

# Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919-22

GYAN PANDEY

In January 1921 the peasants of Awadh burst onto the national stage in India. Huge peasant demonstrations at Fursatganj and Munshiganj bazars in Rae Bareilly district led to police firing on 6 and 7 January. At other places in Rae Bareilly, Faizabad and Sultanpur districts, peasant violence—the looting of bazars (as at Fursatganj), attacks on landlords, and battles with the police—broke out around this time. For some weeks, indeed, many a landlord was too scared to appear anywhere on his estate. 'You have seen in three districts in southern Oudh [Awadh] the beginnings of something like revolution', Harcourt Butler, the Governor of UP (the United Provinces of Agra and Awadh, modern Uttar Pradesh), observed in March 1921.<sup>7</sup> The peasants' actions received wide publicity in the nationalist press, too, especially after Jawaharlal Nehru had been drawn into the Munshiganj events of 7 January.

Virtually for the first time since 1857 the Awadh peasant had forced himself on the attention of the elites in colonial India. The debate was quickly joined. The leaders of the major nationalist party, the Congress, who had been involved in some of the peasant meetings and demonstrations of the preceding months, now stepped forward to defend the peasants in the courts and to prevent further violence. Colonial administrators rushed to consider remedial legislation: 'It has for long been obvious', as one of them put it, 'that the Oudh Rent Act requires amendment.'<sup>2</sup> The Liberals, moderate nationalists who were moving away from the

<sup>7</sup>Harcourt Butler Colin., Mss. Eur. F. 116 (India Office Library, London), vol. 80: Note of Butler's interview with taluqdars. 6 March 1921.

<sup>2</sup>Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow (hereafter UPSA), U.P. General Administration Dept. (hereafter GAD), Rle 50/1921, Kw: Commissioner. Lucknow Division to Chief Sec., U.P., 14 Jan. 1921.

Congress as it adopted a more militant posture at this time, shared something of both the Congress and the Government positions. With local Congressmen, some of them had supported the initial organizational efforts and demands of the tenants. After January 1921, they were foremost in pressing for legislation to improve their conditions.

The underlying causes of the peasant protest that brought forth these reactions lay in a pattern of agrarian relations that had evolved over a long period. In 1856 Awadh was brought under direct British rule in order, it was said, to rescue the province from the effects of misrule and anarchy. The mutiny and civil rebellion of 1857-9, which brought some of the fiercest fighting and severest reprisals of the century, formed, from that point of view, an unfortunate interlude. After that the benefits of Pax Britannica flowed freely, towards some. Chief among the beneficiaries were the two hundred and eighty or so taluqdars who, for their part in the recent uprising, were now held up as the 'natural leaders' of the people. The taluqdars were mostly local rajas and heads of clans, officials and tax-farmers who had secured an independent position in the land before the British annexation, plus a handful of 'deserving chiefs' who were given estates confiscated from the most notorious of the rebels. On this motley crowd the new rulers formally conferred many of the rights of the landowning gentry of Britain. Three-fifths of the cultivated area of Awadh was settled with them in return for the regular payment of revenue and assistance in maintaining order in the countryside. And British policy was now directed towards ensuring the taluqdars the wealth, status and security necessary to fulfil this role. The extent of the British commitment to the taluqdars was indicated by Harcourt Butler when he wrote, in the 1890s, that for political purposes 'the Taluqdars are Oudh'.<sup>3</sup> By the Encumbered Estates Act of 1870 and subsequent measures, the colonial administrators even agreed to bale out any insolvent taluqdari estate by taking over its management for as long as twenty years—although this ran counter to all their principles of political economy.

Some effort was made to secure the intermediary rights of other traditionally privileged groups: village proprietors, coparcenary

<sup>3</sup>T.R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century* (Delhi, 1979), p. 198; see also Metcalf in R.E. Frykenberg, (ed.) > *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison, 1969), p. 147.

communities controlling various plots of land and privileged tenants of several categories. This was necessitated in part by the prolonged resistance of many of these inferior right holders, such as the Barwar Rajputs of Amsin Pargana and the under-proprietors on the Raja of Pirpur's estate (both in Faizabad district).<sup>4</sup> Legally and in terms of actual power, these intermediary groups retained something of their earlier position in the taluqdari as well as the non-taluqdari areas of Awadh.<sup>5</sup> Yet Pax Britannica and the compromise sub-settlements of the 1860s tended to work against the interests of the lower classes.

Generally it was laid down that under-proprietors would pay the Government revenue plus a further 10 to 50 per cent. Thus they bore the entire burden of any enhancement of revenue while the taluqdars escaped any new obligations. In the years after the first round of settlements and sub-settlements had been completed, the smaller under-proprietors lost more and more of their remaining rights to the taluqdars and, to some extent, to money-lenders and other men from outside. Many groups of once privileged tenants also suffered losses in the general process of enhancement of rents. The Government contributed fully to these developments. On the Government-managed estates of Mehdona, Kapradih and Sehipur in Faizabad district, for instance, several arrests were made for the non-payment of rents in full by underproprietors; and

where tenants held reduced rates only by favour of the taluqdar, without any legal claim based on a former proprietary title, the Government exerted itself vigorously to bring rents up to the level of those paid by ordinary cultivators.<sup>6</sup>

Among the tenants, then, Brahmans and Thakurs suffered a progressive decline in terms of favoured rental rates as well as the areas of land leased out to them. Yet the pressure on them was light by comparison with that on the Kurmis and Muraos, cultivating castes with a reputation for efficiency who formed a considerable part of the tenantry, numbering in all about a million in Awadh in the 1880s. In Rae Bareilly, in the decade following the first regular settlement of the district, during which prices rose only gradually,

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 131-3.

<sup>5</sup>P.J. Musgrave, 'Landlords and Lords of the Land: Estate Management and Social Control in U.P., 1860-1920', *Modern Asian Studies*, 6:3 (July 1972).

<sup>6</sup>Metcalf in Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control*, pp. 133-4; see also *Collection of Papers Relating to the Condition of the Tenantry and the Working of the Present Rent Law in Oudh*, 2 vols. (Allahabad, 1883).

the increase in their rents varied between what was described as 'nominal' and 30-80 per cent, and actually reached a 100 per cent in one or two cases.<sup>7</sup>

With the taluqdari settlement, the bulk of the population of Awadh (just under 11 1/2 million in 1881, rising to over 12 million by 1921) had in any case lost all their rights, which were unrecorded earlier and now excluded from the record. The vast majority of cultivators emerged as tenants-at-will on small holdings, or as landless labourers. In Lucknow district at the beginning of the 1880s, only a half per cent of the agricultural population held more than 50 *bighas* of land (a *bigha* = 5/8 acre). Six per cent held from 20 to 50 *bighas*, 11 1/2 per cent 10 to 20 *bighas*, 15 per cent 5 to 10 *bighas*, and 39 1/2 per cent less than 5 *bighas*. This was at a time when officials, who could scarcely be accused of liberality in these matters, felt that a cultivator needed at least 5 *bighas* to live 'reasonably'. The remaining 27 1/2 per cent of Lucknow's agricultural population were classified as landless day-labourers.<sup>8</sup>

The resistance of Kurmi and other tenants on various occasions<sup>9</sup> could do no more than slow down these developments in particular areas. Nor did legislation that aimed at providing a modicum of security for the unprotected tenants and some control on the level of rent enhancements, significantly arrest the general deterioration. The landlords had too many cards up their sleeves, most of them the gift of the British Raj itself, to be seriously affected by such paper threats. They collected more than the recorded rents, instituted a system of unofficial taxation whereby the tenant paid a large premium or *nazrana* to be admitted or re-admitted to a holding, and often ignored the law altogether.<sup>10</sup> C.W. McMinn noted in the 1870s that taluqdar power was still great, in some ways indeed 'more absolute' than before, but now (constricted to narrower channels) it had 'meaner developments'.<sup>11</sup> The taluqdars now concentrated their efforts on screwing up their incomes from their estates, without any concern for protecting old tenants and dependants or improving their lands. The peasants of Pratapgarh

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., vol. I, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., vol. II, p. 400.

<sup>9</sup>F.W. Porter, *Final Settlement Report of the Allahabad District* (Allahabad, 1878), pp. 47-8; S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, vol. I* (London, 1975), p. 46.

<sup>10</sup>See G. Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926-34; A Study in Imperfect Mobilization* (Delhi, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and the Raj*, p. 175.

described this situation in their own idiom in conversation with the Deputy Commissioner of the district in 1920. Referring to the *murda faroshi kanun* (literally, the 'law for sale of the corpse'), i.e. the law permitting immediate enhancement of rent on, or sale of, the land of a dead tenant, they said that a new kind of Mahabraham (the lowest among the Brahmans on account of the fact that he lives on funeral gifts) had come into being. The one object of this creature was to pray for an epidemic—just as the grain dealer prays for a famine—so that he might reap a rich harvest of *murda faroshi* fees. This Mahabraham was the landlord. 'Before the ashes are cold on the pyre this Mahabraham has to be satisfied.'<sup>12</sup>

To add to the misfortunes of the lower classes, population pressure on the land and the cost of living steadily increased from the later nineteenth century. In these conditions a very large section of the Awadh peasantry, both smaller landowners and tenants, sank into debt. As time went on they relied more and more heavily on their valuable crops, especially rice and wheat, to pay off interest and other dues, and the acreage under these crops increased. For their own consumption the bulk of the rural population depended on the inferior grains—maize, barley, *jowar* and *bajra*. One result of the growing demand for these inferior grains and the decline in the area over which they were cultivated, was that their prices rose even more sharply than the prices of wheat and rice in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> It was a somewhat paradoxical index of the social dislocation that lay behind the revolt of the Awadh peasantry after the First World War.

January 1921 was the culminating point of a movement that had advanced very rapidly indeed from its inception towards the end of 1919. Kisan Sabhas, or peasants' associations, were being organized locally in Pratapgarh from the early months of 1920. By the middle of that year they had found a remarkable leader and coordinator in Baba Ramchandra, a Maharashtrian of uncertain antecedents who had been an indentured labourer in Fiji and then a *sadhu* (religious mendicant) propagating the Hindu scriptures in Jaunpur, Sultanpur and Pratapgarh, before he turned to the task of

<sup>12</sup>U.P.S.A., U.P. Rev. (A) Dept File 753 of 1920; 'Report on Agrarian Disturbances in Pratapgarh', by V.N. Mehta, Deputy Commnr., Pratapgarh (hereafter, Mehta's Report), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>M.H. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India: The United Province\*, 1918-22* (New Delhi, 1978), ch. II.

organizing Kisan Sabhas. Led by Ramchandra, members of the Pratapgarh Kisan Sabha sought the support of urban nationalists. It was then that Jawaharlal Nehru 'discovered' the Indian peasantry and found the countryside 'afire with enthusiasm and full of a strange excitement';<sup>14</sup> and then that the Kisan Sabha workers of the Congress who had endeavoured to extend their links in the villages of UP since 1918, began to work in association with the organizers of these independent local Sabhas, especially in Awadh.

Before the involvement of the nationalists from the cities, the Awadh Kisan Sabha movement had already gained considerable strength. There were reported to be 585 panchayats (village arbitration boards established by the peasants) working in Pratapgarh district alone. In the month or two during which Rure, the village in Pratapgarh where the first Kisan Sabha was established, was a centre of the movement, 100,000 peasants were said to have registered themselves with the association. These early efforts at organization had received indirect encouragement from the sympathetic attitude of the Pratapgarh Deputy Commissioner, V.N. Mehta, who asked Ramchandra and other peasant leaders to forward the peasants' complaints to him for examination and instituted inquiries regarding some of the more tangible allegations.<sup>15</sup> Now, with the growth of urban nationalist support, the movement advanced more swiftly still until it had engulfed large parts of Pratapgarh, Rae Bareilly, Sultanpur and Faizabad districts, and established important footholds elsewhere. Its strength may be judged from the numbers of peasants who were said to have turned out for very different kinds of demonstrations: 40-50,000 to press for the release of Ramchandra from Pratapgarh jail in September 1920, 80-100,000 for the first Awadh Kisan Congress held in Ayodhya (Faizabad district) in December 1920.<sup>16</sup> Such estimates of the numbers involved in mass gatherings are of course notoriously unreliable. But even if we scale them down to one half or a third, as colonial officials did at the time, they indicate the rise of a movement of massive proportions.

<sup>14</sup>J. Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London, 1936; 1947 rpt), pp. 57, 51.

<sup>15</sup>Baba Ramchandra Colin. II (Nehru Memorial Museum & 'Library, New Delhi'; hereafter NMML), Ace. No. 610: RCXI, 'Autobiographical Notebook', p. 13; Ramchandra Colin. I (NMML) Ace. No. 163: 'Note' of 8 Aug. 1947 and incomplete letter of 1939, pp. 5-6. For Mehta's role, see also Mehta's Report, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Siddiqi, op. cit., pp. 146-7.

Matters came to a head in January 1921, and soon after, the Awadh peasant movement, by now bereft of support from its erstwhile urban allies, was repressed by a determined attack on the part of the Government. It was not crushed, however, and a few months later it arose again in northern Awadh in the modified form of an Eka (unity) movement. We write of this as a continuation of the earlier, Kisan Sabha, phase of the struggle because the same kinds of forces were involved in its creation, and there was the same kind of ambiguous relationship between the Congress and the peasant rebels.<sup>17</sup> The Eka associations were aided in their initial stages by some Congressmen and Khilafatists of Malihabad, Lucknow district. But they quickly outstripped their beginnings, spread out widely and became very militant. The movement was strongest in certain districts of northern Awadh where the evils of grain rents and disguised rents abounded. The peasant associations now raised the cry for commutation to cash rents and resistance to demands for anything more than the recorded rent. They called at the same time for non-cooperation with the colonial regime. Before long, colonialist observers were complaining about the fact that the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code had 'no provision for a whole countryside arrayed against law and order'.<sup>18</sup> Yet the Congress leadership spared little time for the protagonists of Eka, and in due course this new phase of the movement was suppressed by a large force of armed police and military men.

There could have been no other outcome, given the positions adopted by the various contending forces in UP in early 1921. In the following pages we examine these positions at some length, for what they tell us about different assessments of the nature of political struggle in colonial India and the role of the peasantry in that struggle. The urban nationalist leaders and British officials have left behind more or less detailed discourses on the Awadh peasant movement of these years, alternative perspectives which reveal, we believe, their basic concerns and the extent of their

<sup>17</sup>As the officer specially deputed by the U.P. Govt. to inquire into the Eka movement, Lt Col J.C. Faunthorpe, put it, 'The Eka movement, which commenced towards the end of 1921, is a revival of the *Kisan Sabha* movement.' *United Provinces Gazette*. 13 May 1922, pt VIII (hereafter Faunthorpe's Report), p. 273.

<sup>18</sup>Clipping from *Englishman* (Calcutta), 28 Feb. 1922 in GDI, Home Dept., Pol. Branch, File 862 of 1922 (NAI, New Delhi).

understanding of the contradictions and possibilities existing in the situation. There are of course subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, variations between the language, say, of Gandhi and of Nehru, or the comments of the Liberals and those of the young non-cooperating Congressmen of 1920-22. Again there is a world of difference, on the Government side, between the response of someone like the Pratapgarh Deputy Commissioner, V. N. Mehta, and that of H. R. C. Hailey, his Commissioner and immediate boss in Faizabad Division, or Harcourt Butler, Lieutenant Governor and then (after 1920) Governor of UP: the first undertook an intensive tour of his district, interviewed 1700 witnesses and collected a mass of material on the basis of which he drew up a 111 page 'Report on Agrarian Disturbances in Pratapgarh' in 1920; the second described the report as 'partisan', 'one-sided', painting peasant grievances in 'lurid' colours; the third dismissed it simply as 'long and crude'.<sup>19</sup>

An appreciation of these variations is important for a proper reconstruction of the history of the period. Yet, in general terms, an official and a Congress stand on the Awadh peasant movement in these years, can be discerned. So can a general landlord position, though the landlords of Awadh were so much the puppets of their colonial masters by this time that they have left no significant deposition of their own. As for the peasants who set off this debate, no one took the trouble of recording their discourse. A small collection of papers, notes and diaries written by Baba Ramchandra mainly in the late 1930s and 1940s has been discovered, and this is in some ways very valuable. But we have no peasant testament outlining the impulses that moved them or defending the actions they took in 1919-22, not even an elaborate statement from Ramchandra. The peasants' view of the struggle will probably never be recovered; and whatever we say about it at this stage must be very tentative. Yet it seems important to try and piece together some part of it, from the isolated statements of peasants found in the documents and from the only other evidence we have—the message contained in their actions. Without this the historical record remains woefully incomplete. And the exercise is relevant for another reason too.

Historians of India have long debated the question of how mass

<sup>19</sup>U.P. Rev. (A) Dept. File 753 of 1920: Hailey to Keane, 26 Nov. 1920 and Butler's 'Note' of 17 Dec. 1920.

mobilization occurred in the course of the struggle for liberation from colonial rule. In the earlier writings, nationalist as well as colonialist commentators tended to treat the 'masses' (in this agrarian society, predominantly peasants) as essentially inert. When peasant insurrection occurred and swelled the tide of anti-imperialist agitation in the latter part of British rule in India, it was for the colonialists a sign of manipulation by 'outside agitators', for the nationalists evidence of mobilization by popular urban leaders. Colonialist (and neo-colonialist) historiography has not moved very far from this early position, although the theory of deliberate instigation of disturbance among ignorant and unconcerned people has been rendered somewhat superfluous by the discovery of 'factions', their members ever ready, in their hundreds if not thousands or indeed tens of thousands, to rise behind 'faction-leaders' in the latter's quest for the prestige and profits of office.<sup>20</sup> Liberal nationalist and Marxist historians, on the other hand, have gone on to make significant new statements regarding the politics of mass protest in India.

First, research indicated that many of the most important peasant insurrections in the country were largely autonomous, and that the intervention of 'outside' leaders was a marginal and, often, a late phenomenon. But while it was recognized that peasants had at times exercised an independence of initiative, their actions were seen as having been non-political or at best 'pre-political'. More recently some scholars have granted that these actions were in fact (at times) political, in the sense that they threw up a challenge to the established structure of authority and sought to create alternative centres of power. Yet the previous view persists: indeed, it remains dominant in the universities and among others interested in the recent history of the subcontinent, finding expression for instance, in the common equation of the Congress movement with the 'political' movement and of workers' and peasants' struggles with a 'social' one. And where some acknowledgement has been made of the political content of the latter, a new argument seems to have arisen. It is now suggested, in what might be called the last stand of traditional nationalist historiography, that these sectional struggles, of peasants and workers and other labouring and exploited classes, were out of step with the primary need of the 'nation' at that stage in its

<sup>20</sup>Sec D. Hardiman, 'The Indian 'Faction': A Political Theory Examined', in this volume.

history—the need to advance the anti-imperialist movement.<sup>21</sup>

The validity of some of these propositions cannot be fully tested until a good deal more research has been undertaken into modern Indian history, especially in the domain of mass movements and popular consciousness. Yet enough is known already about particular struggles, like that of the peasants in Awadh from 1919-22, to raise doubts about certain long-standing assumptions regarding what has come to be described as the relationship between popular struggles and the Indian national movement. It is the limited purpose of this essay to examine these assumptions in the light of what we know, from secondary as well as primary sources, about the Awadh peasant movement. I shall first analyse the very different contemporary responses to the political events of 1919-22 in Awadh, and then go on to consider whether historians commenting on peasant revolt and Indian nationalism have not too readily accepted the viewpoint of the better-educated and more vocal participants in the anti-colonial struggle in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India.

### *The Congress Response*

In February 1921, when he visited UP, Gandhi issued the following *Instructions* to the peasants of the province:

Attainment of swaraj or redress of grievances is impossible unless the following rules are strictly observed.

1. We may not hurt anybody. We may not use our sticks against anybody. We may not use abusive language or exercise any other undue pressure.
2. We may not loot shops.
3. We should influence our opponents by kindness, not by using physical force nor stopping their water supply nor the services of the barber and the washerman.

<sup>21</sup> See Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (New Delhi, 1979) for the view that Gandhi and the post-World War I Congress 'aroused [the masses] to political activity', and for the above distinction between 'political' and 'social' struggle, pp. 127, 165, 183 and *passim*. There is a faint echo of this 'political'-social' distinction also in Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi, 1973), p. 515; and it is commonly voiced at academic seminars in India and elsewhere. The view that a peasant struggle was ill-timed, or diversionary, is expressed most clearly in Siddiqi, *op. cit.*, pp. 217, 219. It is also reflected in Bipan Chandra, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

4. We may not withhold taxes from Government or rent from the landlord.
5. Should there be any grievances against zemindars they should be reported to Pandit Motilal Nehru and his advice followed.
6. It should be borne in mind that we want to turn zemindars into friends.
7. We are not at the present moment offering civil disobedience; we should, therefore, carry out all Government orders.
8. We may not stop railway trains nor forcibly enter them without tickets.
9. In the event of any of our leaders being arrested, we may not prevent his arrest nor create any disturbance. We shall not lose our cause by the Government arresting our leaders; we shall certainly lose it if we become mad and do violence.
10. We must abolish intoxicating drinks, drugs and other evil habits.
11. We must treat all women as mothers and sisters and respect and protect them.
12. We must promote unity between Hindus and Muslims.
13. As amongst Hindus we may not regard anyone as inferior or untouchable. There should be the spirit of equality and brotherhood among all. We should regard all the inhabitants of India as brothers and sisters.
14. We may not indulge in gambling.
15. We may not steal.
16. We may not tell an untruth on any account whatsoever. We should be truthful in all our dealings.
17. We should introduce the spinning-wheel, in every home and all—male and female—should devote their spare time to spinning. Boys and girls should also be taught and encouraged to spin for four hours daily.
18. We should avoid the use of all foreign cloth and wear cloth woven by the weavers from yarn spun by ourselves.
19. We should not resort to law courts but should have all disputes settled by private arbitration.

The most important thing to remember is to curb anger, never to do violence and even to suffer violence done to us.<sup>22</sup>

These *Instructions*, directed especially towards the peasants of Awadh who had so recently been responsible for acts of violence, may be taken as the final Congress comment on the peasant movement in Awadh. They were issued, we may be sure, after

<sup>22</sup> *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XIX (Ahmedabad, 1966), pp. 419-20

much soul-searching on the part of Gandhi, and a long period of trial-and-error on the part of the Congress leadership as a whole. In the ranks of the Congress and other organized nationalist parties, there were still some who favoured a continuation of the peasants' struggle. But in the thinking of the most important Congress leaders in the province and the country, January-February 1921 marked an important turning-point.

Numbers 1-3, 9 and perhaps 8, in addition to the concluding sentence of Gandhi's *Instructions*, reiterate the deep Gandhian concern for the maintenance of non-violence in all circumstances. It is notable, however, that the specific injunctions contained in them flow not simply from an abhorrence of physical violence in any form, but also from a precise knowledge of the actions taken by the Awadh peasants in the course of the development of the Kisan Sabha movement over the preceding months.

*Instructions 1* and *2* were clearly intended to counter the kind of peasant activism that had broken out in Rae Bareilly at the beginning of January 1921 and in Faizabad, Sultanpur and elsewhere a few days later. Peasants had attacked and looted bazars as well as stores of grain in the villages. They had destroyed and burnt property: straw belonging to the landlords, crops on the landlords' fields, large quantities of clothes, jewels and so on. *Instruction 2* related to this. So probably did *Instruction 15*, for destruction is no different from theft in the eyes of the propertied and their counsel.

*Instruction 9* inveighed against the repeated attempts of peasants to liberate their leaders when they were arrested. Such attempts had led on more than one occasion in recent weeks to serious clashes with the police and to police firing. The most famous of these was the incident at Munshiganj bazar, a couple of miles from the centre of Rae Bareilly town, on 7 January 1921. On that date thousands of peasants converged on the town from the early hours of the morning. The common object of those who turned out was to obtain the release of a popular leader. Most came because of rumours that Baba Ramchandra had been arrested and imprisoned in Rae Bareilly jail. Some reported having heard that Gandhi had been detained there as well. The crowds probably also included some followers of Baba Janki Das, a local Kisan Sabha leader, who had been arrested in the district two days earlier and brought to the town but not, it was reported, before he could instruct his men to get people from Arkha (an early base of the

Kisan Sabha movement) to come and free him.<sup>23</sup> The numbers had soon swelled to an estimated 10,000, and the 'largest and most determined' section of the crowd was said to be at Munshiganj. The assembly was peaceful but refused to break up until their leaders had been released or rather, as it turned out, until a landlord and the police had fired several rounds at them, killing a number and wounding many more.

Just over three weeks later, on 29 January 1921, another man who called himself Ramchandra was arrested near Goshanganj railway station in Faizabad district. He had for some time before this been active in the area, urging peasants to refuse to pay their rents in protest against existing conditions, and advocating the justice of land being owned by its tiller. He had developed a large following—on account, it was said, of his radical preaching, *sadhu's* garb and, not least, his adopted name. When he was arrested crowds gathered at the station following a false report that the authorities intended to take him away by train. They lay on the rails and prevented the train from moving, and were dispersed once again only after police firing and the arrest of eighteen of their number.<sup>24</sup> By this time, indeed, such confrontations between the police and the people had become fairly common. 'Even when minor agitators are tried for petty offences', the Deputy Commissioner of Bara Banki wrote in an affidavit submitted to the Court of the Judicial Commissioner of Awadh in the case instituted against Baba Ramchandra in February 1921, 'enormous gatherings assemble at the court house with the object of intimidating witnesses or to rescue the accused.'<sup>25</sup>

Gandhi no doubt wished to prevent the recurrence of the violent incidents that developed out of these situations. But in the process he attacked the very action that had first demonstrated the organized strength of the peasantry to the British administration and, more importantly, to the peasants themselves. Towards the end of August 1920, the Pratapgarh district authorities had arrested Baba Ramchandra on what appears to have been a fabricated charge of 'theft'. Arrested with him were Thakur Jhinguri Singh, who was

<sup>23</sup>U.P., G.A.D., 50/1921, Kws: J.A. St. John Farnon to Dy. Commr., Rai Bareilly, 19 Jan. 1921, and A.G. Shireffs 'Note' of 29 Jan. 1921.

<sup>24</sup>Siddiqi, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-9.

<sup>25</sup>Motilal Nehru Papers, Group C (Legal) (NMML), File No. 44, 'King-Emperor v. Ram Chandra. Charge Under Sec. 124A IPC, Court of the Judicial Commr. of Oudh', affidavit submitted by C.W. Grant, Dy. Commr., Bara Banki, 10 Feb. 1921.

one of the men responsible for the establishment of Kisan Sabhas in the district even before Ramchandra took a hand, and about thirty other peasants. Their plea for bail was refused. Three days later, when the arrested men were due to appear in court in Pratapgarh, 4-5,000 peasants marched to the town to see them—whereupon the hearing was either postponed or held secretly in jail. Upon this the crowd marched to the jail and held a peaceful demonstration outside: it dispersed only after officials had made a number of promises, the nature of which is not clear. Ten days later, a larger crowd (estimated variously at 10,000 to 40-50,000) congregated at Pratapgarh, drawn there by the rumour that Gandhi had come to get Ramchandra released. Gandhi was absent, but the peasants refused to budge until they had extracted a promise from the officials to release Ramchandra the next morning, then spent the night on the banks of the river Sai and re-assembled outside the jail at dawn. As the crowd began to swell even more, the authorities lost their nerve; Ramchandra was released, spirited out of the jail under cover to prevent a stampede, and taken to a spot some distance away where from a tree-top he gave an audience to his followers. In their fear, officials had also assured the crowd that the grievances of the peasants would be investigated; and, if nothing came of this immediately, a few days later the case against Ramchandra, Jhinguri Singh and their co-accused was withdrawn.<sup>26</sup> It was a noble victory, but not one that Gandhi's injunctions would allow the Awadh peasants to repeat.

The origins of *Instruction 8* are equally hard to locate in the principle of non-violence alone. On the occasion of two mass rallies of the peasants, the Awadh Kisan Congress at Ayodhya on 20-21 December 1920 and a later conference at Unchahar in Rae Bareilly on 15 January 1921, thousands of peasants practised 'non-cooperation' by travelling ticketless on the trains, and, when evicted, offered 'passive resistance' by lying on the rails until officials gave in and permitted them to travel free of charge. In January 1921, too, as we have noticed above, the peasants practised satyagraha by lying on the rails at Goshanganj (Faizabad) on the day of the arrest of the pretended Ramchandra. Years later,

<sup>26</sup>Siddiqi, op. cit., pp. 130-3. Ramchandra reports that the case against him and his comrades was got up by the Ramganj Estate. See his incomplete, undated letter in Ramchandra Colin., Acc. No. 163, Subject File No. 1—'Papers Relating to the Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1921'.

Jawaharlal Nehru recalled with pride these spontaneous acts of the Awadh peasants. The Non-co-operation Movement had begun, he wrote, and

the *kisans* took to travelling in railway trains in large numbers without tickets, especially when they had to attend their periodical big mass meetings which sometimes consisted of sixty or seventy thousand persons. It was difficult to move them, and, unheard of thing, they openly defied the railway authorities, telling them that the old days were gone. At whose instigation they took to the free mass travelling I do not know. We had not suggested it to them. We suddenly heard that they were doing it.<sup>27</sup>

In February 1921, however, Gandhi advised, nay instructed, the *kisans* to refrain from such actions; and Nehru went along with him.

Numbers 8 and 9 of Gandhi's *Instructions* indicate that, in Gandhi's view as in that of the colonial regime, the peasants bore the responsibility for the preservation of non-violence—and for its break-down in any situation of clash with the authorities. *Instruction 3* shows that this was his view also of any confrontation between the peasant and the landlord. The instruction referred to physical force, but what was unique in it was the injunction against social boycott. It was precisely through this traditional practice that the Kisan Sabhas of Awadh had first signalled their arrival in the post-war political arena and through it too that they had considerably extended their influence. Towards the end of 1919, certain taluqdars of Pratapgarh who were guilty of severe exactions or other oppressive acts, found themselves up against such 'strikes' by the villagers. *Nau dhobi band kar diye gae*, i.e. the services of the barber, the washerman and other performers of menial but essential tasks, were withheld. More than a year later, in December 1920 and January 1921, this form of protest was still widespread in Pratapgarh and Sultanpur districts.<sup>28</sup> Now, after the outbreak of violence at various places, Gandhi sought to restore 'peace' by asking for the voluntary surrender of this time-honoured and effective weapon. No corresponding sacrifice was demanded of the landlords.

Indeed, the concern for the interests of the landlords went further. 'We may not withhold taxes from the Government or rent

<sup>27</sup>Nehru, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>28</sup>*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XX, p. 544; Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 111.



from the landlord' (*Instruction 4*). This was in line with *Instruction 7*: 'We are not at the present moment uttering civil disobedience [this 'further step' was adopted by the Congress only in November 1921]; we should, therefore, carry out all Government orders.' But it was actuated by an altogether different argument as well: 'It should be borne in mind that we want to turn zemindars into friends' (*Instruction 6*). 'We should influence our opponents by kindness' (*Instruction 3*). 'Should there be any grievances against zemindars they should be reported to Pandit Motilal Nehru and his advice followed' (*Instruction 5*).

The use of the first person plural pronoun in Gandhi's *Instructions* was a delicate touch, typical of the man. But the delicacy of *Instruction 5*—'Should there be any grievances'—is of a different order. The long-suffering peasant masses of Awadh exploded in anger in 1920-21 in a situation of severe hardship. We have referred above to the well-nigh unchallengeable position guaranteed to the taluqdars by the British administration and—what was perhaps seen as part of that guarantee—the extremely insecure legal position given to the vast majority of tenants in Awadh. We have pointed also to the more or less general trend of immiserization of the peasantry under the weight of a stagnant economy coupled with population growth, rising prices and increasing demands for rent, interest and other dues. The First World War and its immediate aftermath brought new and crushing burdens: rocketing prices, uncertain harvests, War Loans, recruitment and sudden demobilization, and finally a quite disastrous season of epidemic disease. Added to these was renewed pressure from the landlords for enhanced rents, and much increased *nazrana* and other cesses, backed by the force of legal and illegal evictions of *bedakhli*. It was against *bedakhli* and *nazrana* that the peasants of Awadh protested most bitterly in 1920-21. And officials admitted the legitimacy of their protest, and therefore hastily moved to amend the Rent Act. 'There is no doubt', wrote the Commissioner of Lucknow Division having awakened to a new awareness of his surroundings in January 1921,

that in the worst managed taluqdars' estates in this district [Rae Bareli] and others the tenants have been treated with such want of consideration and in some cases with such oppression by the landlords that one is compelled to sympathise with them.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup>U.P., G.A.D. 50/1921, Kws: Commnr., Luknow to Chief Sec., U.P., 14 Jan. 1921.

It was not as if Gandhi knew less than this official about the extent of distress among the peasants. Among the more prominent leaders of the national movement, it was he who first vowed to identify himself with the poorest in the land (in language, in dress, in the food he ate) and to work for their uplift, precisely because of his awareness of their misery. But in Awadh at the beginning of the 1920s, he sought to play down the significance of the clash of interests between landlord and peasant, for tactical reasons as much, it appears, as out of any concern for non-violence. 'Should there be any grievances': in other words, if there were any examples of oppressive acts or punishment or cruelty which a peasant could not possibly tolerate any longer, he should—not protest, organize a social boycott of the oppressor, or perform satyagraha by sitting and fasting outside his house, but—refer the matter to Pandit Motilal Nehru, and follow his advice. Otherwise, outside the sphere of these extreme, absolutely intolerable grievances, 'You should bear a little if the zemindar torments you. We do not want to fight with the zemindars. Zemindars are also slaves and we do not want to trouble them.'<sup>30</sup>

Presiding at the Rae Bareli District Political Conference a few months later, Jawaharlal Nehru seconded Gandhi. The meeting appealed to tenants and zamindars to live in harmony, and 'although the recent Rent Act [the Awadh Rent Amendment Act which had in the meantime been rushed through the provincial legislature] had made their position worse, still they should patiently bear all their troubles, pay their rents and keep the welfare of the country in view'. Before then, the Congress message had gone out in still plainer terms: peasants in Faizabad Division were asked to give up organizing 'meetings', as well as 'disturbances', and to leave it to Gandhi to win Swaraj.<sup>31</sup>

It needs to be emphasized that Gandhi and other Congress leaders were concerned here not primarily with urging the peasants to forswear violence and continue their struggle by non-violent means. They were urging that the struggle be abandoned altogether—in the interests of 'unity' in what they and later commentators have called the 'greater' struggle against the British.

<sup>30</sup>Gandhi to a peasant audience in Faizabad on 12 Feb. 1921, quoted in Siddiqi, op. cit. p. 180.

<sup>31</sup>Gopal, op. cit., pp. 61, 65. See also Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 179 for Jawaharlal's earlier expression of disapproval at the peasants' actions.

This idea of a united front with the landlords of Awadh in the anti-imperialist campaign bears pondering for a moment, for the landlords' dependence on the British (the 'slavery' that Gandhi spoke of) is obvious enough. Very few of the taluqdars performed any useful function in the rural economy, the man who was Settlement Commissioner of Rae Bareilly in the 1890s recalled later: most of them were 'mere rent collectors'.<sup>32</sup> The British relied on these rent collectors. They were 'a very solid body', 'by no means a negligible quantity' and 'the only friends we have', the Lieutenant Governor of UP observed in 1920. Or again, as he noted in a memorandum justifying a demand for five reserved seats for the taluqdars in the new legislative council to be set up in the province under the reforms of 1919, 'they live on their estates. They are prominent in all good works. They take the lead in all movements for the improvement of the province and make generous subscriptions'.<sup>33</sup>

The mutuality of interests found here is noteworthy, for the taluqdars relied even more heavily on the British. Wherever the Kisan Sabha spread in 1920-21 their authority crumbled at a stroke; very few did 'anything else than shut themselves up in their houses or leave for the nearest town and complain of the supineness of the authorities'.<sup>34</sup> Then, like the village dog who sneaks out barking when danger has passed, the taluqdars returned to battle in February-March 1921, adamant in their refusal to agree to a liberal amendment of the Awadh Rent Act and insistent on the sanctity of the *sanads* (or patents) granted to them by the British after 1857. They were good landlords, one taluqdar asserted in a discussion regarding the proposed legislative amendments; therefore, 'the tenant. . . should only be the tiller of the soil, and he should not be given any rights'.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Butler Colin., vol. 75: S.H. Fremantle's comment on R. Burns's talk on 'Recent Rent & Revenue Policy in the United Provinces' in *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (20 May 1932), p. 674.

<sup>33</sup>Butler Colin., vol. 21: letters to H.E. Richards, 2 June 1920. and Vincent, 10 Nov. 1920; vol. 75: Memo prepared for the Southborough Committee, 1 Dec. 1918. Butler 'screwed' Rs 20 lakhs out of the Maharaja of Balrampur for the War Loan, and got him a knighthood in return. He had in fact intended to extract 50 lakhs, but because of a misunderstanding the subordinate official whom Butler sent to Balrampur asked only for 20 lakhs (Butler Colin., vol. 20: Butler to Hewett, 19 July 1918).

<sup>34</sup>U.P., G.A.D. 50/3/1921: Hailey to Lambert, 1 Feb. 1921; cf. also Butler Colin., vol. 80, Butler's notes on his meeting with taluqdars on 6 March 1921.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid; note on meeting with taluqdars, 12 Feb. 1921. For the emphasis on *sanads*, see esp. Raja Sir Rampal Singh's 'Taluqdars and the Amendment of the Oudh Rent Law' (Lucknow, n.d.), in *ibid*.

Nehru himself admirably summed up the position of the taluqdars in his *Autobiography*:

The taluqdars and big zammdars... had been the spoilt children of the British Government, but that Government had succeeded, by the special education and training it provided or failed to provide for them, in reducing them, as a class, to a state of complete intellectual impotence. They did nothing at all for their tenantry, such as landlords in other countries have to some little extent often done, and became complete parasites on the land and people. Their chief activity lay in endeavouring to placate the local officials, without whose favour they could not exist for long, and demanding ceaselessly a protection of their special interests and privileges.<sup>36</sup>

But that was a later reflection. In 1921 Nehru and Gandhi looked aghast at the actions taken by the Awadh peasants against these creatures of imperialism. The symbolic significance of the Munshiganj events of 7 January 1921 when the landlord and the Deputy Commissioner lined up with the armed police against unarmed peasants and their local Congress allies, was missed. Or at least it was overlooked; for even at the time Nehru described the landlord as 'half an official' and wrote bitterly of 'the twins' (the British Deputy Commissioner and the Sikh landlord) who stood shoulder to shoulder at Munshiganj.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the Congress leaders looked to their landlord 'brothers' for support in the great struggle that was then raging against the British.

#### *The Colonial View*

A British intelligence official who travelled around a 'disturbed' area in December 1920 and January 1921 made what was in some ways a shrewder analysis of the political situation in the UP countryside, in spite of his need to justify the colonial power—which he did at every step. His assessment was based on a month's tour through the part of Allahabad district that bordered on Pratapgarh (Partabgarh in his report) and Jaunpur. Conditions differed here in significant respects from those that obtained in Awadh. Yet a strong Kisan Sabha movement arose in the same years, and there are so many features of similarity that this report on Allahabad, reproduced in full as an Appendix to this paper, may

<sup>36</sup>Nehru, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup>*Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 1 (New Delhi, 1972), pp. 213, 224.

be taken as representative of the official discourse on the peasant movement in Awadh at this time.

Intended as a general report (and a secret one at that), this Intelligence Department document is far less selective than Gandhi's *Instructions*. Its ostensible purpose was to establish the identity of the opposing forces in the countryside and the reasons for peasant discontent. The report is therefore to the point about the causes of the Kisan Sabha movement.

Everywhere . . . the great outcry is against bedakhli (ejectment), in spite of the large amount of marusi [*maurusi*, i.e. land held on a stable, occupancy tenure] land held by cultivators in these parts. (See p.193 below.)

The situation was far more serious in the neighbouring districts of Awadh where the great bulk of the tenants' land was *ghair-maurusi* (non-occupancy)- But even in Allahabad,

the idea prevails that the zamindars are avoiding the pinch of rising prices by taking it out of their tenants, both in the form of nazranas and by raising rents. When enhanced rents are not paid, the tenants are evicted, or in some cases the land is given for ploughing to others, without even the formality of an ejectment decree, (p. 193 below.)

The official's comments on the structure of colonial administration are equally frank. No one in the villages knew anything about the much-vaunted Montagu-Chelmsford reforms and the right of franchise conferred upon some people, he tells us, until Congress spread the word that votes should not be cast. But for the non-cooperators, the elections would have been 'even more of a farce' than they actually turned out to be. It would have meant, he adds in a significant observation, that 'the subordinate officials and well wishers of the government wishful to make the Reform Scheme a success would have brought voters to the polling stations as they did recruits to the colours and subscriptions to the War Loan.' (p. 195 below.) Elsewhere he pinpoints the contemporary social and political position of the landlords. 'The average zamindar is only concerned with collecting his rents and pays very little attention to improving the means of production, communication and irrigation on his estates.' 'The position taken by the zamindars is that they and their forefathers have been well wishers of the government, and it is up to that government now to help them out of their

difficulties'. 'Their only wish is for things to go on the same as ever', (p. 194 below.)

The major weakness in this report is the absence of any direct reference to the role of the colonial Government. The author plainly fails to make sufficient allowance for the fact that he is 'a European official', his assertion to the contrary notwithstanding. The point he wishes to stress most of all is that the Kisan Sabha agitation is 'not in any way anti-British nor even anti-Government'. The movement, he suggests, is basically directed against the landlords—and who can deny that the latter have in a large measure brought it upon themselves? He argues, further, in an interesting variation of the 'manipulation' theme, that the peasants are really quite ignorant of the larger issues at stake; they did not even know who Gandhi was, and actually said 'We are for Gandhiji and the Sarkar'. (p. 197 below.) We shall have more to say about this in a moment.

First, it may be noted that the intelligence official's clean chit to the Government and the Court of Wards, and his contention that the peasants were in no way anti-Government or anti-British, is contradicted by testimony that he himself inadvertently provides:

The idea is a fixed one [in the minds of the villagers] that a poor man has no chance against a rich man in a contest in the courts, and who will say that there is not some truth in this under the system of civil and criminal justice as it has come to be practised in India, (p. 193 below.)

He admits, besides, that the peasants blame the Government for all their sufferings during the War and believe that they 'supplied the men and money' but got nothing in return. Finally, there is in the latter part of the report still more conclusive evidence against the intelligence man's claim that the Government was 'above it all'. Here it is stated that when it was announced to crowds of peasants that Gandhi had ordered that no votes be given, 'everyone' obeyed. 'For the present . . . Gandhi's word is supreme'. 'What he orders must be done', (pp. 196-7 below.) That fact stood as an open challenge to the authority of the British. One should add that in a situation where the peasants were not even certain of who Gandhi was (as the intelligence report indicates), it is unlikely that they would always come to know what he had 'ordered'. Rather they must often have decided, by assumption, what his orders were. The point is of some importance for, as we shall see in the next section of this essay, in parts of Awadh Gandhi's name came to be

used by peasant rebels, without any specific instructions from Gandhi, to deal out justice to the landlords and the police—the subordinate officials as well as the well-wishers of the regime.

The intelligence official's remarks regarding the supremacy of Gandhi, however, tell us a good deal more about the nature of the peasant movement in Awadh in 1919-22. They indicate the important role played by rumour in the rise of such movements. It is a common assertion that peasants, scattered and isolated by the conditions of their existence, are incapable of mobilizing themselves for political action. They need an 'outside leader', we are told—a Peasant King or a modern substitute, come to deliver the people from their thrall. Yet a Just, and usually distant Ruler has often been known to provide the necessary inspiration for peasant revolt. The belief in an 'outside leader' can also be seen as the obverse of a belief in the break-down of the locally recognized structure of authority; and rumour fulfils the function of spreading such a notion as efficiently as the leader from the town. Here lies the real significance of the myth of the Great Man: 'someone' has challenged the powers that be, 'someone' has come to deliver. Hence:

The currency which Mr Gandhi's name has acquired even in the remotest villages is astonishing. No one seems to know quite who or what he is, but it is an accepted fact that what he orders must be done. He is a Mahatma or sadhu, a Pandit, a Brahman who lives at Allahabad, even a Deota. One man said he was a merchant who sells cloth at three annas a yard. Someone had probably told him about Gandhi's shop [the new Swadeshi store set up in the city of Allahabad]. The most intelligent say he is a man who is working for the good of the country, but the real power of his name is perhaps to be traced back to the idea that it was he who got *bedakhli* stopped in Partabgarh. It is a curious instance of the power of a name. (p. 196 below.)

A brisk trade in rumours arose in many parts of India during the First World War. Embellished, re-interpreted, modified and magnified as they were passed on from person to person, these rumours contributed significantly to the flood of mass risings in this period. There was a widespread belief that the British Empire was on the verge of collapse; the recruitment campaign grew ever more furious and fearful because its armies were decimated, there was a need to scrounge pennies from the people (the War Loans) because its coffers were empty. The advocacy of Home Rule took on a new

meaning. The German King was sending troops to help the opponents of the Raj, it was said. The world was turning upside down. The day of the downtrodden had come. So stories concerning the coming of the Germans caused 'excitement' not only in the villages of Allahabad (p. 197 below.); they accompanied a whole variety of other mass uprisings in these years—agitation among the Oraons of Ranchi and Chota Nagpur (and in the distant tea-gardens of Assam) in 1915-16, violent revolt among the Santhals of Mayurbhanj (Orissa) in 1917 and the large-scale rioting in Shahabad (Bihar) on the occasion of the Baqr-Id in the latter year, for instance.<sup>38</sup>

The 'power of a name' was evident again in Awadh in the first years of the 1920s. Both 'Baba Ramchandra' and 'Gandhi' came to acquire an extraordinary appeal. This is highlighted by the huge demonstrations for the release of Ramchandra on different occasions, and the success of the 'pretender' Ramchandra at Goshainganj (Faizabad), noticed above. It is testified to also by the 'multiple personality' that Ramchandra appeared to develop during this period: he was reported to be 'in Bahraich on the 5th [January 1921] by Nelson, to be in Barabanki at the same time by Grant and in Fyzabad [Faizabad] by Peters'.<sup>39</sup>

Rumours about the presence of Gandhi added to the tumult on several occasions and, as we have already noted, brought thousands of peasants thronging to Pratapgarh jail in September 1920 and to Rae Bareilly on 7 January 1921 when the firing at Munshiganj occurred. Less than a week later, the Commissioner of Faizabad reported that 'large numbers' of peasants were heading towards Rae Bareilly (in which district a big meeting of peasant delegates was scheduled to be held, at Unchahar, on 15 January), having been told by their Kisan Sabhas that 'it was Gandhi's order that they are to go'.<sup>40</sup> But with these indications of the response to 'Gandhi' and 'Ramchandra', we have passed into the domain of the peasants' perspective on the political events of 1919-22.

<sup>38</sup>See IOL, London, L/P & J/6/1448 of J916; L/P&J/6/1488 of 1917; L/P & 1/6/1507 of 1918; GOI, Home Progs., Conf., 1919, vol. 52.

<sup>39</sup>U.P., GAD 50/1921, Kws: Hailey to Chief Sec., 15 Jan. 1921. Nelson, Grant and Peters were the Dy. Commrs. of the three districts named.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., Hailey to Chief Sec., 13 Jan. 1921.

## The Peasants' Perspective

'We are for Gandhiji and the Sarkar'(p. 197 below). The peasants of UP, like peasant rebels elsewhere,<sup>41</sup> appear to have retained faith in the justice and benevolence of a distant ruler, the 'Sarkar', even as they revolted against his despotic agents. From this point of view, even the statement in the intelligence report on Allahabad district that the reverence for Gandhi was partly due to the belief that he had influence with the Government may be said to have had a grain of truth in it.

It is perhaps significant that in the Awadh of the early 1920s, those who spoke of Gandhi displacing the King at Delhi or in London tended to be men from the towns.<sup>42</sup> The peasants' own 'kings' were recruited locally. 'Gandhi Raj' would bring reduced rents, and

*Baba Ram Chandra Ke rajwa  
Parja maja urawe na  
(In the raj of Baba Ramchandra  
The people will make merry).*<sup>43</sup>

The peasants' Gandhi was not a remote, western-educated lawyer-politician: he was a Mahatma, a Pandit, a Brahman, even a merchant 'who lives at Allahabad', (p. 196 below.) Baba Ramchandra was more emphatically still a local man—a *sadhu* of renown in the districts of Jaunpur, Sultanpur and Pratapgarh, even before he gained a position of importance in the Kisan Sabha movement.

M.H. Siddiqi, citing the folk-rhyme regarding Ramchandra quoted above, rightly observes that the notion of *raja* (king) and *praja* (subjects) was 'so deeply ingrained in the psyche' of the peasant that he spoke even of popular peasant leaders in these terms.<sup>44</sup> The evidence from Awadh is indeed striking in this respect. Shah Muhammad Nairn Ata, the descendant of a pious Muslim revered by Hindus and Muslims alike in the village of Salon (Rae Bareli district), became 'King of Salon' when he joined

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Gopal, op. cit., pp. 49-50n; I.J. Catanach, 'Agrarian Disturbances in Nineteenth Century India', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 3:1 (1966); Daniel Field, *Rehels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston, 1976), *passim*.

<sup>42</sup>U.P., GAD 50/2/1921, D.O. No. 1620 from Office of Publicity Commnr., Naini Tal, 25 June 1921, quoting article in the *Leader* entitled 'Perversion of Peasants'; Siddiqi, op. cit., pp. 173n, & 178n.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 200, & 112n.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 122-3n.

the rebels in 1920. Jhinguri Singh, founder of what was probably the first Kisan Sabha of the movement in Rure (Pratapgarh district), was acclaimed 'Raja of Rure' and said to have 'swallowed all laws'. The pretender Ramchandra established his 'kingdom' in the region of Goshainganj (Faizabad district), held court and meted out justice before his arrest in January 1921. Thakurdin Singh, a servant of the Raja of Parhat, had done the same in some of the latter's villages in Pratapgrah district a couple of months earlier. In February 1922, again, it was reported that the leaders of the Eka movement had begun to assume the title of Raja and were moving about the countryside with 'large bodyguards of archers and spearmen'.<sup>45</sup>

The pithy rhyme from the Patti tahsil of Pratapgarh district thus captures a central feature of the traditional peasant view of the political world. There are rulers and ruled. And rulers are usually just: they must be, for their subjects to remain contented and for the normal functioning of the prescribed order of things. As we shall see, it was a view that at least some sections of the Awadh peasantry were to discard as their struggle matured between 1919 and 1922.

In the early stages of the Kisan Sabha movement, however, traditionalism was pronounced. One of the earliest forms of peasant protest to come to notice in Awadh during this period was the age-old practice of social boycott—*nan dhobi band*. The customary sanction of village caste panchayats was used to enforce the boycott among the peasants.<sup>46</sup> Caste solidarity and the authority of the caste panchayat appears also to have been of significance in the setting up of the Kisan Sabhas. The villages where the first Sabhas were established, such as Rure, Arkha and Rasulpur, had in their populations a large proportion of Kurmis and Muraos, 'superior' cultivating castes with a tradition of solidarity and independence, and it was among these castes that the Kisan Sabhas found their initial base.<sup>47</sup>

In southern and eastern Awadh as a whole the Kurmis were

<sup>45</sup>U.P., GAD 50/1921: telegram from Commnr., Lucknow to Chief Sec., U.P., 12 Jan. 1921; Mehta's Report, p. 3; S.K. Mitral and Kapil Kumar, 'Baba Ram Chandra and Peasant Upsurge in Oudh, 1920-21', *Social Scientist*, No. 71 (June 1978); extracts from the *Englishman* and the *Leader* as in notes 18 and 42 above. Cf. Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* for a picture of Pugachev, the Pretender.

<sup>46</sup>Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 117; W.F. Crawley, 'Kisan Sabhas & Agrarian Revolt in the United Provinces, 1920-21', *Modern Asian Studies*, 5:2 (1971), p. 101.

thought to be the 'mainstay' of the movement all the way from the last months of 1919 to the early part of 1921.<sup>48</sup> At more than one place in his notes and diaries, Baba Ramchandra reports how Thakur Jhinguri Singh and Thakur Sahdev Singh, the men who were responsible for drawing him into the Kisan Sabha movement, were aided in their earlier efforts to promote the movement by a number of 'honest, dedicated, self-sacrificing' Kurmis named Kashi, Bhagwandin, Prayag and Ayodhya. Jhinguri Singh, Sahdev Singh and their families initially had to bear the entire cost of looking after the thousands of peasants who in the early months of 1920 flocked to Rure to report their grievances. Then Bhagwandin, Kashi, Prayag and Ayodhya got together and proceeded to mobilize support from their caste-fellows. This they did so successfully that several thousand rupees were raised in a short while, and the movement gained a more secure footing.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, on the occasion of the great Awadh Kisan Congress held at Ayodhya in December 1920, the Rasulpur (Rae Bareilly district) Kisan Sabha leader, Mata Badal Koeri, raised Rs 6000 from the Koeris who had come to attend the Congress.<sup>50</sup>

By the winter of 1920-21, the Kisan Sabha had gained considerable support among tenants and labourers of a wide range of castes, including Muslims. Caste consciousness may now have posed other problems for the organizers of the movement: hence, perhaps, the need for Ramchandra's directive that after meetings, local Ahirs should look after and feed Ahirs who had come from distant places, and Kurmis, Koeris, Muslims, Brahmans and others should do likewise.<sup>51</sup>

The peasant movement in Awadh was, in addition, marked by a pervasive religious symbolism. At the early peasant meetings Ramchandra and others commonly recited excerpts from Tulsi-das's *Ramcharitmanas*,<sup>52</sup> the favourite religious epic of the Hindus in

<sup>48</sup>Ramchandra Colin. II, RC XIII; U.P. Rev. (A) Dept. File 753 of 1920: Hailey's 'Note' on Mehta's Report, dated 17 Dec. 1920; U.P., GAD 50/1921, Kws: Commnr., Faizabad to Chief Sec., U.P., 14 Jan. 1921.

<sup>49</sup>Ramchandra Colin. I, Subject File No. 1: 'Papers Relating to Peasant Movement in Avadh 1921', incomplete letter of 1939 and 'Avadh, U.P., ke kisanon par mere niji vichar' (14 July 1934). Translation from the Ramchandra papers is mine, except where otherwise stated.

<sup>50</sup>Ramchandra Colin. II, RC XI: 'Autobiographical Notebook', p. 35.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>52</sup>Nehru, op. cit., p. 53; D.N. Panigrahi, 'Peasant Leadership', in B.N. Pandey (ed.), *Leadership in South Asia* (New Delhi, 1977); p. 85. Old Congress workers of Sandila in Hardoi district recalled how Madari Pasi also 'recited *kathas* and held peasant meetings'.

northern India and especially beloved of people in this region: their own language, Awadhi, was after all the language of Tulsi-das's composition, and places like Ayodhya (a few miles from Faizabad), the seat of Ram's kingdom, very much part of their world. The phrase 'Sita Ram' early became the chief rallying call of the movement—used by peasants of all communities, Muslims as well as Hindus, to bring out supporters for meetings and (at a later stage) for resistance to Government and landlord agents attempting to overawe members of the Kisan Sabhas, confiscate moveable property or take other action against the peasants.

Baba Ramchandra has a good deal to say about the words 'Sita Ram' in the course of his fairly sketchy writings on the movement. He recalls, in a note written in 1934, that when he first came to Awadh, the greeting *salaam* (usually addressed by one in an inferior station to one in a superior) was widely used. He promoted the use of the alternative, 'Sita Ram', which did away with such discrimination on grounds of status, and thus earned the displeasure of 'many of the praiseworthy [*sic.*] and respectable folk of the upper castes'. Gradually, however, he writes, 'Sita Ram', 'Jai Ram', 'Jai Shankar', caught on in place of *salaam*. And as the movement developed, and his own popularity increased, it was enough for Ramchandra to raise the slogan 'Sita Ram': the cry was promptly taken up in one village after another, and thus in a remarkably short space of time thousands would assemble to see him and hear his discourse.<sup>53</sup>

Elsewhere, Ramchandra writes with still greater pride of the phenomenal power of the peasants' new slogan. On one occasion, early in the history of the Kisan Sabha movement, a confrontation took place at village Bhanti (in Pratapgarh district) between the police and the agents of the Ramganj and Amargarh estates, on the one hand, and Thakur Jhinguri Singh and his co-workers on the other. 'On that side were the wielders of *lathis* and spears', Ramchandra records dramatically. 'On this side was the slogan "Sita Ram". . . As soon as the cry of "Sita Ram" was raised, thousands of peasants poured out in waves from the surrounding villages.' It needed no more to make the police and other authorities change their tune: with the landlords' men, they left as quietly as possible.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Ramchandra Colin. I, Subject File 1: 'Avadh ke kisan par mere niji vichar' (14 July 1934); Nehru, op. cit., p. 52; interviews with the late Babu Mangla Prasad, one of the Allahabad Congressmen who had been drawn into the Pratapgarh peasant movement in 1920. <sup>54</sup>Ramchandra Colin. II: 'Autobiographical Notebook', p. 26.

In retrospect, indeed, Ramchandra attributes miraculous powers to the phrase 'Sita Ram'. He describes an incident in which a servant of the Amargarh estate forcibly cut a peasant's sugarcane crop for the purpose of feeding the Amargarh estate's elephants. As he returned with his loot loaded on an elephant, he was stopped by a Kisan Sabha worker named Prayag. 'The driver urged the elephant to advance upon him. But Prayag stood his ground, crying "Sita Ram". The elephant refused to advance.' Ramchandra goes on to report that in the part of Awadh where he was first based, the mango trees in the villages for several miles around bore fruit only once every three years. 'Because of the slogan "Sita Ram" they began to bear fruit every year.' He concludes: 'In the most difficult of situations, the peasants turned to the slogan "Sita Ram". And the slogan fulfilled their many different desires. As a result the organization [of the Kisan Sabhas] grew ever stronger.'<sup>55</sup> In other 'notes' written at around the same time, i.e. in 1939 or 1940, Ramchandra rues the fact that the peasants of Awadh were forgetting the two simple words that had brought them such great victories as the extraction, from the British, of the Awadh Rent (Amendment) Act of 1921 and the passing, by a Congress ministry, of the far more thorough U.P. Tenancy Bill of 1939.<sup>56</sup>

These reflections of a man who was by then inclining more and more to a left-wing position point to the religious type of consciousness<sup>57</sup> that the peasants brought to their struggle. That it was not just a 'half-crazy' *sadhu* who attached a special significance to the words 'Sita Ram' is attested to by other contemporary observations. The 'most serious feature' of the situation in January 1921, according to the Deputy Commissioner of Faizabad, was

the immense danger which arises from an organization which at very short notice is able to collect enormous crowds. The existence of a definitely arranged rallying cry is another danger.

The last part of this statement was later elaborated thus:

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 26-7.

<sup>56</sup>Ramchandra Colin. II, RC XIII; Ramchandra Colin. I, Subject File No. 1: 'Note' of 27 Dec. 1939. The 1939 Tenancy Bill received the Governor's approval and became law only in 1940 after the resignation of the Congress ministries.

<sup>57</sup>Ranjit Guha has drawn my attention to this concept which occurs in some of the early writings of Karl Marx.

One of the most powerful weapons at their [the peasants'] command is the war cry—Sita Ram Ki jai. They all say that when this is sounded, most turn out and to a very large extent this is done. It has become the cry of discontent.<sup>58</sup>

The hold of religious symbols on the mind of the peasant is perhaps also indicated by a story relating to the selection of Rure as the place where the first Kisan Sabha should be established. V. N. Mehta, after his enquiries into the movement, suggested that Rure was chosen partly because legend had it that Ram and Lakshman, the heroes of the *Ramayana*, had once rested there. Tulsidas wrote: '*raj samaj virajat Rure*' [the company of Princes honour Rure with their presence], and the people of Rure claimed that this was a reference to none other than their own village.<sup>59</sup> What better traditional sanction than this for the launching from here of a just and righteous political movement?

The idea of a just, or moral, struggle appears to have been fundamental to the peasants' acceptance of the necessity of revolt. Exploitation as such was not unjust. It was inevitable that some ruled and some conducted prayers and some owned the land and some laboured, and all lived off the fruits of that labour. But it was important that everyone in the society made a living out of the resources that were available. It was when the subsistence needs of the peasants of Burma and Indo-China were threatened in the colonial era that the fiercest peasant revolts broke out there.<sup>60</sup> It was similarly when the landlord decided to levy new and oppressive imposts in a period of considerable hardship for substantial sections of the peasantry that resistance was taken up in Awadh as morally right and necessary.

In Allahabad district, the intelligence officer noticed that there was a difference in the peasants' response on the estates of resident proprietors on the one hand and absentee owners on the other, and among the latter especially those of 'new men'—city *hantias* and *mahajans* and the like.

There is nowhere any genuine objection to performing *hart* and *begari* [forced labour] according to immemorial custom for zamindars who

<sup>58</sup>U.P., GAD 50/3/1921: H.R.C. Hailey to Butler, 24 Jan. 1921; and 'Note' by Hailey, regarding views of himself, Peters and Scott O'Connor (enclosed with Hailey's letter to Lambert, 1 Feb. 1921). See also Nehru, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>59</sup>Mehta's Report, cited in Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 115n.

<sup>60</sup>James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (California, 1976), *passim*.

are seen and known, but there is a tendency to kick against working for and supplying nazrana, hathyana, motorana [all relatively new 'taxes'] etc. etc. for distant and unknown landowners at the bidding of foul mouthed karindas and sepoys.<sup>61</sup> (pp. 192-3 below.)

The feeling against 'new men' may have contributed to the peasant revolt in some of the Awadh districts too. The animosity displayed towards one or two Sikh taluqdars in Rae Bareli, it was suggested in January 1921, was because they were regarded as interlopers. On the estate of Sardar Amar Singh, the peasants were reported to have accepted the leadership of a Rajput occupancy tenant who had been dispossessed following the Mutiny.<sup>62</sup> In an attack on the estate of the small Kurmi taluqdar of Sehgaon-Pacchimgaon, also in Rae Bareli district, the peasants followed the Kurmi descendants of co-sharers likewise dispossessed after the Mutiny.<sup>63</sup> The adoption, as King of Salon, of Shah Nairn Ata—descendant in a line of revered benefactors of the village—may also have been the result of a similar kind of sentiment.

There is evidence too of an acceptance of the long-established, 'fair' rights of the landlord—in Awadh as in Allahabad. A contemporary statement on the Awadh Kisan Sabha agitation made the point that the peasants' complaints regarding *begar*, *rasad* and so on were minor compared with their sense of outrage over *bedakhli* and *nazrana*: 'The former had been a custom for generations. The latter were of comparatively recent growth.'<sup>64</sup> In Pratapgarh, Mehta reported on the basis of his inquiries in October 1920, town-based politicians like Mata Badal Pandey had adopted the position that nothing more than the rent should be paid to the landlord; but 'the tenants have not yet fallen into line with them'.<sup>65</sup>

The 'Kisan pledge' to be taken on the formation of each new Kisan Sabha, which was drawn up in May or June 1920, still looked to the landlord (Thakur) for justice and protection from his oppressive agents (*ziladars*, peons and so on). It read as follows:

<sup>62</sup>*Nazrana* was the premium demanded from a tenant to allow him onto, or let him stay on the land. *Hathyana* and *motorana* were imposts levied on the peasants when a new elephant or a motor-car was bought by the landlord.

<sup>63</sup>U.P., GAD 50/1921, Kws: Commnr., Lucknow to Chief Sec., U.P., 14 Jan. 1921.

<sup>64</sup>H.R. Nevill, *Rae Bareli: District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, vol. 39, (Lucknow 1923), p.95; Siddiqi, op. cit., pp. 160-1.

<sup>64</sup>Faunthorpe's Report, p. 273.

<sup>65</sup>Mehta's Report, p. 57.

1. We Kisans shall speak the truth—not the untruth—and tell our story of woe correctly.
2. We shall not brook beating or abuses from anyone; we shall not lay our hands on anyone but if a *ziladar* or *peon* raises theirs on us we, five or ten of us, will stay his hand. If anyone abused us we shall jointly ask him to restrain himself. If he would not listen we would take him to our Thakur.
3. We shall pay our rent at the proper time—and insist upon a receipt. We shall jointly go to the house of the Thakur and pay the rent there.
4. We shall not pay illegal cesses like *gorawan* [*ghodawan*], *motorawan*, *hathiawan*. We shall not work as labourer without payment. If any *peon* catches hold of a Kisan (for forced labour) the rest of the villagers will not take their meals without setting him free. We shall sell *upli* (cow dung cakes), *patai* (sugarcane leaves for thatching) and *bhusa* (straw) at slightly cheaper than the bazaar rate but we shall not supply these articles without payment.
5. We shall not quarrel and if we do we shall settle it by a panchayat. Every village or two to three villages combined will form a panchayat and dispose of matters there.
6. If any Kisan is in trouble we shall help him. We shall consider other Kisans' joys and sorrows our own.
7. We shall not be afraid of constables. If they oppress [us] we shall stop him [them]. We shall submit to no one's oppression.
8. We shall trust in God and with patience and zeal we shall try to put an end to our grievance[s].<sup>66</sup>

Later a spokesman for the peasants explained, with reference to clause 4 above, that the amounts of *bhusa*, *upli*, etc. traditionally given, would still be provided free of charge; it was only anything demanded in addition that would have to be paid for as specified. And in October 1920, shortly after his liberation from Pratapgarh jail on account of the mass demonstrations of his followers, Ramchandra promulgated the rates of the customary dues, like *hari* and *bhusa*, *karbi* and *bhent*, that peasants were to pay.<sup>67</sup> It is in the light of the peasant's notion of a moral world, rather than in the simple terms of 'moderate' and 'radical' borrowed from elite discourse,

<sup>66</sup>This translation is found in *ibid*, pp. 109-10. The pledge appears over the name of Gauri Shanlcar Misra, vice-president, U.P. Kisan Sabha, but its language and Ramchandra's reconstruction of it in his writings (see undated, incomplete letter in Ramchandra Colin. I, Hie No. 1), suggest that Ramchandra and other local people had a major hand in drawing it up.

<sup>67</sup>Mehta's Report, p. 110.



that this position might best be understood. It is in this light too that we might comprehend the 'not altogether simple' demands<sup>68</sup> of the 3000 peasants led by Baba Janki Das and others, who besieged the house of Thakur Tribhuvan Bahadur Singh of Chandanian (Rae Bareli) on 5 January 1921 to obtain an end to ejection and 'the turning out of a prostitute in the Taluqdar's keeping'.

The religious-ethical aspect of the peasants' demands was evident also in the oath taken by villagers in northern Awadh to signify the support of their villages for the Eka movement in the latter part of 1921 and the early months of 1922. An elaborate religious ritual accompanied the oath-taking. A hole dug in the ground and filled with water represented the sacred river Ganga. Over this, and in the presence of all the villagers—summoned, officials averred, by means of abuse, threats and social boycott—a pandit recited a prayer. A collection of four annas or more per head was made, and part of this was used to pay the pandit for his services. Finally, an oath was administered and a panchayat formed in order to settle disputes in the village. By the various injunctions of the oath, the peasants bound themselves to:

1. Refuse to leave their fields if illegally ejected.
2. Pay only the recorded rent.
3. Pay rent regularly at the agreed times.
4. Refuse to pay rents without being given receipts.
5. Refuse to perform *begar* for zamindars without payment.
6. Refuse to pay *hari* and *bhusa*.
7. Refuse to pay for the use of irrigation tanks.
8. Refuse to pay for grazing cattle on jungle and pasture lands.
9. Give no help to criminals in the village.
10. Oppose oppression by the zamindars.
11. Take all disputes to their own panchayat and abide by its decision.<sup>69</sup>

There are several points of similarity between the Eka oath and the earlier Kisan Sabha pledge. In both a traditional peasant morality finds expression. There was a proper share that the superior classes might claim: this was to be met promptly. Crime was to be opposed (Eka oath), truthfulness and trust in God maintained (Kisan Sabha pledge). Yet both emphasized, at the same time, the peasants' need for unity and self-help, especially reliance on their own panchayats for the purpose of settling all internal disputes.

<sup>68</sup>Siddiqi, op cit., p. 154. <sup>69</sup>Ibid., pp. 201-2.

It seems evident that there was already, in the earlier stages of the peasant movement, a growing tension between the traditional structure of agrarian society and the peasants' insistence on implementing traditional practice. Thus rents would be paid, but only if receipts were provided. Customary cesses would be met, but not any demand for larger quantities than usual, nor any new and illegal imposts. More generally, the peasants would resist oppression by the police and the landlord's agents, although they might still turn to the landlord for arbitration.<sup>70</sup> By the time of the Eka movement, this tension had been resolved to some extent by the adoption of a more militant stand against the traditional system as a whole. A commitment was still made to pay rents as agreed between landlord and tenant, but this was no longer the case even with customary cesses such as *as hari* and *bhusa*. The peasants would no longer perform *begar* without remuneration, or pay for the use of irrigation tanks or pasture lands; for water, like air, was a gift of God, and the jungles and other uncultivated lands had for long (before the arrival of the British legal system and record of rights) been used in common. Finally, the peasants now declared their determination to resist any attempt to evict them illegally from their fields, and indeed to oppose all oppressive acts of the landlords. The surviving elements of deference, found in the expression of hope of justice from the landlord in the Kisan Sabha pledge, had disappeared.

This change of tone reflects another feature of the powerful peasant movement under discussion, its ability to overcome some of its own traditionalist limitations. Seeing how their landlords had acted, the Awadh peasants were learning to defend their interests. Many of the old links between the landlords and their tenants, labourers and other servants, had been eroded by the imposition of British order, the registration of rights, rigorous collection of rent, revenue and interest, the enforcement of all this in the courts of law, and most recently the exceptional pressure brought to bear on the peasantry during the First World War. Now, with the emergence of the Kisan Sabhas (working at times in association with Congress and Liberal volunteers) and the later Eka associations, the peasants' subservience broke down further.

<sup>70</sup>At another level the use of the traditional greeting 'Sita Ram' reflected the same tension—since it was promoted in part to do away with the peasant's consciousness of hierarchy and attitude of deference, and was opposed (as we have observed) by members of the more privileged classes.

Soon they launched into a more open attack on the old order. The movement had entered upon a significant new phase.

For the beginnings of this phase we have to look back to the events of December 1920 and January 1921. The great Kisan Congress at Ayodhya on 20 and 21 December 1920, attended by some 80-100,000 peasants, appears to have marked the turning point. After the Congress, the peasants first lay on the rails until they were permitted to travel home on the trains without purchasing tickets; then, back in their villages, took to protracted discussion of the events and decisions of the meeting 'in the local panchaits [panchayats] which have since been formed in almost every village'.<sup>71</sup> For the first time, an official commented, these villagers 'had begun to realise the power of an united peasantry—to realise that they themselves had the remedy of the most flagrant of their wrongs, the illegal exactions of the landlords, in their own hands'.<sup>72</sup>

By January 1921, another official reported after an investigation in Faizabad division, while most tenants professed 'a certain amount of attachment to the estates to which they belong', they appeared 'firmly determined to obey their [Kisan Sabha] leaders'. He went on to comment on the mass meeting scheduled to be held at Unchahar in Rae Bareli district on 15 January 1921, at which it was said Ramchandra would decide whether future rents were to be paid or not: 'The organization of the tenants' sabhas is now so far complete that it is probable that these orders will carry great weight, if [they are] not implicitly obeyed'.<sup>73</sup> As in Allahabad, a new authority had arisen. 'Gandhi's word is supreme.' Baba Ramchandra will be 'implicitly obeyed'.

As it happened, the peasants did not wait for the word of Gandhi, or of Ramchandra who was by this time working in close association with the leaders of the Non-cooperation Movement. It is evident that the presence of Gandhi and the Congress, and rumours regarding Gandhi's achievements in Champaran, were an important source of inspiration to the Awadh peasant in these years. The support of local Congressmen, Khilafatists and Liberals, and the intervention of men like Jawaharlal Nehru was also of consequence, helping to further inject the Kisan Sabhas with

<sup>71</sup>U.P. GAD 50/1921, Kws: St. John Farnon, Dy. Commnr., Rae Bareli, 19 Jan. 1921.

<sup>72</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., Commnr., Faizabad to Chief Sec., U.P., 14 Jan. 1921.

nationalist symbols and slogans and of course giving them wider publicity. Yet, one must not exaggerate the role of the urban politician in the growth of the movement. Any suggestion that it was the Congress (or the Liberals) who politicized the peasantry and thus drew the Awadh peasant into the wider campaign against the British Raj, is belied by timing of the peasants' revolt and the violence of their actions.

It is clear that masses of peasants returned from the Ayodhya Congress with their own unexpected interpretation of the stated purpose of the gathering: 'to end landlord atrocities'. Ramchandra had appeared at the Congress bound in ropes, a dramatic gesture alluding to the bondage of the Awadh peasantry. Before the end of the conference he agreed to throw off his ropes since 'owing to the gathering, ejectment had already been done away with'.<sup>74</sup> The peasant audience took this act literally. Ejectment symbolized the oppressive authority of the landlords, and over the next three months this authority was attacked time and time again. The period saw widespread rioting in Rae Bareli, Faizabad and Sultanpur districts, and the extension of protest into other areas over matters that had not until then been brought into contention.

From the Faizabad division, officials reported a 'general refusal' to till the landlord's *sir* in Pratapgarh, Sultanpur and parts of Faizabad district.<sup>75</sup> The Raja of Pratapgarh, a leading taluqdar, received confirmation of the changed character of the struggle in January 1921 when he found tenants refusing his 'liberal' offer of fourteen-year leases which they had a short while earlier readily accepted. Around the same time, protests were beginning to be heard against demands for *rasad* and *begar* in Bara Banki, a district that had remained largely unaffected by the Kisan Sabha movement until then.<sup>76</sup>

In January 1921 there were also several instances of attacks on landlord property. These were concentrated in Rae Bareli district and the Akbarpur and Tanda tehsils of Faizabad district, but occurred elsewhere too. In Rae Bareli large bands appeared in several estates, destroying the taluqdars' crops and looting and destroying their storage places. 'From 5 January for some days the

<sup>74</sup>Siddiqi, op cit., pp. 148-9.

<sup>75</sup>Sir. land held by the landowner under title of personal cultivation.

<sup>76</sup>U.P. GAD 50/1921 Kws: letters of Commnr., Faizabad and Lucknow Division to Chief Sec., U.P., 14 Jan. 1921.

district was practically in a state of anarchy.' In Pratapgarh there was an assault on the *ziladar* of Raja Bahadur Pratap Bahadur Singh. In Faizabad the terminal weeks of 1920 and the early days of 1921 brought isolated attacks on the servants of taluqdars, and the looting and burning of their straw. Then, following a meeting on 12 January 1921, which led to an attack on and the looting of the zamindars of Dankara, widespread rioting broke out in the district. Bands of 500-1000 men, women and children marched from place to place for the next two days, settling scores with their enemies.<sup>77</sup>

By this time, as we have already observed, many of the lower castes and landless labourers were involved in the agitation. At Fursatganj and Munshiganj bazars in Rae Bareilly district, where police firing occurred on 6 and 7 January 1921 respectively, the multi-caste composition of the crowds was especially noted. Among these crowds were numbers of Pasis and members of other 'criminal' tribes who constituted a substantial section of the labouring population of the district. The prominence of the latter was attested to again by the official view that they were responsible for the 'indiscriminate' looting of village bazars and the concentration of rioting in the south-eastern tehsils of Rae Bareilly.

In Faizabad, it was reported, Brahmans and Thakurs were not 'generally' in the movement, but 'all the lower castes are affected'. The rioters were said to consist chiefly of Ahirs, Bhars, Lunias and the untouchable Pasis and Chamars, i.e. the castes that provided the majority of the small tenants and agricultural labourers. Deo Narain, one of the two major Kisan Sabha leaders active in the district (the other was Kedar Nath), appears to have concentrated his propaganda efforts among the *halwas* (labourers) of the Brahman and Thakur zamindars and tenants, organizing them into numerous Kisan Sabhas. Consequently Pasis, Chamars, Lunias and other labouring castes were to the fore in the riots in Akbarpur and Tanda tehsils: they plundered the houses of high-caste villagers and their women too came out to attack the high-caste women.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup>Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>78</sup>U.P., GAD 50/1921 Kws: St. John Farnon to Dy. Commr., Rae Bareilly, 19 Jan. 1921; U.P. GAD 50/3/21: telegram from Commr. of Faizabad to U.P.A.O., Lucknow, 16 Jan. 1921; and L. Porter to Governor, 19 Jan. 1921, report of interview with Raja Tawaqul Husain of Pirpur; also Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 166 and Panigrahi, op. cit., p. 95. C.A. Bayly has noticed the same sort of development in the neighbouring Allahabad district: by December 1920, he writes, the 'enraged lower peasantry had been joined by landless labourers.

The interests of the landless labourers and the smaller, unprotected tenants of Awadh converged to a large extent. And after December 1920, the actions of the peasants highlighted the concerns of these sections of the rural poor. Their attacks were extended to the bazars and other points where wealth was concentrated. The chief targets were the *banias* (merchants) who had exploited the difficult times to make large profits, but *sunars* (goldsmiths), weavers and others who were thought to have profited from the situation were also attacked in some places. Stores of grain belonging to the taluqdars were looted and destroyed. The houses of upper caste and prosperous villagers were attacked, and quantities of clothes, jewels and so on burnt and destroyed.<sup>79</sup>

At this more advanced stage of the struggle, the peasants also identified more clearly the forces that were ranged against them.<sup>80</sup> In Faizabad the targets of the peasants' violence spread out from the taluqdars and their direct agents to patwaris,<sup>81</sup> small zamindars, large cultivators and the high castes in general. They now covered all those who were on the side of the 'enemy'. This explains the attacks on upper-caste tenants, for as the Commissioner of Faizabad observed, many of these in Faizabad (and in Sultanpur) belonged to 'the same clans as the landlords' and 'opposed the formation of Sabhas in their villages'. Indeed, at this stage the higher castes in Faizabad turned more openly against the movement, welcomed the police, and on the latter's arrival 'plucked up spirit' to defend their property.<sup>82</sup>

suddenly caught by the rise in prices and the sharp turn of the labour market against them after the good months following the influenza epidemic of 1918. Offences against the liquor laws and attacks on the police by Pasis became frequent and in north Allahabad and Patti [Pratapgarh district] disorderly 'swarajya' crowds composed of unemployed Pasi and Chamar labourers became increasingly active during the next six months.' Bayly, 'The Development of Political Organization in the Allahabad Locality'. (Oxford D. Phil. thesis, 1970, pp. 369-71, 382.)

<sup>79</sup>U.P. GAD 50/3/1921; Siddiqi, op. cit., pp. 151-3, 165.

<sup>80</sup>Siddiqi seems to accept the contemporary officials' view that the peasants were 'indiscriminate' in their attacks, and describes the local Sabhas as becoming 'totally anarchic' 'at the level of action' (ibid., p. 154). Yet the weight of the evidence points to a quite different conclusion, in spite of the instance Siddiqi singles out of an attack on weavers by 'softie ten men'. (Ibid., pp. 150, 153.)

<sup>81</sup>In Awadh the patwari was looked upon as a servant of the landlord though he also performed several duties for the Government. Metcalf, Ldw/, *Landlords and the Rai*, pp. 302-3.

<sup>82</sup>U.P., GAD 50/3/21; Commr. of Faizabad to Chief Sec., U.P., 24 Jan. 1921; & U.P., GAD 50/1921 Kws: Commr. of Faizabad's telegram and letter of 16 & 17 Jan. 1921; also Panigrahi, op. at., p. 97.

It was in the very nature of these developments that the peasant rebels should soon come into direct confrontation with the law-enforcing authorities, who were unquestionably on the side of their enemies. An official diagnosis suggested in February 1921 that

the kisans have come to appreciate the strength of numbers and having successfully defied the landlords are quite ready to defy Government authority. They have to a large extent lost all fear of the police.

It also reported a growing feeling of antagonism towards Europeans and the abuse of policemen for deserting their countrymen and serving an alien race. An important part of the local Kisan Sabha propaganda at this stage declared the taluqdars to be 'evil creations' of the Government; or, alternatively, described the Government as being 'in league with taluqdars, as guilty of murders and crimes, and above all as being condemned by Gandhi'.<sup>83</sup> All this had little to do with the Congress leaders. It was rather a product of the experience gained by the peasants in the course of their struggle. Given the structure of the colonial administration, the necessity of opposing European officials and the police arose from the very fact of opposing the landlords. This is evident from an examination of the circumstances surrounding even a few of the clashes between the peasants and the police in the Awadh countryside.

In the village of Sehgaon-Pacchimgaon, the peasants were aroused by news of the demonstrations and battles at Fursatganj and elsewhere in Rae Bareilly district. In this situation they accepted the leadership of the dispossessed Kurmi co-sharers earlier mentioned and responded to their appeals to unite against the landlord. After the third week of January 1921 tension increased in the village. The villagers set loose the zamindar's cattle to graze on his sugarcane fields. Then, on a bazar day, they gathered and threatened to attack the landowner. The police intervened—to be attacked by the peasants. 'One constable was killed by a *lathi* blow, which smashed the back of his skull. The others retired two or three hundred yards using their guns.' It was some time before the so-called 'ringleaders' could be arrested and the crowd dispersed.

Not long after this event another major clash occurred near the railway station of Goshainganj in Faizabad district. Here the

<sup>83</sup>U.P. GAD 50/3/21: Hailcy's 'Note' enclosed with Hailey's letter to Lambert, 1 Feb. 1921.

pretender Ramchandra, who will by now be familiar to the reader, was active for several days in the last part of January 1921, advocating the non-payment of rent and apparently also the doctrine of 'land to the tiller'. Propagandists like him, officials observed, made 'the strongest appeal to the low castes and landless castes who are always little removed from starvation and are told that a millenium in the shape of swaraj is coming through the intervention of Mahatma Gandhi'. The Goshainganj Ramchandra actually did better. Such was his following for a short while that he was able to return land to peasants who had been ejected and order the expulsion of others 'not true to the cause'. On 29 January 1921, then, it required a force of some seventy mounted policemen to arrest this one man. That afternoon crowds gathered thinking that he was to be taken away by a train at that time, and lay on the tracks to prevent the train from moving. When a large police force came forward to remove them, the peasants responded by attacking them with bricks lying near the station. The police had to fire thirty-three rounds before the crowds dispersed.

Later, in March 1921, the familiar sequence of mobilization against a landlord (in this case a widowed landlady) and then against the police when they intervened, occurred at Karhaiya Bazar in Rae Bareilly district. In this area Brijpal Singh, a demobilized soldier from Pratapgarh, Jhanku Singh, another ex-soldier, Surajpal Singh and Gangadin Brahman, delivered numerous 'objectionable speeches' in the first three weeks of that month. A meeting, scheduled to be held at Karhaiya Bazar on 20 March, the weekly market day, was prohibited by the authorities, and orders issued for the arrest of the 'agitators'. But on that day, the peasants battled with the police, trading brickbat for buckshot, and rescued Brijpal Singh and Jhanku Singh when the police tried to arrest them. Indeed, the police were forced to retreat into the taluqdar-in's house and here they were besieged by 'a yelling mob of several thousand people'. The arrival and direct orders of the white Sahib, the English Deputy Commissioner, failed to move the peasants. They continued their vigil all night and maintained a barricade the next morning to prevent 'motors' from entering or leaving the courtyard of the house. Another round of police firing was necessary before the peasants withdrew and their leaders were arrested. Jhanku Singh who was shot during the firing, later succumbed to

his injuries, and at least two other peasants are known to have been killed.<sup>84</sup>

The transformation that had taken place in the Awadh peasants' struggle was recognized by the Magistrate at Pratapgarh who reported that what had started as a 'genuine tenants' agitation' soon assumed an 'openly political form' [*sic*].<sup>85</sup> In Faizabad, an official summary informs us, the result of the lectures delivered every three or four days all over the district by Deo Narain Pande, Kedar Nath Sunar and Tribhuvan Dutt was that

meetings are held nightly *in every village* and a regular system of non-co-operation is being preached. Cultivators are told not to go to the courts, or to the tahsil or to the police, and to pay no rent, [emphasis added.]

At one of these nightly meetings, at which two police constables were beaten and slightly hurt, a number of papers were confiscated from the speaker: in the main, these were petitions to Gandhi describing various grievances regarding the peasants' fields, but they also consisted of two lists of men to be appointed to the posts of Deputy Commissioner, 'Kaptan Sahib' (i.e. Superintendent of Police), Daroga, etc.<sup>86</sup> In Karhaiya, as in Goshainganj (Faizabad), there is evidence of the rebels having established something in the nature of a parallel government. Brijpal Singh and Jhanku Singh in the former, and 'Ramchandra' in the latter, held frequent panchayats and tried criminal cases. Some villages in Rae Bareilly even elected their own Deputy Commissioners, who then tried local cases.<sup>87</sup> In Tajuddinpur village in the district of Sultanpur, at about the same time, 'for a few weeks *swaraj* was proclaimed and a parallel government set up'.<sup>88</sup> It was a measure of the distance that the Kisan Sabha movement had traversed between the end of 1919 and the early months of 1921.

At this point the peasant movement in Awadh was more or less abandoned by the Congress leadership, and an emboldened admin-

<sup>84</sup>The last three paragraphs are based on Siddiqi, op. cit., pp. 160-1, 162-3, 168-70 and U.P., GAD 50/2/1921: Judgement of Khan Bahadur Md. Abdus Sami, Magistrate First Class, Rae Bareilly, 25 April 1921, in Criminal Case 69, King-Emperor v. Brijpal Singh & others.

<sup>85</sup>Report on the Administration of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, 1921-22 (Allahabad, 1922), pp. 31-2.

<sup>86</sup>U.P., GAD 50/3/21: L. Porter to Governor, 19 Jan. 1921: report of interview with Raja Tawaqul Husain of Pirpur, and Hailey to Butler, 24 Jan. 1921.

<sup>87</sup>Faunthorpe's Report, p. 273. <sup>88</sup>Gopal, op. cit., p. 55.

istration advanced to crush it—through the arrest of all of the most important peasant leaders, Ramchandra, Deo Narain and Kedar Nath among them, the widely publicized,<sup>89</sup> but ultimately trivial, amendment of the Awadh Rent Act, a sustained campaign of propaganda on behalf of the Government and a massive display of armed force.<sup>90</sup> Yet the movement was far from finished. Towards the end of November 1921 it burst forth again in the form of the Eka campaign.

The revival of the movement in this novel form may have owed something to an All-India Congress Committee resolution in November 1921 sanctioning 'full civil disobedience' including the non-payment of taxes. It was also encouraged initially by the efforts of certain Congressmen and Khilafatists based at Malihabad in Lucknow district, from whom it was suggested the movement got its new name—'Eka' or 'Aika' for unity. However, the Eka associations spread swiftly and it was not long before 'they got out of the control of the Congress people who were quite annoyed about it'.<sup>91</sup>

In Hardoi district, where the Eka movement first took root, tenants began to organize locally towards the end of 1921 to resist landlord attempts to collect more than the recorded rent. In Bahraich in early January 1922, there were two occasions on which tenants beat up *thekadars* (long-term lease-holders who collected rents on behalf of the taluqdars) and carried away the grain extracted from them as rent. Later that month bands of tenants were reported to be moving from village to village in the district demanding the immediate abolition of grain rents, through which the taluqdars and *thekadars* reaped virtually all the benefits of high prices. In Kheri district, the arrest of a Congress volunteer was the occasion for a demonstration by a considerable gathering,

<sup>89</sup>On 13 Jan. 1921, the U.P. Government telegraphed to various newspapers and to the Associated Press a press communique along the following lines: 'With reference to the suggestion that an enquiry must be held into the relations between the landlords and tenants in Oudh the Government is in possession of full information and has already decided to take up the question with a view to early legislation.' Further, 'Sir Harcourt Butler [the Governor] hopes as an old friend of both the landlords and the tenants of Oudh that they will avoid all action likely to cause a breach of the peace and will trust the Government to do justice.' (U.P., GAD 50/1921 Kws.) The Government also telegraphed all Dy. Commrs. to 'have intention to legislate published in every Tahsil' (UP GAD 50/3/21).

<sup>90</sup>P.D. Reeves, 'The Politics of Order: "Anti-Non-Cooperation" in the United Provinces, 1921' *Journal of Asian Studies*, 25:2(1966); Butler Colin., vol. 21, Butler to H.E. Richards, 4 Feb. 1921.

<sup>91</sup>Faunthorpe's Report, p. 274.

which besieged the police station and released the man. In the village of Kothi in Bara Banki district, again, the peasants' wrath was aroused; here a zamindar's peon was killed in March 1922 when he tried to collect rents.<sup>92</sup>

These and other such incidents reflect the force of the peasant movement as it swept through Hardoi, Bahraich, Kheri, Bara Banki, Sitapur and Lucknow districts. By the end of January 1922 the movement was very strong indeed in the Sandila tehsil of Hardoi district, and the landlords of the area more than a little perturbed. In February 1922 one police circle in Hardoi reported twenty-one Eka meetings in three days, with assemblies of 150 to 2000 people. In the same month Kishan Lai Nehru visited Atrauli (Hardoi district) in order to try and reassert a Congress hold on the movement. But he found that Madari, an untouchable Pasi by birth who had become the acknowledged leader of the Eka movement, was 'in full command'. Indeed at this stage, as the movement spread to thirty more villages, Madari completely severed his connections with Malihabad and shifted the Eka headquarters to Sandila in Hardoi district.<sup>93</sup>

Yet this symbolic and significant break from the Congress did not make the Eka movement any less 'political', even if we take the narrow view of equating the political with the avowedly nationalist. On the contrary. The official report on the Eka movement, produced by Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Faunthorpe, I.C.S., in April 1922, sought to draw a distinction on this ground between the Kisan Sabha and the Eka phase of the agitation. In the former, Faunthorpe wrote, 'the animosity of the peasants was directed entirely against the taluqdars and not against Government officials. In the Eka movement this is not so much the case.' The official biographer of Jawaharlal Nehru writes that 'though the Congress had little to do with the Eka Movement . . . the Eka associations soon began to pass political resolutions'. According to the police at the time, too, there was little to distinguish Non-cooperation from Eka in the preachings of men like Baba Garib Das, a Pasi turned *sadhu* who was active in Bara Banki in March 1922—perhaps the most striking evidence of all is Madari's attempt to extend the appeal of the movement at the very time

<sup>92</sup>Loc. cit; Siddiqi, op. cit., pp. 196-204.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 200 & n.; Faunthorpe's Report, p. 274.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 273; Gopal, op. cit. p. 57; Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 204n.

when he shifted its headquarters from Malihabad to Sandila. In order to do this, it was reported, he 'adjusted local differences' and urged zamindars to join the Ekas. In the weeks that followed, large numbers of petty zamindars did so.<sup>95</sup>

The provincial authorities in UP were in no doubt about the political implications of the Eka movement. From the end of 1921 they used their 'most autocratic powers' to break the Eka and die Congress organizations.<sup>96</sup> In Awadh this intervention again led to open clashes between the police and the peasants. When the police tried to arrest Madari in February 1922—having made 'arrangements on a somewhat elaborate scale'<sup>97</sup> for the purpose—several thousand peasants gathered to frustrate their effort. Indeed Madari was not to be apprehended until June that year, in spite of the handsome Rs 1000 reward that the authorities offered for his arrest. In March 1922 the peasants of Hardoi provided further evidence of their political feelings, when a large crowd of Pasis attacked a police party that was making inquiries about Eka meetings in village Udaipur in the Shahabad police circle. In the police firing that followed, two of the attackers were killed.<sup>98</sup> Ultimately the forces at the disposal of the Government proved to be too great for the proponents of Eka to match on their own. Confronted by large bodies of armed and mounted police and a squadron of Indian cavalry, the Eka movement went under.

### Conclusion

When peasant violence erupted in January 1921 to set off the debate on the social and political condition of Awadh, the British were quick to sum up its causes. 'It has for long been obvious that the Oudh Rent Act requires amendment.' 'In the worst managed taluqdars' estate . . . the tenants have been treated with such want of consideration and in some cases with such oppression by the

<sup>95</sup>Faunthorpe's Report, p. 281. Siddiqi argues that the participation of the small zamindars was "not entirely political". He quotes the instance of one landowner whose involvement was attributed by officials to a desire to advance his personal interests, but then goes on to tell us that most of the zamindars who supported the movement did so either because they were Khilafatists or because of 'the crushing weight of the revenue demand which made them join the ranks of the tenants' (op. cit., pp. 206-7). It is not easy to conceive of many choices more political than that.

<sup>96</sup>Reeves, op. cit., p. 273.

<sup>97</sup>Faunthorpe's Report, p. 274.

<sup>98</sup>Loc. cit. See also Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 204 & n.

landlords that one is compelled to sympathize with them.' The administrators themselves, fair-minded officials, representatives of a great empire, were above it all. Venerable justices of the peace, their influence would count, their neutrality could scarcely be called into question. The assessment turned out to be inaccurate. The days were gone when the Raj could pose as an impartial referee, standing on high and whistling 'foul play'. Local struggles tended more and more to get caught up in the general wave of anti-imperialism sweeping through India. Even as the officials in Awadh were making their pious pronouncements on the reasons for the 'disturbances', the peasants had begun to attack the symbols and servants of the British Raj.

The colonialists could never comprehend this development. Then and later their explanation of it was to be in terms of the ignorance of the Indian masses and the manipulation of them by self-interested politicians. Yet they needed no prodding to realize its potential consequences. They wavered for a brief moment in mid-January 1921, even asking the bigger and more 'responsible' nationalist and peasant leaders to mediate and bring their moderating influence to bear on the peasants.<sup>99</sup> Then they moved with determination—and 'sympathy' was less in evidence than armed and mounted police and contingents of Indian troops.

Other participants in the debate could not match such clarity of vision or firmness in action. It was a period of learning, of trial-and-error, and uncertainty all round—among the peasants as among their urban well-wishers. Gandhi and Nehru recognized and indeed stressed that the Awadh peasant movement was anterior to and independent of the Non-cooperation Movement, though there is evidence too of the interaction between the two and the strength one lent to the other. Hesitantly, yet surely, the Congress leaders were drawn into the conflict between the peasants and their oppressors. In the end, however, they came around to the view that if the peasants' struggle was allowed to continue, it might hinder the development of the national movement against the British. The interests of that 'larger' struggle, the need for 'national unity', necessitated the shelving of such sectional struggles for the time being. The argument appears to have a good deal of force in it and some recent historians have been tempted to

<sup>99</sup>U.P., GAD 50/1921, Kws: telegram from Commnr., Lucknow to Collector, Rae Bareilly, 14 Jan. 1921.

accept it *in toto*. The grounds on which they do so, however, require closer examination.

A united front of the whole Indian people—landlords and peasants, millowners and manual labourers, feudal princes and the tribal poor—in the anti-colonial campaign was scarcely feasible: no major struggle for change anywhere has ever achieved such unity. If, then, the statement is diluted to one urging the 'widest possible unity' on the basis of the only demand held in common by most Indians, the demand for Swaraj, we are still in the position of begging the question. What did the demand for Swaraj in fact signify? Is the idea of liberation from colonial rule to be equated with the narrow vision of the eviction of the white man from India? It is doubtful if a single one of the more important Congress leaders had a notion of Swaraj that was restricted to the simple physical eviction of the British from Indian soil. Had this been the sum total of the nationalist demand, the British would in all probability have been willing to submit to it long before they did. The concept of Swaraj had inherent in it the idea of greater individual freedom, equality and justice, and the hope of accelerated national and consequently individual development. Whether articulated by a Gandhi, as in his *Hind Swaraj*, or a Nehru, as in Jawaharlal's 'socialist' phase, or by the humblest nationalist sympathizer, the idea of Swaraj had built into it the dream of 'a new heaven, a new earth'—increased participation by all in the making of the decisions that affected them, reduced burdens (of rents and other taxes and imposts), an end to oppression.<sup>100</sup> The question then was how best to organize to bring this about.

The appeal to the need for *national unity* in the pursuance of this goal is plainly rhetorical. It needs to be re-phrased in terms of an appeal for *a particular kind of alliance*, seen as being necessary for the furtherance of the anti-imperialist struggle. It should be evident that the nature of the Swaraj that eventuated from this struggle would depend very much on the nature of the alliance (the 'unity') that was forged. From this point of view, the Congress' insistence in 1921-2 on a united front of landlords as well as peasants and others, was a statement in favour of the *status quo* and against any radical change in the social set-up when the British finally handed over the reins of power. The advice to peasants to give up organizing

<sup>100</sup>Sec Saadat Hasan Manto's story 'Naya Qanoon\*' for an interesting portrayal of such expectations.

'meetings' and 'disturbances' and to leave politics to the professionals, was a statement against mass participatory democracy and in favour of the idea of 'trusteeship'—the landlords and princes acting as trustees in the economic sphere, Gandhi and company in the political. In the two and a half decades following 1922, sections of the Congress did abandon this stance, under the impetus particularly of the workers' and peasants' struggles that arose in various parts of the country during the years of the Depression and after. But the main body of Congressmen stood by the position worked out by Gandhi and other leaders in 1921-2.

The sort of alliance that the Congress leadership settled on at that juncture was of crucial significance in determining the future course of the anti-imperialist struggle in India. Yet it is too easy to present a scenario of a dynamic urban-based party conducting the struggle, and at certain points making a choice between a variety of passive onlookers who might be expected to sympathize with their objectives. Referring to the debate between pro-slavery (conservative) and abolitionist (liberal) writers on American slavery, Genovese has pointed out that both viewpoints treat the Blacks 'almost wholly as objects, never as creative participants in a social process, never as half of a two-part subject'.<sup>101</sup> So, in the case of colonial India, the peasants have generally been treated as beneficiaries (economically) of an increasingly benevolent system or victims of an oppressive one, 'manipulated' (politically) by self-seeking politicians or 'mobilized' by large-hearted, selfless ones. Both viewpoints miss out an essential feature—the whole area of independent thought and conjecture and speculation (as well as action) on the part of the peasant.

From the stand-point of many an Awadh peasant in the 1920s, we would suggest, there was a Gandhi different from the one we know and a promise of Swaraj also different from the one that we do not so *much know as assume*; just as from his predecessor's point of view there had been, in the nineteenth century, a 'benevolent' but inaccessible white queen, quite different from the 'benevolent' Queen addressed and perhaps seen by the western-educated Moderate members of the Indian National Congress. This man, with his own peculiar expectations of Gandhi and Swaraj, jumped into the fray in Awadh in the years 1919-22. Beginning with petitions,

<sup>101</sup>Eugene D. Genovese, 'American Slaves and their History' in A. Weinstein and P.O. Gatlif (eds.), *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1973), p. 186.

and demonstrations against the landlords's agents, he went on to show his faith in locally-organized panchayats in preference to the British courts, to non-cooperation with the railway authorities and further, in places, to a campaign for the non-payment of taxes and attacks on the landlords and the police. At the very moment of Gandhi's imaginative Non-cooperation Movement, he and thousands of his comrades arose to present a parallel and powerful challenge to the entire structure of colonial authority in UP. They threw up thereby the real and immediate possibility of an anti-imperialist movement very different from any until then contemplated by the urban nationalist leadership. And to press their point they marched scores of miles first, in June 1920, from Pratapgarh to Allahabad, and then, in the succeeding months, to several Kisan Conferences to meet their Congress leaders and learn from them how they should proceed.

It was not, thus, an abstract question of whom the Congress might choose as ally, and then educate and train for political action. The peasants of Awadh had already taken the lead in reaching out for an alliance. As Ramchandra put it:

It was felt that if we could link our Kisan movement with some established organization, or gain the support of well-to-do [privileged?] groups and lawyers, then this movement would become the future of India.<sup>102</sup>

As it happened, the Congress leadership declined this offer—on account of its concern for the maintenance of non-violence, its uncertainty as to the possible repercussions of encouraging a broad-based peasant movement, or a dim but growing awareness of its own class interests.

Recent statements on the peasant movement in Awadh have asserted that 'the Congress and the Liberals had helped the Kisans to stand on their feet'<sup>103</sup> and to 'defy not just the landlords but even the Government'.<sup>104</sup> How far and in what way this was true has already been indicated. For the sake of the completeness of the historical record, it needs also to be said that the same people helped, by their refusal of continued support, to bring the peasant movement to its knees. It has been argued, in addition, that while the Liberals appreciated the class interests of the peasants better

<sup>102</sup>Ramchandra Colin. I, Subject File No. 1: incomplete letter of 1939.

<sup>103</sup>Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 217. <sup>104</sup>Gopal, op. cit., p. 55.



than the Congress—witness their support for the amendment of the Awadh Rent Act—'the Congress, as a more advanced political force that wanted to end British rule in India, devoted its energies and attention towards preserving unity between different classes'.<sup>105</sup>

Here the historian faithfully reproduces the Congress leaders' assessment of the peasant movement in Awadh as fundamentally misguided. On the basis of the evidence so far available, this is not a position that is easy to uphold. Indeed it may more reasonably be argued that, as their struggle matured, the peasants of Awadh sensed more accurately than the urban leaders did, the structure of the alliance that held up the colonial power in UP and the range of forces that might combine to fight it. The very 'moderation' of Madari Pasi's effort to enrol the support of the smaller zamindars stands testimony to that. In this situation, a pronouncement of the error, or ill-timing, of the peasant movement can come only out of an uncritical acceptance of the Congress leaders' point of view. It does not flow from an analysis of the actual conditions of anti-colonial struggle in the 1920s.

Madari, Sohrab, Isharbadi: three names, and the caste affiliation of the first-named (a Pasi), is all we know about these Eka leaders who, with others as yet unnamed, for several months in 1921 and 1922, guided a powerful peasant movement against the colonial regime and its local collaborators.<sup>106</sup> It is a telling comment on the importance that historians and others have so far attached to the history of the subaltern.<sup>107</sup> Some scholars have indeed expressed their prejudice quite plainly. 'To organize was difficult enough, to

organize in the face of repression was not possible for Madari.' Thus Majid Siddiqi, in the only published monograph on the peasant movement in Awadh.<sup>108</sup> This comment on the configuration of forces then existing in the country betrays the elitist viewpoint of its author, for the picture appears very different from the peasants' perspective.

By the winter of 1921-2, the peasant movement in Awadh had overcome many, though by no means all, of its own traditionalist limitations. Yet, its localism and its isolation remained. To get over these it needed an ally among other anti-imperialist forces in the country. But the chief candidate for this role, the party of the growing urban and rural petty bourgeoisie, had turned its back on the peasant movement long before that time. What a commentator wrote on another popular struggle, in another time and another land, is perhaps more appropriate in the context:

The petty bourgeoisie encouraged insurrection by big words, and great boasting as to what it was going to do. [But] wherever an armed conflict had brought matters to serious crisis, there the shopkeepers stood aghast at the dangerous situation created for them; aghast at the people who had taken their boasting appeals to arms in earnest; aghast at the power thus thrust into their own hands; aghast, above all, at the consequences for themselves, for their social positions, for their fortunes, of [at?] the policy in which they were forced to engage themselves . . . Thus placed between opposing dangers which surrounded them on every side, the petty bourgeoisie knew not to turn its power to any other account than to let everything take its chance, whereby, of course, there was lost what little chance of success there might have been, and thus to ruin the insurrection altogether.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>105</sup>Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>106</sup>The long lists of 'freedom-fighters', *Swatantrata Sangram ke Sainik*, drawn up district by district, by the U.P. Government in connection with the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of Indian independence, does not contain entries for any of these leaders. Madari Pasi and the village he is supposed to have come from are mentioned in the introductory note to the volume on Hardoi district. In a brief visit to the district I sought to use this lead in order to try and find out more about Madari, only to discover that Madari never came from a village of that name, that a village with that name does not exist in the concerned tahsil, and that old Congressmen (mentioned in the list of 'freedom fighters') spoke of Madari as they would of a 'bad character' or at best an inconsequential one: so heavily does the elitist heritage sit upon us. I did not have the time to pursue my inquiries after Madari and other Eka leaders on that occasion, but feel sure that further effort will yield useful information.

<sup>107</sup>We use this term (as we use 'elite') as a convenient short-hand to distinguish the lower, labouring and exploited classes from the upper, relatively privileged groups in different parts of the society.

<sup>108</sup>Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 202n. Kapil Kumar has recently completed a doctoral dissertation on the peasant movement in Avadh, for the University of Meerut. When published, this should tell us a good deal more about the Eka movement.

<sup>109</sup>F. Engels, *Gemany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (London, 1969), p. 105.

## APPENDIX

### Kishan Sabha in Allahabad

(Source: Government of India, Home Department, Political Branch, Deposit, February 1921, No. 13. Extracted from CID Memo No. 1052, dated Allahabad 7 January 1921, signed P. Biggane, Asst. to D.I.G., C.I.D. UP, SB).

The following note is the outcome of personal observations and enquiries after a month's tour in the trans-Ganges tract of the Allahabad district, where the Kishan Sabha agitation has been most acute.

There is a very noticeable stirring of the pathetic contentment of the masses, but the discontent lacks definite aims. After due allowance is made for the fact that the enquirer was a European official there can still be no doubt that up to the present at any rate the disaffection is directed against the landlords and is not in any way anti-British nor even anti-Government. Naturally the strength of the movement varies with the locality, it being strongest in places along the pucca roads where agitators were on the motor cars near the Partabgarh border and in big market villages where extremist meetings have been held. Get away even a mile or two from these special localities and there is very little active interest. Of course people have heard of meetings being held and Kisan Sabhas being formed at other places, but at present there is very little inclination to follow suit without direct instigation from outside. The distinction is generally freely admitted between the condition of land tenure in Oudh and in the Allahabad district, but still there is a great longing for the Permanent settlement (or Duncani Bandobast) as it exists in Jaunpur. The difference is very noticeable between the state of affairs in villages where the landlords are small men residing on the spot and on the estates of long absentee landowners, particularly on those of *cityhanias* and *mahajans*, who have no interest in the tenants except what they can get out of them in the way of rent. It is freely recognised that the trouble there is that the landowners have to employ *Sujawals*, *karindas* and sepoys and it is these middlemen who are the cause of the oppression of the tenantry. There is nowhere any genuine objection to performing *hari* and *begari* according to immemorial custom for zamindars who are seen and known, but there is a tendency to kick against working for and supplying nazrana,

hathyana, motorana, etc. etc. for distant and unknown landowners at the bidding of foul mouthed karindas and sepoys. Everywhere however except in Court of Wards Estates where the tenants have no complaints of any sort the great outcry is against bedakhli, in spite of the large amount of marusi land held by cultivators in these parts. To what extent the outcry is justified can be better decided by some one more acquainted with the working of the revenue courts than the writer, but the word is in every person's mouth. The idea prevails that the zamindars are avoiding the pinch of rising prices by taking it out of their tenants, both in the form of nazranas and by raising rents. When enhanced rents are not paid, the tenants are evicted, or in some cases the land is given for ploughing to others, without even the formality of an ejection decree. It is all very well to argue that such proceedings are impossible under the law, and that the tenant has his redress in the courts. Whatever the facts may be the idea is firmly rested in the average cultivator's mind that this sort of thing is going on; and it is also a fact that there is very little faith left in the efficacy of the law courts as a means of obtaining redress. The idea is a fixed one that a poor man has no chance against a rich man in a contest in the courts, and who will say that there is not some truth in this under the system of civil and criminal justice as it has come to be practised in India? It is no use arguing with the cultivator that as a result of the prevailing high prices of food stuffs, he gets far and away more for his produce than he did, and that it is only fair that a ratio of the profits should go to the zamindar and to Government. His reply is that owing to the drought this year there has been little or nothing produced, and in any case cloth is so dear that he cannot afford to clothe himself and his children. This contention is unanswerable and the extent of the genuine distress is very great. It is naturally difficult for the Indian peasant who cannot see much beyond his nose either in space or time, to understand how the war has caused a world shortage of commodities and how the value of the currency has fallen. After all people in other countries with a greater claim to intelligence and education are as unreasonable on the subject of the high prices, and have a tendency to blame their Government of whatever form it may be. The Indian peasants' chief idea about the war is that they supplied the men and the money and [Government] issued them bits of paper instead. It will be noticed that these notions distinctly smack of Bolshevism, and it

would be interesting to know whether they are in some way the indirect result of Bolshevik propaganda, or have arisen from the same causes as have produced them in other countries. The Bolshevik idea is also rapidly spreading from the extremist areas mentioned above, that it is the cultivators who plough, sow, irrigate and reap and are thus entitled to the whole of the produce of the land. There is no need of, and no right to be such things as zamindars. Here again the contention of the cultivators is very hard to refute, as there is no denying the fact that the Indian landlord is singularly backward in the performance of his duties. The old class of small proprietor who acted the godfather to his tenants and helped them on the occasions of their domestic ceremonies is being rapidly bought out, and even he did practically nothing to improve the economic lot of the cultivators. The average zamindar is only concerned with collecting his rents and pays very little attention to improving the means of production, communication and irrigation on his estates. No doubt the system of sub-division of estates militates against such improvements being effected as a general rule, but the fact remains that the population cannot go on increasing and the standard of living be raised unless there is more intensive cultivation and increase in yield per acre. The general attitude of the zamindars is even less reassuring than that of the cultivators. Their only wish is for things to go on the same as ever. In only very few places in this district up to the present are they meeting with any organized opposition from the tenants and they are content to get on by the force of custom and prestige and to hope that things will not get worse. In the few places, as in some villages near the Partabgarh border where the tenants have combined to oppose and boycott them, and where they can get no redress owing to the solidarity of their opponents they are biding their time and relying on Government to put things right. There is no attempt to combine or form a political party. The position taken up by the zamindars is that they and their forefathers have been well wishers of the British Government, and it is up to that government now to help them out of their difficulties. The curious part about the situation is that the vast majority of the cultivators also still look to Government as their only salvation. They can make no suggestions as to the remedy for their present distress; that is the function of Government. They have their grievances and their miseries and it is up to

Government to put things right. There is no other power under Heaven that can save them. *Upar Parmeshwar niche Sarkar*. They have generally heard the word swaraj but are quite incapable of explaining it. (In this perhaps they are not peculiar.) If they are told that it is the sarkar's own hukm that the government is to be handed over to Indians as quickly as possible they are filled with genuine consternation and quote instances of mismanagement under Indian officials. They all contend that such a thing is impracticable without unity among Indians themselves, and they are unanimous in the opinion that such unity is impossible. They allow that if even the cultivators of one village can combine they are then in a position to oppose the zamindar, but they generally refuse to admit that such union is permanently possible. Such a thing as any concerted action between Hindus and Muhammadans—in the opinion of the Muhammadan minority at any rate—is quite beyond the bounds of possibility. For the present then the cultivators like the zamindars are looking to Government to put their troubles right, and it is unfortunately undoubtedly true that they have completely failed to grasp the idea that they are themselves in a position to influence the decisions and policy of Government through the reformed councils and by that means to get the law altered if they choose to suit their ends. Up to within a few days of the General Election on the 30th November, hardly a soul in the villages had heard anything at all about councils or votes, and the whole system of representative government, in spite of District Board Elections, seems absolutely incomprehensible to the vast majority. In many places it was only when the non-cooperation agents spread about the injunction that votes were to be given to no one, that any one had heard of such a thing as a vote. Even then no one had any idea what it meant. It is no exaggeration to say that if there had been no non-cooperation agitation at all the elections in the rural parts of this district at any rate would have been even more of a farce than they actually were. It would have probably meant that the zamindars, subordinate officials and well wishers of the government wishful to make the Reform Scheme a success would have brought voters to the polling stations as they did recruits to the colours and subscriptions to the War Loan. The cultivators would have recorded their votes because it was a sarkari hukm and not with any conception at all of what they were doing. Even the election campaign conducted by Pandit Radha

Kant Malaviya through the Kisan Sabha proper seems to have educated only a negligible number of persons in the Handia tahsil. The elections occurred at a time when the cultivators were fighting the drought in order to produce some rabi crop. Every hour spent away from the irrigation well meant a certain loss of produce. Naturally the hard headed cultivator was glad of an excuse not to attend a function in which he took not the slightest interest. Two or three days before the election the candidates began a little propaganda in the form of distribution of leaflets, specimen voting papers, etc. These apparently made no impression. The method of attack adopted by the Moderate candidates seems to have been in the main to approach the zamindars and get them to round up some of their tenants at the polling stations. Those who went to the polling stations on the election day did so with a vague idea that they were going to attend some sort of sabha which was some affair of the zamindars. It was thus not difficult for the non-cooperation agents to persuade them that the whole thing was a ruse of the zamindars to get their signatures (or thumb impressions) on a paper which would lead in the end to *bedakhli*. The Indian villager is chary of giving his signature without knowing exactly what he is signing, and with good cause. Thus when it was announced to the hesitating assemblies that it was the order of Mr Gandhi that no votes should be given, every one heaved a sigh of relief and went home. The currency which Mr Gandhi's name has acquired even in the remotest villages is astonishing. No one seems to know quite who or what he is, but it is an accepted fact that what he orders must be done. He is a Mahatma or sadhu, a Pandit, a Brahman who lives at Allahabad, even a Deota. One man said he was a merchant who sells cloth at three annas a yard. Some one had probably told him about Gandhi's shop (the new Swadeshi store in Hewett Road). The most intelligent say he is a man who is working for the good of the country, but the real power of his name is perhaps to be traced back to the idea that it was he who got *bedakhli* stopped in Partabgarh. It is a curious instance of the power of a name. As mentioned above the Duncani bandobast is still a byword in this part, and the writer was solemnly asked by more than one man whether he knew the Duncans and whether any of the family was now in India. Were a Duncan Sahib to come to settle the Allahabad district now, his name would probably supersede that of Gandhiji in a week. One cannot help being struck by the

chance that offers among a people of this nature to a real patriot, should one arise from among the people themselves, not from among the landowning or professional classes, to take the place of the notoriety hunters and Bolshevik agents who now pose as leaders of the people. For the present, however, the fact must be faced that Gandhi's word is supreme, and even the local hero Malaviji has been displaced, being accused of mispending funds entrusted to him. When votes were obtained by Radha Kant Malaviya by his agents, it was generally only because they told the voters: 'Gandhi Babu says you are not to vote at all, or, if you do, to vote for Malaviji.' The curious thing is that as a general rule Gandhi is not thought of as being antagonistic to Government, but only to the zamindars. The sarkar is still conceived of as something above and aloof from such consideration.

The Reformed Councils are just a ruse of the zamindars. We are for Gandhiji and the Sarkar. The reverence for Gandhi is undoubtedly partly due to the belief that he has great influence with the Government. If therefore the result of the new councils is legislation in favour of the zamindars the effect is likely to be disastrous. Undoubtedly what is required to allay the present unrest is some amendment of the Land Tenure Laws in such a way as to appeal to the imagination of the tenants. And the sooner some thing of the sort is done the better. At present, as stated above, the cultivators are much too busy irrigating their fields to be easily led away on any other tack. Should, however, the rabi fail as the kharif has done a delicate situation would be created. Generous remissions of land revenue would be the first requisite. But even if they were granted, assuming that Mr Gandhi's name continued in the ascendant till April, the mischiefmakers would be in a position to use it to create an ugly situation, in the panicky condition in which the people would then be. If on the other hand there are winter rains and the Land Tenure act is tackled in a liberal manner as the first business of the new council, Mr Gandhi's name will probably fade from people's memories as quickly as did that of the Germans after the first excitement at the outbreak of the Great War.