
Peasants and Their Interlocutors

Swami Sahajanand, Walter Hauser and the Kisan Sabha

MANISH THAKUR, NABANI PA BHATTACHARJEE

Few unpublished doctoral dissertations may have been cited as frequently as that of Walter Hauser titled “The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha 1929-1942: A Study of an Indian Peasant Movement.” For decades, this dissertation has been referred to by students of agrarian history and peasant politics, thanks to its two copies having been made available by the author at the A N Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. The dissertation, completed in 1960 at the University of Chicago, has finally been published with a foreword by William R Pinch, an eminent historian of Indian peasants’ religio-ascetic universe and one of Hauser’s students (Hauser 2019; Pinch 1996, 2008). For Hauser, who passed away on 1 June 2019, his doctoral work heralded a lifelong scholarly commitment to the world of Bihar peasants, and more importantly to the life and legacy of one of their tallest leaders, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. This commitment and labour of love reached fruition in the publications of edited translations of Swami’s Hindi memoir *Mera Jivan Sangharsh* in two avatars: *Culture, Vernacular Politics and the Peasants: India: 1889-1950* (Hauser and Jha 2015) and *My Life Struggle: A Translation of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati’s Mera Jivan Sangharsh* (Hauser and Jha 2018).

The former is an extensively researched volume with meticulous contextual end-notes, placing the life and activism of Swami in the context of his times and academic scholarship in general, and the latter is for the express purpose of making Swami’s memoir accessible to the wider reading public. Given that such well-produced volumes were already in existence, one fails to understand the need for yet another translation of Swami’s

REVIEW ARTICLE

Culture, Vernacular Politics, and the Peasants: India, 1889–1950: An edited translation of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati’s *Mera Jivan Sangharsh* (My Life Struggle), Walter Hauser, Kailash Chandra Jha (translated and ed), New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2015; pp xlv + 708, ₹2,295.

My Life Struggle: A Translation of Swami Sahjanand Saraswati’s *Mera Jivan Sangharsh*, Walter Hauser and Kailash Chandra Jha (translator and ed), Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2018; pp 434, ₹995.

The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha 1929–1942: A Study of an Indian Peasant Movement. Walter Hauser (Foreword by William Pinch), Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2019; pp 265, ₹1,495.

memoir by another publisher (Pradhan 2019). But then the publishing market has its own logic, and we should, in any case, appreciate the increasing salience of Swami’s work in our post-everything and decolonising times.

At a time when scholarly interest in peasant society and culture is at its ebb, it is hard to invoke the excitement that would have propelled an American historian and South Asianist like Hauser to the dusty villages and blood-stained fields of south Bihar in his enterprise of capturing the evolution of Swami as the most effective advocate for peasants, and especially over time for landless agricultural labourers. Surely, he would have been attracted by the intriguing story of a sannyasi whose religio-ascetic commitments seamlessly dovetailed into the increasingly militant peasant activism and radical agrarian politics that he spearheaded for close to two decades in the latter half of 20th-century India. William Pinch in his foreword to Hauser’s work captures some of this excitement when he writes,

[it was] a world where change was being propelled not in urban centres but in the village and countryside, and a world in which a leading proponent of that change was a man

who insistently defined himself as a *sannyasi*, a staunch representative of a brahmanical religio-ascetic tradition with deep civilization roots, a *dandi sannyasi* unabashedly proclaiming his high-caste birth but showing no hesitation in converting the same *dand*, the ritual staff, into an instrument of peasant rebelliousness and to be used on their behalf, a rare instance of instrumental use of the weight of brahmanical religious tradition to demolish structures of oppression and create radical transformation. This was tradition in the service of change. (2019: 24–25)

Indeed, there have been other instances of religious men participating in, and leading the peasant movements; Baba Ramchandra of Awadh is an oft-quoted case (Siddiqi 1978). However, Swami’s political trajectory is a unique one as he went through manifold activism of his times—social reforms through caste association, Indian national movement under Gandhian influence and peasant movements—to reach the pinnacle of his political influence as the general secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936. Subsequently, as he increasingly got enmeshed in national politics through his short-lived association with Subhas Chandra Bose’s Forward Bloc and the communists in general, he started losing influence as a peasant leader and ultimately passed away in 1950 as a man lost in political wilderness. Gail Omvedt characterises Swami’s political predicament succinctly:

Swami was in a sense a historical loser: his “external” enemy, the Congress came to power in India, his “internal foes,” the Communists, captured the All India Kisan Sabha—and their analytical framework, which characterised peasants as class-divided and at best ambivalently revolutionary and recognized only the rural proletariat as a firm ally of the working class, remains largely hegemonic today. (1996: 104)

Yet, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati holds a fascinating vantage point by the sheer act of having produced an Indian history

of a peasant struggle through his memoir. As someone who lived the history of peasant struggles and represented it to others, his life raises issues of representation of peasant politics in the academe. Not only is his memoir suffused with a certain intimacy, detailed everyday-ness of peasant struggles and ethnographic richness, but is also a source of sustained questioning of the externally fashioned conceptual categories of peasant politics and agrarian social structure.

Peasant Political Consciousness

In the 1930s, as Walter Hauser reminds us, the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (hereafter the Kisan Sabha) was the most significant mass movement sharing a complex relationship with the Indian National Congress. The former helped provide an economic outlook to the latter and in the process led to attempts at radicalising both the agrarian and national politics. The militant activities of the Kisan Sabha surely paved the way for the abolition of the zamindari system after independence. Even otherwise, the Kisan Sabha had been a source of steady pressure on the Congress for radical agrarian change. Besides, the development of leftist political currents in the province, then (and later), also owe something to the influence of the Kisan Sabha. Hauser is categorical in asserting that

If there was a widespread political and agrarian consciousness, the agitations of the Kisan Sabha contributed to it. It was precisely when the leadership of the Kisan Sabha came into basic conflict with the political interests of Indian nationalism that the movement became unimportant in the province. During the period of the Congress Ministry, there were important differences in the interpretation of the peasant's role in the national movement. In fact, the Kisan Sabha maintained that it expected more and consequently demanded more during the period of the Congress ministry. How do you articulate specific class demands in a political system dominated by a party which eschewed class conflict and divisiveness that comes with it? The Congress was indeed a political movement conservative in character, and therefore the differences between it and the class demands of the Kisan Sabha were more pronounced. The divisive character of the Kisan Sabha became crucial after 1941. (2019: 188)

It is important to remember that Hauser has been a historian with an anthropological bent of mind much like

his dissertation supervisor Bernard S Cohn. Moreover, throughout his professional career, he steered clear from the Marxist debate about the lack of political consciousness among the peasantry. This lack, the Marxists argued, was due to a host of factors such as the parochial limits of peasant revolts, the divisions of caste, the immense gulf between the peasantry and the menial proletariat, and the deeply rooted authority of the zamindars. Taking issue with the Marxist historian Irfan Habib, Hauser unambiguously underlines the fully formed peasant political consciousness as evidenced in the Kisan Sabha movement.

Equally important is Hauser's refusal to get carried away by the apocalyptic charm of subaltern historiography that held such a sway in the field of peasant studies following the publication of Ranajit Guha's 1983 work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. That is why, unlike the subaltern scholars, Hauser could never make light of the domain of legal-political relations, and take refuge under everyday forms of peasant resistance. For him, peasant activism was, to borrow a metaphor from Radcliffe-Brown, as real as a seashell. The Kisan Sabha implied "explicit struggles on the ground and in the fields and villages of Bihar directed at realizing specific legal rights to the land and its crops, and that melded over months and years into a powerful kisan andolan, that is, peasant movement" (Hauser and Jha 2015: xxxvi).

Sure enough, the Kisan Sabha movement was limited in terms of time, area and the number of peasants directly affected. The movement mostly revolved around the tenancy rights of peasants, the price problem and the various forms of illegal exactions by the land-controlling zamindars. In matters of leadership, it was a strong movement of agitation, though it was not organised structurally as a party because of the impatient but articulate leadership that Swami Sahajanand Saraswati provided. In the words of Hauser,

He was a swami who sought change, a charismatic revolutionary. So long as he maintained that attitude within the framework of the nationalism which sustained all political activity in India during this period, the movement was effective. When he was attracted to

ideological politics of the anti-nationalist left, he and the movement he had created found little or no support among the peasants of Bihar. (2019: 189)

Scholars of the Kisan Sabha agree that in the late 1930s, and especially from 1939, Swami became increasingly involved in national political concerns. His communist associations grew in this period, and his political position on World War II as people's war (after the entry of Russia into the conflict in June 1941) through an All India Kisan Sabha resolution along with the communists, and his abstention from the Quit India movement in 1942 created unbridgeable rift between him and his supporters. Even as Swami became subsequently disenchanted with the political programme of the then mainstream left, and in 1945 parted with the communists to seek new political alignments, he miserably failed. By that time, he had already alienated both his close associates among the Congress socialists of the earlier Kisan Sabha days and his mass support.

Hauser reads Swami's ultimate failure as the outcome of a series of errors of political judgments on Swami's part. Evidently, Swami had misjudged the sentiments of the peasants of the militant agitation of the Kisan Sabha when it came to the national question. Other historical conjunctures like restrictive measures on political activities during the war, the Congress being rendered leaderless through mass arrests and the internal divisions within the Kisan Sabha, particularly between Swami and the Congress socialists over the support to the Quit India movement, contributed to the decline of the once powerful movement. By 1940, the Kisan Sabha movement effectively ceased to function in Bihar and in India. Swami himself had earlier resigned from the Bihar Congress Working Committee in January 1938 on the charges of inciting violence that the provincial Congress leaders had levelled against him.

In effect, the Kisan Sabha never regained its political vitality as a class based organisation despite its being a peasant political front of the mainstream communist party in the post-independence period. One may argue that the Kisan Sabha ideology and activities somehow

continued to inform the agrarian agitations of the Communist Party of India (CPI), and to some extent socialists of different hues, in the first few decades after independence. But any simplistic equation between the present-day Kisan Sabha and Swami's Kisan Sabha, or the characterisation of the former as the legatee of the latter, would be an exaggeration of huge proportions, the uniformity of nomenclature notwithstanding. Quite noticeably, Bihar has witnessed steady erosion of class-based politics leading to the near eclipse of an agrarian political agenda (Thakur 2013).

In any case, 1936 was the peak year for the Kisan Sabha when it urged an acceptable agrarian programme on the Congress, and with the promises and pronouncements of such a programme the Kisan Sabha extended its full support to the Congress in the election campaign. This was also the year of the internecine left-right tussle in the Congress in the wake of its Lucknow and Faizpur sessions. Be that as it may, the Kisan Sabha could formulate and articulate a set of basic and long-range demands.

The Kisan Sabha called for the abolition of the zamindari system, elimination of agrarian debt, creation of a system of peasant ownership of land, and the provision of gainful employment for the landless. Its other key demands were for fixity of tenure, rights of free transfer, protection against attachment of property and goods, abolition of all produce-rent systems, cancellation of rent arrears by at least 50% and prevention of further enhancement, full protection regarding rent receipts and illegal exactions, and the elimination of certificate powers of rent collection. One can clearly see the influence of the socialists and the clear impress of Swami on this charter of demands. Through all this, Swami emerges as the towering leader in consistent and close touch with the agrarian conditions peculiar to Bihar. And, he never shied away from forcing this understanding either on the Bihar Congress leadership or on the broader political movement of his times.

Inevitably, Swami's radical agrarian agenda and its incompatibility with the character and the policy of the Congress

lay at the root of conflicts that ultimately devoured the Kisan Sabha. These conflicts reached their crescendo during 1937–39 when the provincial Congress ministry in Bihar brought about the tenancy legislation to offer relief to the peasants. The conflicts were as much about the contents of the tenancy legislation as the manner in which it was effected (through compromise between the Congress and the leading zamindars of the day).

Given the subsequent attempts to (mis)appropriate Swami's political legacy by the sectional political leaders belonging to a range of parties, from the Bharatiya Janata Party to the Janata Dal (United) (Thakur and Bhattacharjee 2012, 2019), it needs to be emphasised that

Kisan Sabha did not have basic caste motivations throughout the period of its primary strength. It was essentially an agrarian agitation, notwithstanding the prior involvement of Sahajanand in Bhumihar causes and the occasional interjection of caste considerations during the movement ... but during the heat of the movement in the 1930s Sahajanand was a peasant agitator, not a casteist. (Hauser 2019: 110)

This point needs reiteration as there has been a tendency in some quarters to dub Swami Sahajanand Saraswati as a leader of the high-caste tenants alone. Even as most of the leaders of the Kisan Sabha

were drawn from the upper castes (primarily Bhumihars), there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the participation in militant peasant agitations cut across caste divisions. Also, the Kisan Sabha leaders fought against the zamindars who mostly belonged to the same caste of Bhumihars. And, Swami got no political breather during the Congress ministry headed by a Bhumihar simply because he was once one of their leaders for social reforms. Instead, he was castigated by the Bihar Provincial Congress essentially in his capacity as a militant peasant leader out to destroy the former's plank of social harmony and non-class based politics.

To project Swami Sahajanand Saraswati as a political icon of a particular caste (the Bhumihars) or a group of castes (generally the upper castes) is not only a grave injustice to this "organic intellectual" and leader of one of the largest peasant movements of 20th-century India but also amounts to the perpetuation of a deliberate and dangerous ignorance about the multifaceted thinking of an enviable autodidact.

Agrarian Culture of Exploitation

Students raised on the standard textbooks of peasant history and agrarian sociology may be more than surprised to learn that

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Swami Sahajanand Saraswati considered agrarian labour or rural proletariat (*khet mazdoor*) as peasants. Likewise, while the much-debated “middle-peasant thesis” in Marxist historiography saw much revolutionary potential in them because of their structural independence from the markets, Swami viewed their interface with the market as a strategy of survival rather than a genuflection to capitalist agriculture. Swami was equally open to technological inputs into agriculture while the Marxists would expend much of their political energy in transforming social relations of production in agriculture ahead of any major technological innovation.

This issue has particular Indian resonance in relation to the green revolution technology, which was held to benefit the rich peasants in the absence of the required overhauling of the social relations of production (Dhanagare 1987). Moreover, one has to merely recall the characteristic arguments of the “mode of production debate in Indian agriculture” to appreciate the differences between Swami’s understanding of the agrarian question and that of the Marxists (Patnaik 1990).

More importantly, Swami fell short of advocating for collectivisation of agriculture, *a la* communists; at most he recommended the formation of cooperative farms in the villages. Excluding zamindars, Swami consistently fought his struggles through a united front of peasant classes, including the substantive tenants whereas the rich peasant as an agrarian category has been an anathema to orthodox Marxists. For want of space, we do not go for the elaboration of the agrarian question in Marxist tradition (for a useful summary, see Bernstein 1996).

Suffice to say that for Swami, the usual Marxian distinction between peasants and farmers was redundant for the large masses of population (whose leader he was) who earned their livelihoods through land and lived in what Swami characterised as *grihastha ashram*. It is not that the latter is independent of the relations of power and dominance that categories such as caste and class embody. Our point is to underline the fact that Swami was, in essence, talking of

the entire ecosystem of rural livelihoods that revolved around land irrespective of one’s ownership status. And, such an understanding included landless agricultural labourers whose well-being was seen to be intimately linked with the overall agrarian prosperity.

At a more fundamental level, Swami could never reconcile to the idea of peasants playing second fiddle to the proletarian or nationalist revolution. His fierce advocacy of the autonomy of peasant politics, and his open repudiation of the ideology that castigated the peasantry as a “reactionary” and “conservative” force given their hunger for land, propelled him into a category of his own, notwithstanding his obstinate insistence on red flag being the flag of the Kisan Sabha.

His avowed celebration of peasant militancy sat uncomfortably with the classical Marxian characterisation of peasantry as a sack of potatoes. Likewise, the Marxian notion of rural idiocy seldom made any sense to Swami who found India’s villages as the springboard of some of the most valiant peasant struggles ever launched in Indian history. No doubt, his distinctive understanding of peasant politics turned him into something of a loner towards the fag end of his political career as his dream of a robust All India Kisan Sabha floundered on account of the internecine ideological wars during World War II.

Hauser’s two earlier edited and translated volumes of Swami’s work—*Sahajanand on Agriculture Labour and the Rural Poor* (Hauser 1994) and *Swami Sahajanand and the Peasants of Jharkhand: A View from 1941* (Hauser 1995)—do bring to our notice Swami’s nuanced understanding of the agrarian culture of exploitation that prevailed in the Indian countryside in the first half of the last century. Sadly though, his understanding of the agrarian social stratification and the place of peasants in revolutionary social transformation has failed to engage the academic attention of social science practitioners (sociologists in particular) in our country. Quite predictably, courses on agrarian social stratification in Indian universities begin with Lenin’s fivefold classification of peasantry, and through Mao’s

modified class analysis, winds up with the never-ending debate on the role of the revolutionary potential of different agrarian strata.

If only Indian students of agrarian economy and politics would have cared to read one of Swami’s most insightful political tracts, *Kranti Aur Sanyukta Morcha* (yet to be translated in English—a task that Kailash Jha can ably initiate), they would not have to wait for the Hamza Alavis of the world to help identify the most appropriate allies of the proletarian revolution in predominantly agrarian societies.

Nor could Swami ever be trusted as an ally of such political forces whose quest for social revolution made them champions of various caste associations. The leaders of the Triveni Sangh and the Bihar Dalit Varg Sangh continued to maintain a hostile attitude to Swami’s Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha and its idiom of class politics. In fact, the Kisan Sabha was charged to have decelerated the processes of politicisation of the Dalit caste groups. So much so that Jagjivan Ram, the then tallest Dalit leader in Bihar, took the initiative to organise an independent Khet Mazdoor Sangh in 1937 to oppose the Kisan Sabha’s subsumption of agricultural labour under the category of peasants (Chaudhary and Shrikant 2005). What is generally forgotten is that it was Swami who made available a refreshingly new vocabulary of peasant rights and agrarian transformation at a time when the politics of competitive backwardness in caste terms had already started taking shape in Bihar.

In this sense, Swami played a pivotal role in the constitutive articulation of the identity of the *kisan* as a politico-economic class amidst the caste-ridden agrarian landscape of colonial India. It does not matter if his diagnoses were particularly original, or if he was simply a product of his times in his understandings and goals of peasant politics, so long as “he had both an ideology and a methodology with which to develop his ideas and inform his politics” (Robb 2007: 40). And, Swami belonged to that rare category of peasant leaders for whom no sacrifice was big enough if it came in the way of his political mobilisation of

peasant interests. After all, his steadfast allegiance to the peasant cause and an autonomous peasant organisation occasioned his steady quarrels with political formations of all ideological hues.

Production of Knowledge

At its innocuous best, one could argue that Swami's life and thought largely remained understudied, for much of his writings have been available in the Hindi language alone. But the recent publications, and the earlier ones (Hauser 1994, 1995; Hauser and Jha 2015, 2018, 2019; Pradhan 2019) render this premise suspect. Now that much of Swami's oeuvre is accessible to the English reading, and hence scholarly public, one hopes to see critical appraisal of Swami's life and legacy, and by implication of peasant politics and agrarian history.

Interestingly, the centrality of Swami to the peasant politics of the 20th century has been belatedly realised through the scholarly works of a Virginia-based historian—Walter Hauser. This opens up a host of questions about the preservation of papers, maintenance of archives and the access to such archives by scholars and researchers.

Hauser could do this much also because he had the far-sightedness of carrying the Swami papers to the University of Virginia for future preservation. As an anguished response to the allegations of possible theft of these papers by him, Hauser has on numerous occasions explained his professional intentions in writing. Now that the very same papers have been shipped back to India, and have rightfully reached the State Archives of Bihar and the refurbished Shri Sitaram Ashram at Bihta—the headquarters of Swami's Kisan Sabha movement—this unnecessary controversy should be laid to rest (Personal communication from Kailash Jha dated 18 July 2019; Jha 2019). One should also be grateful to Hauser for having earlier given and helped put together the Swami Sahajanand papers at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi.

Yet, there is no denying that epistemologies of the South have been at a discount in the global academe; that the politics of global knowledge production

remains informed by the asymmetrical division of intellectual labour between the theoretical North and the empirical South. Not surprisingly then, that we come to realise the value of Swami's historic role in peasant movement only after the scholarly mediation of an American historian with the right resources, and fortunately for us in this case, the right intentions.

Some would argue that Swami Sahajanand Saraswati's works are reminiscent of the non-European intellectual traditions of knowledge by its sheer earthiness and penetrating insights into peasant life and culture. Maybe, one day students of agrarian history and politics will read Swami's work alongside *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* and *Peasants and Revolutions* as part of their university reading lists.

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Manish Thakur (mt@iimcal.ac.in) teaches sociology at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. Nabanipa Bhattacharjee (nabanipab@svc.ac.in) teaches sociology at University of Delhi.

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