are their real well-wishers is gradually gaining ground in the minds of the people."³²²

To counter the influence of the Communists, the Akalis decided to organize a special 'Dhadi jatha' to tour the villages of the Patiala, Nabha and Jind states and carry out pro-Akali and anti-Communist propaganda.³²³ However, "the effect of communists [was] so deep on the public mind," that the Akali Jatha of Jind State wrote to the Akali Dal at Amritsar that

321. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, 16.7.45, ibid.

322. Ibid.

323. Ibid. 'Dhadi jatha' is the name given to a group of singers who sing the glory of the Sikh past and extol the sacrifices of heroes of old. Propaganda through this jatha was always very useful, for its emphasis was on touching the emotional and sentimental chord in the listener. This form is used to this day by the Akalis.

this special jatha "would not be able to remove that effect; and that at least one good speaker who could effectively oppose the communists outright should also accompany the said Jatha."³²⁴ Their fears were well founded, for on reaching Mauraan, the venue of the recent kisan conference, the Dhadi jatha discovered to its dismay that "the hold of the communists was so strong over the minds of the villagers...that nobody cared to hear their propaganda songs...and preaching against the Communists."³²⁵ Meanwhile, their difficulties increased, as the Communists decided to follow the Jatha in the different villages of the Phulkian States.³²⁶

Another very important kisan conference was held at Shehna in Ludhiana district on July 7 and 8, 1945, at which the chief slogan raised was 'Stop batai system', and the audience of 700, mostly muzaras, assured of the Kisan Committee's support. Here, too, red flags were in abundance,ⁿ and the muzaras were exhorted to do away with the biswedari system as the Russian muzaras had done in 1917. The organised looting of the muzaras by the state officials and biswedars was condemned, and Achhar Singh Chhina, ridiculing the Maharaja's claim at Bhadaur that he was a 'Divine Ruler' and God spoke through him, said that God had spoken to the muzaras also and asked them to stop paying

324. Ibid.

325. Ibid.

326. Ibid.

batai.³²⁷ The cumulative effect of these conferences and the numerous small village meetings was soon felt.

The muzaras' attitude grew more defiant and a serious clash occurred on July 7, 1945, at village Dhandoli Khurd in Sunam district when the police party arrived to execute the orders of the District Magistrate to restore some land to the biswedars. The muzaras attacked the police and revenue officials, the police fired in return, and two tenants were killed.³²⁸ Tenants of Bakshiwala started taking forcible possession of biswedars' lands.³²⁹ About 60 tenants of different villages of Patiala state saw the Maharaja and complained to him about the maltreatment they suffered at the hands of the biswedars. His Highness was reported to have listened to them patiently and promised them a fair deal.³³⁰ The biswedars of village Dasaundhasinghwala wrote to the Secretary, Zamindar Sabha, Patiala, to say that muzaras had belaboured him with lathis and gandasis and damaged his crops.³³¹ The Inspector General

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327. Confidential Report on Proceedings of Kisan Conference held at Village Shehna, Ludhiana district, on the 7th and 8th July, 1945. File on 'Correspondence regarding Anti-biswedars movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, PM's Office File 2077.
328. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 13.7.45, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2002 (1945-46).
329. Ibid.
330. Fortnightly Report of IGP, Patiala, dated 15.7.45, ibid.
331. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27.7.45, ibid.

in his report noted that "the tenants appeared to be determined not to give Batai to the Biswedars."³³²

But the most telling reaction was that of the biswedars themselves. A meeting was held on August 14 at Patiala which was attended by prominent biswedars from all over the state, especially those belonging to the affected villages. The general tenor of the speeches indicated "a growing disappointment among them on account of the unsympathetic attitude of the Patiala Government." The meeting started off with the President reviewing the general position of the biswedars in the various villages of the state and expressing concern over the daily 'dacoities' occurring in the rural areas. "It appeared", he said, "as if a revolt had taken place". He went on to report that he along with some biswedars had interviewed the Maharaja and offered him their lands on payment of reasonable compensation, but the Maharaja, in spite of their conciliatory attitude, had been unsympathetic. Another biswedars present stated that, though the muzaras had free access to the Maharaja (and even then tenants of 200 villages were on their way to see him), the biswedars' requests for an audience were ignored. He railed: "You will continue receiving kicks if you continue in your submissive attitude.... If our due demands are not considered sympathetically here, let us go to Simla. Meet the Resident. See the Viceroy.... Here you will have only insults." The biswedars were very critical of the Prime Minister, Hardit

332. Fortnightly Report of IGP, Patiala, dated 15.7.45, ibid.

Singh Malik, who they thought was responsible for encouraging the muzaras. They also felt that the Durbar at Bhadaur "was not the result of a wise counsel" and had lowered the Maharaja's prestige.³³³

So nervous had the biswedars become, and so disillusioned were they with the Government, that a really desperate path was suggested as the only way out. The Secretary of the meeting, Sirdar Nirpal Singh of Bhadaur, proposed that "all the members (of the Zamindar Sabha) make it a point to get enlisted 15 young men each for the Jatha to be called as Drolli Jatha... they should be good lathi fighters and always ready to respond to the call of the Zamindar Sabha.... It does not matter whether such young men are drawn from among the sweepers or chamars... we require good stalwart youth.... Their names should be kept secret... they would be expected to be on duty for all the 24 hours." The object of these jathas was simple: "Just as the tenants are

333. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17.8.45, ibid. Another suggestion made was that Bhulabhai Desai, who was coming to Patiala soon, be given a big reception and his advice sought. (It was also mentioned that he charged Rs.2000 for an hour's lecture.) From this it appears that the biswedars were feeling the necessity of securing support from right-wing elements outside the state, and that they realized that, given the fast-developing political situation in the country as a whole, their problems were not likely to remain within the confines of Patiala alone.

334

organizing attacks on us similarly we should also attack them."

The implications of the above course of action were not lost on the State administration, and the Maharaja reacted with promptness to stem this challenge to the authority of his government. He ordered that the President of the Zamindar Sabha be warned severely against the organisation of the so-called Drolli Jathas as this would not be tolerated and those responsible would be severely dealt with under the law.³³⁵ Clearly, the biswedars had gone too far, and no government worth its name could openly countenance such a direct contravention of the law. The price demanded by the biswedars for their loyalty was one which the government could no longer afford, and when they threatened to take the law into their own hands, it had to intervene and make it clear that they were, after all, only the subjects of the State.

VII

The movement hereafter rapidly escalated into an open confrontation between muzaras and biswedars, with the state

334. This account of the proceedings of the biswedars' meeting was initially omitted by Sardar Birdevinder Singh, the Superintendent Intelligence, from the Secret Abstract of Intelligence, obviously in an attempt to protect the biswedars from the Maharaja's wrath. It came to light, however, and the Prime Minister asked the IG Police to call for an explanation. This incident brings out the nature of the support the biswedars received from certain officials. Prime Minister's Office No.238/SPC dated Delhi, 16.9.45, ibid.

335. Ibid.

intervening mainly to institute cases of non-payment of batai and criminal assault.³³⁶ Numerous armed clashes took place at different places, some over forcible possession of land, others over forcible realisation of batai.³³⁷ At village Gobindgarh, the biswedars Captain Jaswant Singh Jeji opened fire on his tenants, killing one and injuring seven. Biswedars in their turn sent in a barrage of complaints alleging that they and their families were being attacked in the villages by the tenants.³³⁸ Undeterred, the muzaras continued with their refusal to pay batai and increasingly more and more land was forcibly occupied.

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336. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 8.6.45, 13.7.45, end of August, 1945 etc., ibid.
337. Reports sent by biswedars to the Government, dated 1.6.45, 17.7.45, 28.7.45, 3.12.45, 22.12.45, 22.2.46, 28.8.46, 8.10.46, 12.10.46, 1.11.46, 6.11.46, 22.11.46, 16.12.46, File on 'Landlords Association, Patiala', Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No. T-I-of 2001 (1945).
338. Ibid. In their own meetings, they also passed resolutions asking the PM to order the police to recover unauthorised arms from the villages and take steps to ensure batai, started a relief fund to fight the cases of biswedars and the "oppression of communists and tenants" and decided to form an executive committee and sub-committees in districts and tahsils to prepare for the forthcoming Patiala Assembly elections; however, those biswedars who were considered to be pro-muzara or Communist were to be barred from membership. Ibid., CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 8.2.46, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2002 (1945-46).

The Communists continued to be in the lead of this movement, carrying on propaganda, holding meetings in villages where clashes took place, organizing armed guards to protect the seized lands, demonstrating their solidarity at various conferences, sending petitions, organizing deputations, arranging for the defence of tenants involved in court cases, touring the villages and enlisting members and collecting funds.³³⁹ A Muzara War Council was set up in 1945 itself, consisting of 21 members, mainly Communists, to coordinate the movement.³⁴⁰ The Praja Mandal in its Conference held at Patiala on October 5 and 6, 1946, which was attended by 60,000 people, under the influence of Brish Bhan, the Praja Mandal leader sympathetic to the Communists and the tenants' cause, passed a resolution asking for abolition of biswedari system and raising of occupancy tenants to the status of proprietors.³⁴¹ This support certainly gave

339. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 27.7.45, 25.8.45, 21.9.45, 23.11.45, 22.2.46, 22.3.46, 29.3.46, 5.4.46, Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.CB-I-2 of 2002 (1945-46); Reports sent in by biswedars to government, dated 22.2.46, 1.2.47, etc. File on 'Landlords' Association, Patiala', Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.T-I-of 2001 (1945).

340. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.163; PUC II letter dated 1.2.47 from Secretary, Zamindara Sabha, reporting proceedings of Dalelsinghwala Muzara Conference at which an appeal was made for collecting Rs.500,000 required by Muzara War Council to form a powerful union against Biswedars and state police. File on 'Landlords' Association, Patiala', Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.T-I-of 2001(1945).

341. Note on 'Tenants Problem in Patiala State' submitted by All-India States' People Conference, Patiala State, AISPC Papers, File No.133A, 1945-48.

strength to the tenants as the Praja Mandal had the weight of the Congress behind it.

By the beginning of 1947, the General Secretary of the Zamindar Sabha was warning the Government that, if the muzaras were left unchecked in their lawlessness for six months more, "there will be an open revolution throughout the State like France."³⁴² The Maharaja responded with a Royal Proclamation announcing, on March 11, 1947, a sweeping partition of lands between tenants and biswedars, thus establishing the tenants' rights of proprietorship to only a portion of the lands.³⁴³ This solution was rejected by the muzaras but it indirectly strengthened their claim to ownership of land.³⁴⁴ For the time being, however, the proclamation was kept in abeyance,³⁴⁵ and clashes between biswedars and muzaras continued as before, with the administration virtually adopting a policy of laissez faire between tenants and landlords.³⁴⁶

342. Letter dated 13.1.47, File on 'Landlords' Association, Patiala', Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No. T-I-of 2001 (1945).

343. Memorandum submitted by the Patiala State Praja Mandal to the Prime Minister and the States Ministry, Government of India, AISPC Papers, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State).

344. Ibid.

345. Ibid.

346. Biswedars continued to complain of lack of assistance from officials and police. Most of the reports also do not indicate any action beyond institution of cases, etc.

Outside Patiala, however, events were moving at a rapid pace and soon acquired proportions too large for the State to remain unaffected. With the coming of Independence in August 1947, the Praja Mandal became more aggressive and demanded immediate responsible government in the States.³⁴⁷ The Akalis, who only a couple of months ago had declared Patiala as "the only Sikh State where Sikh culture and character can be maintained",³⁴⁸ turned a volte face after joining the Congress Ministry in the Punjab and supported the Praja Mandal in its demands for responsible government.³⁴⁹ The Maharaja's constitutional offer of January 1948³⁵⁰ was rejected by both these bodies.³⁵¹

The Maharaja, in desperation, abandoned even by the Akalis, threw all his weight behind the biswedars and hit out at the

347. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.168.

348. Patiala State Akali Jatha's statement published in The Tribune, July 21, 1947, cited in Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.169.

349. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.170.

350. The proposals provided for indirect elections to the Assembly by the members of Panchayats and Municipal Committees, serious limitations were placed on the powers of the Assembly, only half the ministers were to be from the elected members and there was a long list of Reserved Subjects. The Tribune, January 8, 1948.

351. Joint statement issued by Riyasti Akali Dal, Patiala State Akali Jatha and Patiala State Praja Mandal, The Tribune, January 10, 1948.

muzara movement. The Proclamation of March 11, 1947 was enforced with vigour,³⁵² tenants were punished for refusing to pay arrears of rent³⁵³ and orders were issued to the police to help the biswedars in recovery of rents and repression of lands.³⁵⁴ Even the army was ordered to help the police in its task of repression.³⁵⁵ In an interview he gave to Brish Bhan, the Praja Mandal leader, at the end of March 1948, the Maharaja categorically refused to do anything for the tenants.³⁵⁶ Such

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352. Memorandum submitted by the Patiala State Praja Mandal to the Prime Minister and the States Ministry, Government of India, AISPC Papers, File 133, Part 1, 1948 (Patiala State).
353. Ibid.; Orders passed by Revenue Minister on 15.12.47 and 10.5.48, complaints by tenants of village Pharwahi alleging police torture of tenants to extract rent arrears, File on 'Landlords' Association, Patiala', Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.T-I of 2001(1945); Letter from Inder Singh Chakravarty, General Secretary, Punjab State Praja Mandal, to the Prime Minister, Patiala, dated 24.3.48, complaining of ruthless repression of tenants, AISPC Papers, File 133, 1948 (Patiala State).
354. Orders passed on requests from biswedars, dated 15.12.47, 10.5.48, 3.6.48, File on 'Landlords' Association, Patiala', Patiala State Records, PM's Office Case No.T-I-2001(1945).
355. Memorandum submitted by the Patiala State Praja Mandal to the Prime Minister and the States Ministry, Government of India, AISPC Papers, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State).
356. Report on Interview, dated 30.3.48, with Maharaja of Patiala submitted by Brish Bhan, President, Punjab States Regional Council, AISPC Papers, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State).

was the repression let loose on the tenants that the President of the Patiala State Praja Mandal issued a fervent appeal in May 1948 to the Ministry of States in New Delhi, the All-India States' People Conference and the Prime Minister, Patiala (quoting reports received from tehsil Praja Mandals containing harrowing tales of police activities), to intervene.³⁵⁷ Earlier, too, the Praja Mandal had submitted a memorandum to the States Ministry and the Prime Minister of India in which they had demanded suspension of partition of land and realization of arrears of batai till the setting up of a responsible government, and had complained that the Maharaja, nervous of his future, had thrown in his lot with the loyalist and communal elements -- the biswedars and the Sikhs.³⁵⁸

The alliance between the Praja Mandal and the Akalis had been an uneasy one, and as pointed out in the Memorandum quoted above, the Akalis were soon back with the Maharaja. The occasion was provided by the Praja Mandal's demand for merger of the States with Punjab, a demand born out of frustration with the Rulers' niggardly concessions.³⁵⁹ This demand touched the

357. Letter from the President, Patiala State Praja Mandal, to the Prime Minister, Patiala with copies to the Ministry of States, the AISPC, etc., dated 5.5.48, AISPC Papers, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State).

358. Ibid.

359. The Patiala State Political Conference held on February 29, 1948, at Patiala, presided over by Pattabhi Sitaramayya and attended by 30,000 people, gave two months' notice to the Maharaja to establish a Constituent Assembly, based on adult franchise, to determine the future of the State. Pattabhi Sitaramayya condemned the talk

Akalis to the quick, for it threatened the basis of their separatist politics. The Sikh States were areas they considered their preserve and would countenance no arrangement which would lead to their being swamped by the 'Hindu' majority of Punjab. They promptly put forward an alternative demand -- that for the merger of the Punjab States into a separate union which would maintain the Sikhs in a majority.³⁶⁰ Strangely enough, the

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of merger of Sikh States into a separate union and said that Patiala should join a bigger unit. The Tribune, March 1 and 2, 1948. The Kapurthala Praja Mandal demanded merger of Kapurthala with Punjab and was supported by the State Congress, the Communist Party and the Hindu Sabha.

They were even willing to have a referendum on this question in the State. The Tribune, February 28, March 9, and March 24, 1948. The Kapurthala Political Conference, with Pattabhi Sitaramayya as President, passed a resolution in favour of merger with East Punjab. The Tribune, March 29, 1948. Also see Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.182, 188 and 189.

360. At a conference held at Jaito in Nabha State under the auspices of the Shiromani Akali Dal, resolutions were passed demanding creation of Union of Sikh states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Faridkot, Kalsia, Malerkotla and Kapurthala and threatening to launch a campaign against any one of these states which refused to join. The Tribune, March 1, 1948. The President of the Shiromani Akali Dal, Giani Kartar Singh, issued a statement saying that the overwhelming majority of the people of the East Punjab states are in favour of the Union and that therefore the agitation launched by the Praja Mandal, advocating merger with Punjab, was irresponsible. The Tribune, March, 1948. The working committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal, at its meeting in March 17, 1948, passed a resolution in favour of the East Punjab States Union and urged the States Ministry to use its good offices to bring it about as soon as possible and also requested Sardar Baldev Singh to take up this matter with the States Ministry. The Tribune, March 21, 1948. Master Tara Singh headed a Sikh deputation to the Maharaja of Kapurthala to express his disapproval of the suggestion of the merger of the state with East Punjab and urge upon the Maharaja the desirability of his joining the Sikh States' group. He followed it up with an address to the congregation at the local Gurdwara in which he reiterated his stand in favour of the Union of Sikh states and said that "the
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Congress Government at the Centre under the direction of Sardar Patel decided to accept this demand, the object being not to completely alienate the Akalis and the Princes.³⁶¹ The Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) was inaugurating on July 15, 1948, by Sardar Patel³⁶² who declared it to be the 'Homeland of the Sikhs.'³⁶³

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Panth shall live, I will maintain Panthic entity even if I were called a communalist." The Tribune, March 21, 1948. It was also reported that the Kapurthala Akali Jatha was planning to hold a big Akali Conference presided over by Master Tara Singh to oppose the merger of the State with East Punjab. The Tribune, March 28, 1948. Letter from Jathedar Pritam Singh Gojran to Sardar Patel, Nabha State Records, File 509/E-5, Patiala: Punjab State Archives, cited in Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.189. Master Tara Singh had expressed a similar desire at a Political Conference in Nabha in April 1948.

361. V.P. Menon, Secretary, States Ministry, in a Press Conference held as early as March, had indicated that there was a plan to integrate Jind, Nabha, Malerkotla, Kapurthala and Faridkot into one Union which would not be merged with East Punjab. At this stage, however, Patiala did not figure in the Union, the idea being that big States need not be touched. The Tribune, March 28, 1948. When the formation of the Union became certain, the Shiromani Akali Dal expressed its delight and urged that the Interim government of this Union be formed in consultation with the Shiromani Akali Riasti Dal. Hindustan Times, June 2, 1948. See also Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.191.
362. Patel arrived in Patiala to inaugurate Pepsu and was greeted with cries of 'Sat Sri Akali' and 'Sardar Patel Zindabad'. The Tribune, July 15, 1948.
363. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.191.

The Union came into existence with the Maharaja of Patiala as the Rajpramukh, but without a cabinet, for no agreement could be reached between the three rival claimants -- the Akali Dal, the Praja Mandal (now transformed into the Pepsu Pradesh Congress) and the Lok Sewak Dal (a party inspired by the Maharaja).³⁶⁴ A ministry was formed only after six months of wrangling and after a virtual split had been engineered in the Praja Mandal under the inspiration of Sardar Patel, as the official leadership refused to join a ministry headed by Gian Singh Rarewala, a civil servant of 25 years standing, who had joined politics at the behest of the Maharaja and Sardar Patel.³⁶⁵ The formation of this Ministry (in which even the Akalis refused to participate) left the radical Praja Mandal leadership out in the cold, thus preventing any solution of the muzaras' problem.³⁶⁶ In fact, one reason why they were kept out of power by the States' Ministry (not known for its radicalism) was their support to the Communist-led tenant movement and their known stand in favour of land reforms. Positive proof of this had been their success in getting Jagir Singh Joga, the veteran Communist and Praja Mandal leader, elected to the office

364. V.P. Menon, The Story of the Integration of the Indian States, 1956, pp.248-49; The Tribune, July 16, 1948.

365. The 'rebels', who formed a parallel Pepsu Pradesh Congress Committee and joined the Ministry on Patel's prompting were Giani Zail Singh, Seth Ram Nath and Nihal Singh Takshak. Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, pp.191-92.

366. Ibid., p.193.

of President of the Patiala State Praja Mandal.³⁶⁷

The muzaras' struggle for land continued, and the main focus continued to be on non-payment of rent, thus refusing in practice to recognise the biswedars' right to the land and to a part of its produce. The landlords' attempts at eviction for non-payment of rent were increasingly resisted by the tenants, often successfully. However, the success of the movement and the increase in the boldness and militancy of its participants resulted in an increase in physical clashes between tenants and biswedars, which were provoked most often by the biswedars' forcible attempts, with the aid of bands of strongmen, to realise batai or evict the tenants from the land. The inept and weak administration appeared unable to either prevent the biswedars from taking the law into their own hands and forcibly pressing their claims, or to stem the growing discontent and militancy of the tenants by means of an imaginative strategy. Even its capacity of pure repression seemed to have declined with the growth of the strength of the movement, and the situation was increasingly beginning to resemble that of a civil war in which the contending classes or political groups were left, by and large, to settle the issue between themselves as best as they could. (We use the analogy of a civil war to distinguish the situation which we witness in Patiala from a revolutionary one, in which the confrontation is between an aspiring political group or classes and the existing state. In fact, as we shall

367. Ibid.

show later, the muzara movement and its leadership consciously refrained from organising or encouraging any direct confrontation with the forces of the state, and the couple of instances of armed clashes between the muzara volunteers and the State forces were really the exceptions that proved the rule, and were in fact forced upon the muzara leadership.)

This relative weakness of the administration, its inability to exercise authority, even by force, was an important factor in explaining the success of the movement for non-payment of batai and refusal to vacate lands when landlords insisted on eviction. Since the State hardly ever succeeded in intervening, the tenants could defy the biswedars with impunity and with little cost to themselves, unless the biswedars, on their own, organised their own force of gundas to attack the tenants. In the latter case, the superior numerical strength of the tenants, their high morale born out of a conviction in their cause, their being organised into a movement, which meant that other peasants as well as political cadre would rally to their support, often acted as a deterrent to organised action on the part of the biswedars, and it was only a particularly determined biswedar or one with connections in the administration or the police, who would dare to impose his rights by force.

It is interesting to note, in the above context, how the strategy of the muzara movement gradually evolved in response to this state of affairs. From 1945 onwards, when the movement became very assertive and tenants refused batai, not sporadically, as in the earlier years, but consistently, and biswedars began

to attempt evictions on the basis of non-payment of butai, the obvious new element in the strategy was to prevent these evictions by organising resistance. Increasingly, as some landlords began to use armed gangs, the necessity for the movement to resist this armed onslaught by organising its armed wing arose. And subsequently, this is what the Communists attempted to do during 1946-47. This decision to organise an armed volunteer corps was further strengthened and given a concrete form by the formation in 1948 of the Lal Communist Party, by Teja Singh Swatantar and a break away group of Punjab Communists (mostly belonging to the 'Kirti' wing), who disagreed with the official CPI line of Muslim nationality and Pakistan and wanted to adopt militant, i.e., armed methods of struggle to oppose partition as well as in the peasant movement and, when the CPI refused to accept this line, decided to break away.³⁶⁸ Teja Singh Swatantar

368. G.S. Randhawa, in his interview, says: "The split in 1948 came about as a result of national issues; one of which was support to the idea of Pakistan, which we opposed because nationality is not based on religion. Also, the mistakes of 1942, (the consequences of) which we are suffering to this day. True, we wanted to fight fascism, but this did not mean we should stop the anti-imperialist struggle. We isolated ourselves from the nationalist current and are paying the price to this day. On these issues there was discontent, and the leadership at that time (P.C. Joshi was General Secretary), instead of trying to solve the problem politically, tried to solve it organisationally by removing such people (who opposed the party line). As a result, the major section of the (Punjab) party, after the communal riots, left the CPI. The Kirti group was the main wing of the Party in Punjab, and this group came over entirely to the Lal Party. I was also part of this group. Similarly, other people in the party, Ranadive, Ajoy Ghosh, were questioning Joshi's position, but we did not know this at this time. Even after the break, we identified ourselves emotionally with the Telengana struggle, and considered it our movement, contd...

found his natural home with the muzara movement, which was the only movement in Punjab which conformed to his notions of militant struggle and in which the necessity for organising armed resistance to biswedari repression was already being felt. Under his direction, the process of formation of this group of armed volunteers was pushed ahead, and by the end of 1948, there came into existence this small band of armed men whose duty was to rush to the aid of muzaras who were threatened with physical, especially armed, assault by the biswedars and their organised gangs. However, quite contrary to popular notions, and communist mythology, the size of this 'armed force' was never more than 30 or 40 people, the largest estimate being 100.³⁶⁹

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and similar to our struggle." Interview, October 1981. Jagir Singh Joga gives a similar account: "The split was over policies. We were against Partition, we argued that we should be armed, we should be allowed to be armed, and we will not allow Partition to take place. At the All India Kisan Sabha session in Sikandra Rao in U.P. in 1947. Teja Singh Swatantar argued that the Punjab and Bengal units should be allowed to undertake armed conflict (to prevent Partition). Joshi was General Secretary and Bhowani Sen supported him, so we lost. The entire kisan wing in Punjab came over to the Lal party. I was initially with the other (CPI) wing, but since the entire kisan wing went over to the Lal party and I could not abandon the kisan movement, I too went along." Interview.

369. G.S. Randhawa, in his interview, said that there were about 100 volunteers. He also said, however, that Giani Bachhan Singh was incharge of this 'armed wing', and Giani Bachhan Singh, in his interview, stated categorically that there were about 30-35 trained men. His account of the recruitment and training of this force bears citing at length: "Teja Singh Swatantar **made** me incharge of organising this armed force. Initially, Swatantar gave us 4 or 5 arms. Then we got some arms by raising subscriptions **from** tenant villages. We also seized some weapons in the villages. We recruited boys of muzaras, who were ex-soldiers. We had about 30-35 trained people who were at our beck and call". Interview with Giani Bachhan Singh. Comrade Hari Singh, a

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This new development contributed an added dimension to the muzaras' struggle for land. Of course, the other planks of the struggle continued, i.e., non-payment of batai and resistance of biswedars' forcible attempts at removal of crops and eviction from land by means of collecting a 'crowd' of peasants, men and women, both from the village under attack as well as from neighbouring tenant and bhaichara villages with whom the peasants had kinship as well as political ties.³⁷⁰ The new element was that the biswedars who wanted to use brute force to press their claims had to also calculate on the possibility of the 'armed force' turning up to assist the 'crowd' in offering resistance.³⁷¹ That this did act as a considerable deterrent on biswedars, who might have otherwise contemplated

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communist activist from Bakshiwalla, Giani Bachhan Singh's village, also estimated the number at "less than a hundred". Interview.

370. Interviews with G.S. Randhawa, Baba Bachhitar Singh and Jagir Singh Joga.

371. G.S. Randhawa repeatedly emphasized this aspect. He says that "the 'armed volunteers' were organised only for self-defence against the armed gangs of the biswedars. Ours were not terrorist actions, but only an organised self-defence of the mass movement. Our volunteers were not allowed to retain the arms, after any 'action', the arms were collected and kept with some very trusted member of the Party. We kept great control because we knew that once muzara boys were given arms, they may do any thing and we did not want our movement to take a wrong direction." Interview.

a use of force, is shown by the small number of actual clashes between the biswedars' gangs and the Communists' 'armed force' as well as in the perceptible decline in the biswedars' attacks on tenants³⁷² and the tendency of biswedars to try and come to an 'amicable settlement' with the tenants, which was often a euphemism for their surrendering their rights on the land.³⁷³

It should perhaps also be clarified here that the whole object of this 'armed force' was to prevent the biswedars from an arbitrary use of force, and at no stage was this 'armed force' intended to take on the state forces. In fact, it was explicitly ordered not to get into situations in which a confron-

372. Between 1948 and 1951, The Tribune reports only two such incidents, one in which one tenant and another in which 3 peasants were shot dead by landlords. The Tribune, 28 April 1949, and 29 September, 1951. Apart from this, the only references are to the Kishangarh and Bakhora incidents, which we have discussed below, in which the confrontation was primarily between the tenants and the State forces. Admittedly, The Tribune is not likely to have reported all such incidents, but in the absence of Government records for this period, we have no other source of information except the Communist leaders themselves, and since they are not likely to underplay the biswedars' oppression, one can accept their account as reliable.

373. Interview with G.S. Randhawa. He also notes that around this time many landlords started fleeing from the villages out of fear, abandoning their lands. "Our instruction to our volunteers were that selected landlords should be beaten up soundly, not killed, so that they were frightened. There were 10 or 15 such incidents and this scared the landlords". Interview. See All India Kisan Sabha Bulletin, Vol.I, No.5, Dec. 1952, and Vol.II, No.2, Feb. 1953, for reports of landlords' coming to an 'amicable settlement' with tenants. Also see f.n.376 below, for landlords' complaints to Central Government regarding 'lawlessness' in FEPSU.

tation with the police was likely.³⁷⁴ This can best be illustrated with the example of Kishangarh, for the simple reason that this was the only incident in which a major clash with the forces of the state actually occurred, though here too it was unexpected and unprovoked and in fact accidental.

In Kishangarh, an old stronghold of the muzara movement, there were two landlords, Bhagwan Singh and Siyasat Singh, who

374. Jagir Singh Joga also records: "Our volunteers had strict instructions not to confront the police. They were only to confront the landlords' guards and armed gangs, but not the government forces." In response to the question: "How did you avoid confrontation with the police?" Joga said: "When the police came, they (the armed volunteers) would run away. The police could not reach everywhere at the same time, after all. That is why, apart from Kishangarh, there was no major clash with the police." To a further question: "Then this 'armed struggle' was really with the landlords' gundas?" Joga replied: "Yes", and quipped: "because police in the riyasat (state) stayed in the thanas, and not in the villages." Interview. Giani Bachhan Singh confirms that "this force was only meant to confront the landlords' gundas, not the police, not other exploiters. The police only if they actually attacked us, as in Kishangarh. These volunteers stayed in their own villages. When we received information that gundas were about to attack in a particular village, and this we usually found out a couple of days before the planned attack, we would send messages to this force to collect. The arms always remained in my personal custody or with some trusted member." Interview. Comrade Hari Singh corroborates: "Apart from Kishangarh, there was no clash with the police or army." Interview. G.S. Randhawa said: "The clashes were with the landlords' men, not the police." Interview.

were also Superintendents of Police. These two decided, after an ordinance was issued by the government in January 1949 declaring partition of land between landlords and tenants on the basis of one-fourth to landlords and three-fourths to tenants, to forcibly implement this in their village with the help of armed gundas and the police. In the clash that ensued with the militant peasants of the village, some of the gundas, it seems, were killed, and also, by mistake, a Sub-Inspector of the police. It was clear that the administration would not take the killing of the policeman lying down, and retaliation was expected. Anticipating this, and realizing that they could not afford to confront a concerted attack by the forces of the state, the Communist leadership that was present in the village decided to send away all the outsiders, i.e. peasants of neighbouring villages, the members of the 'armed wing' who had collected there earlier to resist the landlords' onslaught, and this was done. However, also realizing that if all the leaders as well as the armed volunteers went away, this would be tantamount to deserting the peasants in their moment of crisis, and would have a very demoralising effect on the movement and the village, it was decided that a token representation of the leadership as well as the 'armed wing' remain in the village, and Dharam Singh Fakkar along with four armed volunteers (all ex-soldiers) stayed back. As expected, the government sent in the Army, and the village was surrounded and asked to surrender. The peasants refused to comply and the Army entered the village, rounded up the resisters, and in the fracas, the

four armed volunteers were killed. Dharam Singh Fakkar, however, escaped a similar fate, due to the intervention of an army officer, who restrained the policeman who wanted to use this opportunity to shoot him down, on the ground that the policemen could not take the law into his own hands. Fakkar and twenty-six others were arrested and a Conspiracy Case was filed against them. However, through the efforts of Brish Bhan, Des Raj, Harbans Lal, i.e., the left-wing Praja Mandalists who formed a Kishangarh Defence Committee to defend the accused, all of them were subsequently acquitted and released.³⁷⁵

What is in fact significant about the Kishangarh incident is that it was not planned or intended by the Communist leaders, and that it was the only one in which a major confrontation with the police actually occurred, and that it was not therefore representative of the Communist functioning in the muzara movement, though, predictably, because of the killing of members of the 'armed force' as well as of some tenants, it became an important symbol of the movement and is quoted to this day as an example of the heroic 'armed struggle' of the Lal Party and of the militancy of the muzara movement. Our attempt here is not to minimize the importance of Kishangarh, nor

375. This account is based on Interviews with G.S. Randhawa, Jagir Singh Joga, Giani Bachhan Singh, Baba Bachhitar Singh and Comrade Hari Singh. Also see The Tribune, 20, 22 and 23 March, 1949.

to deny the sacrifices and heroism of those who fought and died, but only to place it in a correct perspective vis-a-vis the contemporary Communist strategy in the muzara movement. In that sense, Kishangarh was the exception and not the rule, and the main strategy of the muzara movement remained a combination of refusal to pay batai, refusal to vacate lands and resist landlords' attempts at evictions, etc. if necessary, by force.

This remained the broad pattern of the movement from roughly 1943 to 1952. Meanwhile, important political developments had been taking place at the national as well as provincial level. The ministry headed by G.S. Rarewala, the Maharaja's uncle, and consisting of the Maharaja's men, the right-wing of the Praja Mandal (now the Congress), etc., which had been installed in January 1949, was an extremely unstable one and lacked substantial popular support, since neither the Akalis nor the left-wing of the Praja Mandal (which was in fact the dominant section within the Praja Mandal and had been a consistent ally of the Communists in the muzara movement) were represented on it. Also, though it made a few attempts at handling the problem of the tenants (by ordering, in August 1949, a partition of land on the basis of one-fourth to landlords and three-fourths to tenants, an improvement on the Maharaja's offer of one-third and two-thirds), it by and large failed to either offer something that was acceptable to the tenants or to use the state machinery to effectively counter the tenants' resistance and establish its

own authority over the rebellious villages.³⁷⁶ This ministry itself could not last very long, and was replaced by a caretaker government headed by Rarewala which continued till May 1951. This government appears to have made little effort to tackle the situation.

376. G.S. Randhawa records that when the order of partition on the basis of one-fourth and three-fourths was issued, the Communists discussed this at an underground meeting with militant representatives of the peasants held at Tamkot. Though some of the weaker villages and richer tenants were in favour of accepting this offer, the decision taken was to continue the struggle for proprietary rights and refuse to accept three-fourths. This decision, he says, gave great strength to the muzaras, who felt that because of their struggle they had been offered three-fourths of the land, and if they struggled more, they could get the whole of the land. Therefore, the government's effort at disrupting the movement, which was inherent in this proclamation, was a failure. He also notes that the increased militancy of the movement in this phase was also because of the impact of general reforms that were being introduced in the country as a whole, as a result of Independence, and the fact that the Central Government was known to be in favour of reforms. He further says that the administration was unable to protect the landlords, and the latter were conscious that they had to do this on their own. In fact, the landlords were constantly complaining that there was no law and order in the state, that the Communists had set up a parallel government, that they were levying taxes on the people, etc. He gives the example of the incident in village Bakora in 1951, in which the tenants succeeded, with the help of the armed wing, but without any casualties, in chasing away the landlords' armed gangs and the police, and unlike Kishangarh, there was no attempt at reprisal by the administration. He adds, however, that the Communists had also learnt the lesson of Kishangarh, and had cleared out of the village after the initial clash, to avoid any chance of confrontation with a larger police force. Interview. Also see The Tribune, 30 March 1949, for the landlords' memorandum to the Central Government complaining of the "Communist menace" and the state government's inability to provide protection to them against this menace. Also see The Tribune, 8 October 1951, for a PEP3U government communique refuting the landlords' complaint to the Central Government that lawlessness prevailed in Patiala and Communists had set up a parallel government.

VIII

The formation of a new, purely Congress ministry in 1951, in which Brish Bhan was Deputy Chief Minister and his group had a strong presence, changed the situation. An Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee was set up to make recommendations regarding suitable legislation to solve the tenants' problem and the process of agrarian reform set in motion. Till such time as the legislation could be enacted, the PEPSU Tenancy (Temporary Provision) Act was promulgated in January 1952 which protected tenants against eviction. However, before this process could proceed much further, the 1952 General Elections intervened. In the Assembly that was elected, the Congress did not have a clear majority, securing only 26 seats out of 60, and could form a government only with the help of some independents. However, on the very first day the ministry faced the Assembly, on the occasion of the election of the Speaker, it was threatened by defections. It could have been saved only if the three Communist members of the house (2 CPI and 1 Lal Communist Party) had extended support to the Congress ministry of which Brish Bhan and his group were members. Instead, in their wisdom, they extended support to the rival group headed by Gian Singh Rarewala, now a right-wing Akali, who was Chief Minister when the army had been ordered into Kishangarh in 1949. He now proceeded to form the government at the head of a motley collection of "Haryanvi and Punjabi-speaking Jats."³⁷⁷ However,

377. Ramesh Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.197.

even the Rarewala government, which survived for one year under constant threats of defections, though it introduced the agrarian legislation in the Assembly, was unable to see it through before the Assembly was dissolved on grounds of chronic political instability and President's rule was proclaimed, in March 1953.

The introduction of President's rule, and the taking over of the reins of the administration by P.S. Rau, Adviser to the Governor, PEPSU, brought about a qualitative change in the situation, which had important implications for the muzara movement. Already, the initiation of the process of agrarian reform, and the realization by the peasantry that the satisfaction of their demands was but a question of time, had tended to weaken the aggressive stance of the peasants and the militant character of their resistance, since the necessity of forcible wresting of rights was diminished by the possibility, and increasing certainty, of acquiring them through an easier, if more expensive method. The new administration added a new dimension to the scene. While pushing forward the process of agrarian reform, it simultaneously insisted on restoring the authority of the administration in the affected rural areas, an authority that had been virtually non-existent since the last days of the Maharaja, and which the chronic instability of the successive ministries had done little to restore. This it did by insisting on payment of three years' arrears of rent (the maximum arrears permissible

under the law), and by enforcing this by an effective use of the police force.³⁷⁸ This re-establishment of the authority of the government meant that any attempts at resistance, armed or otherwise, would be indulged in at a heavy cost, a cost that the tenants were increasingly unwilling to pay, given the prospect of acquiring proprietary rights by legislative action. This prospect soon turned into reality when the President issued the PEPSU Occupancy Tenants (Vesting of Proprietary Rights) Act. Under this Act, occupancy tenants could become owners of their land by paying compensation amounting to 12 times the land revenue, an amount which (given the war-time and post-war inflation and the fact that land revenue continued to be assessed at the pre-war rates) was none too large. This legislation, though it did not meet fully the Communists' demand of transfer of proprietary rights without compensation, was obviously found acceptable by the tenants, specially when calculated with the high cost to be paid, if further resistance was attempted, in view of the new and effective tough line adopted by the administration,³⁷⁹ and no further resistance

378. Interviews with G.S. Randhawa and Jagir Singh Joga.

379. G.S. Randhawa stated the issue thus: "The problem was how to face Rau, what tactical line to follow with Rau. Earlier, when there was the Ministry, whether Rarewala's or Raghbir Singh's, when there was no administration worth the name, and the two groups were fighting amongst themselves, even before the police started out on their job, we were in the know and prepared to take action. But when Rau came, with Janak Raj as CID Officer, and revamped the administration, and those elements in the administration who were sympathetic to us were not there, then we could not stand up to the repression. We could not confront them squarely. Besides the legislation giving land to the tenants had meant that occupancy tenants as well as tenants-at-will whose names were recorded in the girdawari became owners after paying the required compensation.

was reported.³⁸⁰ The combination of connections and containment led to the end of the long-drawn struggle of the muzaras for restoration of their hereditary proprietary rights.³⁸¹

This period also coincided with the merger of the Lal Communist Party with the CPI, and this too meant that 'left adventurism', i.e., armed struggle, had to be given up, even in theory, since the CPI was just recovering from the debacle of the post-1948 line of armed struggle that it had followed from 1948-51. All told, for a variety of reasons, the continuation of the muzara movement, in the form that it had existed, became unviable.

380. Another act which was passed at the same time restricted the amount of land that landlords could retain to 100 acres, and gave tenants-at-will the right to acquire the surplus land by paying compensation amounting to 90 times the land revenue. The Communists probably had a greater chance of organising resistance around this issue, since the amount of compensation was quite substantial, but then their movement had been based mainly on the occupancy tenants who were not willing to fight any more, and the tenants-at-will have only begun to be organised at a very late stage and did not as yet have enough strength to resist. Besides, among them, too, the prospect of acquiring land by paying compensation, and that too in reasonable instalments, appears to have been sufficient to prevent the growth of any organised movement. Interviews with G.S. Randhawa and Jagir Singh Joga.

381. Interview with Baba Bachhitar Singh. In response to the question: how did the movement come to an end, Baba Bachhitar Singh said: "It came to an end because the tenants' demands were accepted." Jagir Singh Joga echoes the same: Once the legislation was passed, it became very difficult for us to continue the movement, because most occupancy tenants preferred to pay 12 times the land revenue, which did not amount to very much, and become owners of their land." Interview.

The Communists continued, however, to condemn the new agrarian legislation as inadequate because biswedars' lands were not being confiscated without compensation,³⁸² though admittedly the level of compensation was pretty low and by and large acceptable to the peasantry.³⁸³ Clearly, in their framework of reference there was no room for a bourgeois reformist state that actually carried out land reform and they had no theoretical means of absorbing this policy that had come about as a result of the shift in the balance of class forces following independence and they continued, therefore, to harp, in an increasingly unconvincing and perhaps ritualistic manner, on the inadequacy and meaninglessness of these reforms. This resulted in their growing isolation from the peasants, a process that was also furthered by their opportunist alliances with the right-wing and communal political groups, and desertion of their erstwhile comrades-in-arms in the muzara movement and the Praja Mandal,

382. The Communists insisted that no compensation be paid, while the government insisted that the Constitution did not allow them to accept this proposal and nominal compensation had to be included in the legislation. See, for example, All India Kisan Sabha Bulletin, Vol.I, Nos.3 and 5, September and December 1952 and Vol.II, Nos.1 and 2, January and February 1953. Brish Bhan had an interesting comment on the Communists' insistence on 'no compensation': "Sometimes Communists insist on something that is not practicable, at other times they sacrifice even what is not necessary." Interview.

383. See footnote 381 above.

the left-wing Congress group led by Brish Bhan, who had stood steadfast in their loyalty to the muzaras' cause as well as to the Communists and had been as vocal and adamant as the Communists in projecting the muzara issue³⁸⁴ and had in fact paid the political price of being left out in the cold, because of their links with the Communists, when the first ministry had been formed in 1949.³⁸⁵ Also, the pressure of this group had been greatly instrumental in encouraging the government to introduce the agrarian legislation in question.³⁸⁶ Besides, on the

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384. Apart from the consistent support extended by this group since the inception of the muzara movement, even after the integration of Patiala into the Indian Union, this group had continued to fight for the muzara cause. See, for example, Sunder Lal's (Treasurer, PEPSU Congress Committee) criticism of the ordinance which sought to partition the land on the basis of one-fourth and three-fourths. The Tribune, 25 August, 1949. Another left-wing Congressman, Harbans Lal (President, PEPSU Congress Committee) charged the PEPSU administration with partiality for landlords and complained that the police were harassing tenants. He also demanded emergency legislation banning ejections. He also complained against the police arresting tenants in Bakhora village. The Tribune, 6 July and 9 August 1951.
385. Brish Bhan recounts how, when negotiations for the formation of the ministry in PEPSU were going on in 1948, Sardar Patel insisted that he drop Jagir Singh Joga from the Patiala unit of the Praja Mandal because he was a Communist. Brish Bhan refused, on the plea that he would not desert his comrades, and paid the price of being kept out of the ministry. Interview. Also see Walia, Praja Mandal Movement, p.193.
386. Apart from the legislation mentioned earlier, the Congress government, which came to power after the mid-term poll in 1954, had, under pressure from its left-wing, reduced the ceiling on land ownership to 30 acres. Brish Bhan records that as a result of the policies he pursued, he succeeded in alienating "all the landed aristocracy, businessmen, bureaucrats, liberals. Giani Zail Singh, etc., (the right-wing Congressmen), all opposed me.... The Congressmen after coming to power became reactionary, liberal, and looked only to their own interests. But I succeeded with Panditji's (Nehru's) help." Interview.

Communists' own testimony, they had hardly any ideological differences with this group of Congressmen, who were sturdily secular and left-minded, and, in the past, no political differences either.³⁸⁷ And yet, when it came to the question of functioning

387. The Communist leaders were unable, in spite of our repeated questions on this aspect, to pinpoint any area of ideological difference between themselves and the left-wing Praja Mandalists. Jagir Singh Joga, for example, in response to the question whether the Communists had any ideological differences with Brish Bhan and other left-wing Praja Mandalists, said: "Brish Bhan was of progressive views and had very good relations with us. He was not like Giani Zail Singh, who was different from the beginning. With Brish Bhan, we had no differences though he was not a Communist. Politically he agreed with us, and the reason he did not become a Communist was because, he used to say, he could not take the hardship involved in going to the villages, etc. In fact I was responsible for bringing him and his group (Harbans Lal, Des Raj, etc.) into the movement. When they were in Lahore I used to go to their college and give them political books. They joined the movement around 1937 and did a lot of work for the AISP session at Ludhiana, in 1939. They were lawyers and used to fight the muzaras' law cases without fees. In the Praja Mandal, we were all in the same wing. The other wing (Seth Ram Nath, etc.) were opposed to the muzara movement, but since we (i.e. Communists and left-wing Praja Mandalists) were stronger, the right-wing could do nothing about it." Interview.

Giani Bachhan Singh said in the same vein: "The Praja Mandal group of Brish Bhan, Harbans Lal, Des Raj, etc., was a progressive group, with socialist ideology, and gave full support to the muzara movement. They too wanted change, revolution but via Gandhian methods. Our differences were only over role of Gandhi, role of Russia, etc. At the practical level of the movement, we never had any differences with them. They did not even oppose our armed force. In fact, they agreed that there was no other way of fighting the biswedars' illegal use of force except by resort to force." Interview.

Brish Bhan too confirms the lack of ideological differences with the Communists. To quote: "They were all my comrades, working with us... we were mentally close.... We had the common objective of working for the overthrow of the feudal forces....(that is why) I made Joga the President of the Praja Mandal in 1948, to strengthen the left and radical elements.... I believed in left, extreme left politics.
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in electoral and legislative politics, the Communists' had no hesitation in allying with the rival right-wing and communal groups.³⁸⁸ The reason advanced by the Communists for this desertion of erstwhile comrades and supporters and defenders of the Communists and muzaras, who were responsible for the acquittal of all the Kishangarh accused, when they joined hands with Rarewala in 1952 in defeating the Congress ministry which included Brish Bhan, was that, since for them all 'bourgeois' parties are the same and the job of Communists is to exploit all contradictions in the bourgeois camp and play one group against the other to advance 'the people's interests', they bargained with Rarewala and got him to agree to give more

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I believed in land to the tiller, I was dubbed a Communist. I never had any problems in working with the Communists before 1947." The extent of the ideological similarity between Brish Bhan and the Communists is also shown by his acceptance of and belief in some of the more doubtful Communist characterizations of contemporary developments and personalities. For example, he says of Nehru: "He was a liberal bourgeois who believed in British-type system (referring to parliamentary democracy).... He was influenced by leftist ideas but also by Gandhi. Perhaps there was also some opportunism. He could not become a leader without Gandhi. He should have joined Bose."

Interview.

388. It is interesting that the Communists never formed a United Front, or had United-front type relations, either at election time or afterwards in the Assembly, with the Congress or its left-wing, though they at various times supported other groups, including the Akalis and Rarewala. In the 1954 mid-term poll, for example, Joga stood against his old comrade, Des Raj, and defeated him, while Harbans Lal, another left-wing Congressman, was defeated by Dharam Singh Fakkar. Interview with Jagir Singh Joga.

concessions to the tenants, by way of reducing the compensation recommended by the Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee, and on that condition agreed to extend support.³⁸⁹ Brish Bhan, however, gives a different version. He maintains that the Communists supported the Akalis in PEPSU because of an understanding arrived at between Harkishan Singh Surjeet, the Punjab CPI leader, and the Akalis, with regard to a seat that had been vacated in the Punjab Assembly, and which the Akalis agreed to give to the CPI, provided the PEPSU Communists supported Rarewala.³⁹⁰

389. Interviews with G.S. Randhawa and Jagir Singh Joga. To quote Randhawa: "There was a no-confidence motion pending and our support would decide whether the Ministry would survive or not. We said that we would support that group which gave maximum concessions to tenants." Jagir Singh Joga was more forthcoming: "We were told by the Party that we should support the Akalis. We had three members in the Assembly and they were crucial for the Ministry. So we said that we would support whoever suggests the lowest compensation. When Rarewala suggested one pie instead of one anna (the reference is to a bill which was to abolish ala-malkiyat rights of the ruler of Faridkot), we supported him. For us, there was no difference between the Congress and the Akalis."

390. "In fact", says Brish Bhan, "in 1957, they supported the feudal lords, even the Maharaja of Patiala, against me". Brish Bhan recognises, however, that the PEPSU Communists did this under direction from the Party, i.e., the CPI, and for that reason, he has no personal animus against his erstwhile comrades, whom he continues to regard with affection and respect, though combined with regret at the consequences of their "foolishness". In fact, he explicitly stated: "my view is (that) they should not have left the Congress. (If they had stayed in the Congress) they could have ruled the country. Then all these reactionaries, feudals, businessmen, blackmarketeers, bureaucrats and corruption would have been swept off. But unfortunately the average Communist was not politically conscious and educated, and in PEPSU they were interested only in getting the land." Interview.

However, even if we accept the Communists' own version of events, or the possibility that the truth lay somewhere in between or in both the versions, and that, while the reasons for their decision may have been the Punjab developments, they also used this opportunity to extract concessions for the tenants, their decision to support right-wing and communal elements in preference to secular political forces, which included a sizeable section of left-wing Congressmen, who were also committed to agrarian reform and had in fact already initiated the process, was a case of severe political myopia. The right-wing and communal group led by Rarewala, on the other hand, was astute enough to realize that, given the situation, agrarian reform was inevitable, and was therefore willing to use the Communists in their own political battle with the secular and left-wing forces by promising minor concessions.

The adoption of this myopic, even opportunist, policy helped in no small way, in the long-run, to seal the fate of the secular and leftward-oriented elements in Punjab politics and certainly facilitated the ascendancy of right-wing and communal politics. This was especially unfortunate because the Communists, at least in the early 1950s, did have a significant mass base in the rural areas, having functioned virtually as the rural or peasant wing of the Praja Mandal for many years, and the non-Communist left in the Praja Mandal had mainly concentrated in the urban areas and had no independent mass base in the countryside, just as the Communists had very little

in the towns.³⁹¹ As a result of the Communists' desertion, the earlier non-Communist left-wing Praja Mandalists, who were now left-wing Congressmen, were left isolated and their capacity to resist the ideological and political onslaught of the right-wing and communal elements seriously eroded.³⁹²

In the long run, the Communists were also the losers in this game, because they were too weak, on their own, to struggle effectively against the gradual ascendancy of the Akalis and other communal and semi-communal and right-wing groups, including right-wing Congressmen, and sooner or later found that, far from increasing their mass base, even among the peasantry, their earlier mass base was beginning to get eroded and their erst-while followers were becoming supporters of either the Akalis or of the increasingly right-wing dominated Congress party.³⁹³

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391. To quote Jagir Singh Joga: "Brish Bhan, etc., were town boys, and we (i.e., Communists) were responsible for bringing the kisans into the movement. They had no independent link with the peasants." Interview.
392. Brish Bhan expressed this isolation thus: "I remained a lonely man. It is very difficult to mobilise people for struggle on ideological issues. Those whom I educated and liberated, they (the tenants) betrayed us, they became just like other kisans, and joined the Akalis." Interview.
393. Interview with Baba Bachhitar Singh. Even in his own village, according to the Baba, Akalis have become strong, though earlier, in the days of the muzara movement, the Communist hold was so strong that Teja Singh Swatantar would himself be hidden in this village, as the police would not dare enter it. Brish Bhan in his interview records; "Those tenants whom we liberated have now become followers of the Akalis." Interview. G.S. Randhawa also confirms that the tenants became followers of the Congress and the Akalis. Interview.

As was most poignantly stated by an 85-year old grass-roots Communist worker to the author in 1981: "These people for whom we fought so hard do not even offer us a drink of water these days."³⁹⁴

394. Interview with Baba Bachhitar Singh. In fact, he went much further and said: "Today they (the tenants) are the new sirdars (i.e., biswedars). They are now rich and have left us (the party)."