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**ANTI-BETTERMENT  
LEVY STRUGGLE OF  
PUNJAB**

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**ALL INDIA KISAN SABHA**

## FOREWORD

THIS PAMPHLET IS THE FOURTH IN THE SERIES issued in commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of the AIKS.

This pamphlet tells the story of heroic struggle of the Punjab peasantry which wrote another glorious chapter in the history of the peasant movement in the country under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha. The struggle was conducted against the unjust burden of betterment levy, to the tune of Rs. 123 crore, imposed on the peasants of Punjab to meet the cost of the irrigation part of the Bhakra project. The Punjab peasant was already burdened with heavy taxes. The then existing taxation was taking away big proportion from the peasant's net produce, and the additional imposition of betterment levy, which increased the burden by at least 50 per cent, was the last straw. The Punjab Government, besides, beat all records by attempting by force to secure advance collection of levy, before finally determining its rate. Wanton measures of repression were undertaken for this purpose. This very much enraged the peasantry. The Punjab Kisan Sabha came forward to guide the peasants and organise their resistance.

This struggle united all sections of the peasantry, exceeded in sweep and upsurge any other previous struggle and did a lot to transform the consciousness of the Punjab peasant. Cutting across political affiliations, it gave a blow to communal consciousness in the border state.

Firing, tear-gas, lathicharges, third degree methods against Satyagrahis and looting of peasant houses under pretext of executing attachment orders—all were undertaken in order to intimidate the peasants into submission. Punjab peasant was able to withstand all this and forced the Government to retreat.

This pamphlet tells the story of this struggle and the lessons drawn from it.

*Harkishan Singh Surjeet*

## ANTI-BETTERMENT LEVY STRUGGLE OF PUNJAB

*Harkishan Singh Surjeet*

THE HEROIC STRUGGLE OF THE PUNJAB PEASANTS against the betterment levy added a new, glorious chapter to the history of the Indian peasant movement. After the epoch making struggle of T elangana, this was the biggest struggle fought in the post-independence period where the widest possible unity of the peasants was forged, and the peasants were able to win the support of agricultural workers and other sections of the population, irrespective of their political affiliations. Both women and men defied all types of repression and showed unprecedented heroism in face of brutal repression launched by the Congress Government of Punjab. The movement was able to forge the unity of Hindus and Sikhs and, indeed, all sections of the masses. Never before in the post-independence period Punjab had witnessed such a resounding and massive unity of the popular forces.

Lakhs of peasants participated in this movement in different forms. They participated in demonstrations, early morning processions (*Prabhat Pheris*) in the villages, gave reception to the Satyagrahis, fought against the collection of fines imposed on the Satyagrahis, took the message of struggle from house to house, and fought against all repressive measures of the Government. In the struggle nineteen thousand volunteers offered Satyagraha by obstructing the work of district courts, ten thousand went to jail, three thousand volunteers got badly beaten by police lathis, hundreds were tortured in police stations. Eight became martyrs facing the police bullets, including three women; one died in police custody due to torture; and two more

laid down their lives in prison. Apart from the firing at these places, the police and the security forces organised a siege on many villages with the machine guns directed against the villagers, in order to restrict the movement of the people in strong centres. All these were of no use. The pent up discontent of the peasantry had taken the form of an upsurge, and no amount of repression would cow them down. Even on the day of withdrawal of the movement, 250 Satyagrahis had reached Chandigarh to offer Satyagraha and more than 3 thousand had reached the district courts in different districts of the state and sat in dharna there. This showed the tempo and the scope of the movement.

This peaceful movement of the Punjab peasantry was the expression of pent up discontentment of the peasants and agricultural workers. This was the expression of the resentment of the peasantry against the deepening agrarian crisis, which was the result of the anti-people policies of the Government which were aimed at throwing the burden of the crisis on to the shoulders of the peasantry. Although the discontentment of the peasantry found expression in the anti-betterment levy struggle, it had arisen due to the accumulated effect of anti-people policies for quite a long period following the independence. After independence, the tax burden on the people of Punjab increased from Rs. 14 per head to Rs. 25 per head. Indebtedness increased very rapidly. What was stated in the Reserve Bank survey on rural indebtedness was fully applicable to Punjab. In 1955 the PEPSU Government conducted a survey of rural indebtedness and it was found that 85 per cent of the peasants and agricultural workers were under debt. Apart from this, unemployment was growing, particularly since the introduction of land reforms in 1953, when lakhs of tenants were evicted from the lands and were forced to join the ranks of agricultural workers. 32 lakh acres of land had come under water logging where the water level had risen from 5 feet to 10 feet. The peasants of Punjab, like their bretheren in the rest of the country, were also victims of plunder by way of the market forces. In 1958, the year preceding the anti-betterment levy struggle, the peasants were forced to sell wheat at the rate of Rs. 34 per quintal, but only after six or seven months, the agricultural labourers and poor peasants were

to purchase it at double that price. In the beginning of the year, the food situation had become very bad. Neither the Government had built food stocks nor organised a proper distribution system. The announced prices for foodgrains were only on paper. The Government's anti-people food policy brought the sympathy of the agricultural workers and the urban population on the side of the peasants engaged in anti-betterment struggle. The increased interference in administration by Congress rulers and the growing corruption further enraged the peasantry. When the call of struggle came, the peasantry was aware that the anti-people policies of the Congress Government were responsible for their growing miseries, and resistance to these policies was necessary.

*THE CASE OF THE KISAN SABHA  
AGAINST THE BETTERMENT LEVY TAX*

It was in 1952, before the completion of Bhakra canal system, that the Punjab Government armed itself with a legislation to impose betterment levy, with the aim of meeting all the expenditure on canal system through this tax. According to this legislation, the basis of this tax was to be fifty percent of the increase in price of land due to the Bhakra canal irrigation system. At that time the Government planned to collect Rs. 123 crore on this basis, from the total commanded areas of 49 lakh acres of land under the Bhakra canal system. The Kisan Sabha from the beginning opposed this legislation and advocated that the expenditure on the Bhakra canal system could be met through the normal course of taxation like the water tax and surcharge which were in operation at that time. They also stated that with the imposition of this tax nothing would be left with the peasantry to invest in agriculture ; and so far the poor sections were concerned, they would be forced to sell their lands. But the Government refused to listen to any argument.

At the end of 1957 and the beginning of 1958, when the assessment notifications were served, the whole peasantry of the state was moved. They expressed resentment through mass representations, signature campaigns, conventions, conferences and demonstrations. More than 11,000 peasants individually filed legal objections against the assessment notices. The state

Kisan Sabha sent representation in this respect to the Government on February 10, 1958. An All-Party Convention was held in Chandigarh on March 19, 1958, which endorsed the stand of the Kisan Sabha. The Convention also formed an all-party committee which sent a memorandum to the State and Central Governments asking them to concede the genuine demands of the peasants for the cancellation of the proposed betterment levy. In September 1958 mass demonstrations of peasants were held throughout the state in which more than one lakh peasants participated, demanding cancellation of the levy. In all these representations, conventions and demonstrations, it was argued that the betterment levy tax was unjust and unbearable and would harm the development of agriculture in the state—the development which was necessary because of the deteriorating food situation in the country. It was argued that more than four crores of rupees could be collected from the Bhakra canal system as water tax and surcharge from 30 lakh acres of land which was to be actually irrigated, and these would be sufficient to meet the cost of the irrigation part of the project, if the division of costs between irrigation and power components of the project was properly worked out. Kisan Sabha successfully argued that Bhakra project was a productive one and no case could be made for the imposition of the levy without harming production.

The Central loans could be paid back without burdening the peasants with further heavy taxation. The argument of the Kisan Sabha was supported by men like Prof. Sher Singh, the former Irrigation Minister, and technical experts like Mr. Sally of Rurki University. The Government tried to create confusion among the middle classes by posing the question whether Kisan Sabha agrees with the principle of imposition of betterment levy or not. But the Kisan Sabha answered all these questions through facts and figures and emphasised on the interests of the development of economy. Referring to the methods of expenditure on irrigation and power projects in the USA, Mr Sally argued as follows :

- 1 : No interest be charged from the peasants on the cost of the project.
2. The capacity of the peasantry be kept in mind while

imposing the tax, and no tax be imposed for 10 years since the lands began working with full capacity.

3. The profit from the power sector be utilised to meet the deficit in the irrigation sector of the project.
4. Bhakra project, apart from producing power and providing irrigation also, helped in preventing floods, and, therefore, a part of the expenditure could be met from the fund allocated for flood-prevention.

While the Kisan Sabha was rallying the peasantry, it did not allow any argument of the Government to go unchallenged. It was very much concerned to win the support of all the democratically-minded people for the cause of the peasantry.

But the State Government, instead of paying any heed to the democratic voice of the people, promulgated an ordinance on January 4, 1959, to realise betterment levy as advance payment. Even the principal Act and its rules were set aside. This provocative act of the State Government added fuel to the fire. It enraged the discontented peasants.

By this time Kisan Sabha had started preparing for the struggle. It had its hand on the pulse of the peasants and was conscious of the justness of its cause. The Action Committees were formed at various levels and volunteers to offer Satyagraha were enrolled. The response was immense. By the third week of January, more than 10,000 volunteers were enrolled, ready to make any sacrifice for the cause. A state level Action Committee consisting of Comrades Satwant, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Jagjit Singh Layallpuri, Mohan Singh Jandiala, Master Hari Singh, Baba Gurmukh Singh, Gurcharan Singh Randhawa and Avtar Singh Malhotra, with myself as its Convenor, was formed which was to work in the underground.

In January 1959 food situation worsened in Punjab. The prices of foodgrains doubled, leading to untold sufferings of the poor sections of our population. The Communist Party and Dehati Mazdoor Sabha took initiative in forming a Janta Food Committee to launch the movement. There was some hesitation among a section of the leadership to start and participate in the food movement simultaneously with the starting of anti-betterment levy struggle ; but it was decided that the masses should be led when they were moved on such an issue as food. Thousands

of agricultural workers, workers and poorer sections in the towns as also the middle class people were mobilised in this movement. These two movements proved to be complementary because people under attack from the Government on the food issue became sympathetic to the cause of the peasants on betterment levy.

The Kisan Sabha once again, through an open letter to the Chief Minister in the first week of January 1959 and again through a press statement on January 21, 1959, asked the Government to accede to the demands of the peasants and to arrive at a settlement. But the Government refused to budge an inch. It not only refused to take note of the mood of the people, but did not listen to the advise of its own partymen. The State Conference of the Kisan Vibhag of the Pradesh Congress was held on January 18-19, 1959, at Barapind in district Jullunder. In the presence of the Chief Minister Partap Singh Kairon it demanded the postponement of the realisation of betterment levy at least for two years. Although the Chief Minister stated that he was trying to get the rate of interest reduced from 4½ per cent compound interest to 3 per cent simple interest on the loan incurred for Bhakra project, at the same time he announced in most provocative terms that the levy would be imposed and collected. Therefore, no other course was left except to launch the struggle.

The justness of the cause of the peasantry was further proved when the organ of the AICC, *Economic Review* wrote a note for the reconsideration of the imposition of the betterment levy tax. The movement and its demands were supported by all the Opposition parties and all the legislators belonging to the Opposition parties. Even 12 legislators belonging to the Congress party demanded radical reduction of betterment levy.

The demands of the movement were :

1. Withdrawal of the ordinance,
2. Stoppage of advance payment of betterment levy,
3. Cancellation of betterment levy.

The struggle was started on January 21, 1959. It was the culmination of the agitation for 1½ years when notices were issued to the peasants. It was started in four districts, and after two weeks, on February 16, it spread to another four districts ; and



on 23rd, it covered all the 9 districts affected by the betterment levy. The response was immense everywhere.

### ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION

The Kisan Sabha and the Action Committee were aware of the fact that this struggle was against a major aspect of the Government policy. It was a struggle against efforts of the Government to mobilise the plan resources not from the monopolists and landlords but by throwing the burdens on the toiling people, overwhelming majority of whom came from peasantry. We were conscious of the fact that this struggle would be a difficult one, and the peasants would have to face all types of repression and oppression. But we were aware that on this question we have the support of all sections of the peasantry. Since our demands were just, and we had the support and sympathy of other sections of toiling people, we knew that the Government would have to yield before the united struggle of the peasantry. The Kisan Sabha, having used all methods of campaigning for more than 1½ years, was left with no alternative except to lead the peasantry in the struggle against the unjust burden of betterment levy.

Within a week the struggle was able to draw the attention of the whole state. Thousands used to accompany the Satyagrahis. The Satyagrahi *jathas* used to tour the villages, arousing the people. A new upsurge was witnessed when the whole villages, including men, women, children, used to gether to welcome the Satyagrahis. A new cultural revival took place. Boys and girls composed new songs about the plight of peasantry and heroism expressed during the struggle. Such a broad unity of the peasantry was never forged in any movement in Punjab. Poor and middle peasants participated from the beginning in the movement but the rich peasants also enthusiastically joined it. Hundreds of *numberdars* (revenues collectors), *panchas* and *sarpanchas* took part in the movement. Many *numberdars* tore the slips for the collection of betterment levy. How widely based the support for this movement was, could be understood from the fact that the leaders and ministers of the ruling party could not hold any meeting in any village for two months; they were even afraid of entering the villages. This movement

completely broke the political barriers, village after village as a whole began supporting the movement. Congress, Akali, Communist and non-party peasants, all participated in the movement and defended the movement as peasants; that too under the flag of the Kisan Sabha. Although agricultural workers were not directly affected by the betterment levy, hundreds of them courted arrest and expressed solidarity with the movement. This strengthened the alliance of the agricultural workers with the peasants. The Kisan Sabha's support to the food movement, supporting their demands for wages and land also contributed to this. By the end of February the atmosphere of the whole state was galvanised and anti-betterment levy struggle drew the attention of the people of the whole state. It was an all-in peasant unity against the Government.

The Government was put completely on the defensive. It got isolated from its own peasant base. But since it was a struggle against a major policy issue, the Government did not wish to relent easily. So, it tried to create a division amongst the peasants and resorted to all types of oppressive and repressive measures. Immediately after the beginning of the movement, the Chief Minister, Pratap Singh Kairon announced that only 50 crores of rupees would be collected as betterment levy out of a total amount of Rs. 104 crore. These 50 crores, he said, would comprise of 38 crores as loan and 12 crores as interest. He asked the Kisan Section of the Congress to hold public meetings in the villages on this basis, but they could not succeed. Kisans were not prepared to listen to such promises. After five days of the starting of the struggle, on February 6, the Government came out with announcement setting up a Committee to go into the problem of betterment levy tax. This Committee held its first meeting on February 11. The Chief Minister explained to the Committee his desire to shift 50 per cent of the expenditure to the Bhakra-Nangal scheme and promised to consider other proposals. But when the Congress propaganda failed to weaken the struggle on the basis of concessions and promises, they resorted to severe repression. Warrants of arrest were issued against all the Kisan Sabha and Communist workers. But the Government did not succeed in arresting them. Then the police started looting the villages,

beating the inhabitants and auctioning their belongings in the name of recovery of the fines imposed on the Satyagrahis.

From the beginning of March the oppressive machinery of the state was further geared. A plan was hatched on March 3, according to which many villages, which were the stronghold of the movement, were encircled by the armed police and merciless beatings and looting were resorted to. On March 3 firing was resorted to in Dhariwal, Distt. Jullundar, and on March 5, in village Aitiana, Distt. Ludhiana, leading to the martyrdom of one man and two women. Police then organised a siege of village Sherpur where the armed police surrounded the whole village and directed the machine guns towards the village. In Jullunder District sieges of Khayala, Charniara, Bundala and Roorka Kalan villages were organised by the armed police in the same way. Indiscriminate loot was resorted to. In the other places peasants and workers were dragged to the police stations and mercilessly beaten. The Government resorted to such a repression to suppress the movement that these acts were reminiscent of the martial law of 1919 promulgated by the British. The Government officials took the law into their hands; judiciary and executive became tools in the hands of ruling party. There was no written order issued for any action. The officials did whatever they wanted. In the repressive methods they even surpassed the British rulers. Lathi charge, tear-gas, firing, looting became the order of the day. But the Government did not confine even to this. Hundreds of men and women were arrested in false cases of encounters with the police. Many Communists and Kisan workers were declared absconders, their properties were confiscated. No worker was left against whom the warrants were not issued. Functioning of the office of the Kisan Sabha was made impossible. The daily organ of the Communist Party, *Navan Zamana* was forced to stop publication because all the staff were arrested and sent to prison. All these were aimed at crushing the voice of the peasants.

Along with severe repression, the Government tried to use the media and a section of the press to force the Kisan Sabha and its leaders to surrender. Many stories were released to the press, such as "the Communists want to convert Jullunder Distt. into Telangana". Following this news, repression in Jullunder

was intensified. On March 11, the Chief Minister made a statement in the State Assembly that the Communists were conspiring to seize power. The next day firing was resorted to in village Narur, district Kapurthala, where five people, including one woman, laid down their lives. A news was released that Communists were trying to organise revolt in erstwhile PEPHU area, and the next day hundreds of policemen let loose terror in district Sangroor. The Government also tried to spread slander that the movement was politically motivated and did not serve the general interests of the peasants. When no more place was there in the prisons to accommodate the Satyagrahis, the police resorted to beating of the Satyagrahis, arresting them, putting them in trucks and then releasing them in far-flung areas. In spite of all this the movement went on strengthening, both in scope and intensity. The mood of the people was such that when the staff of the Party organ were arrested, in two-day time many came forward and got the paper started again. The repression and terror could not suppress the movement, and unity of the peasantry could not be weakened. This was proved by the fact that not a single Satyagrahi, despite torture and beating, apologised to the Government. This showed mass enthusiasm and support. The repression which was let loose against the Satyagrahis in Sangroor district reminded people of the beating in Guru-ka-bagh during the Akali movement. The same was the condition in Bhatinda and Ferozpur. In Jullunder, where the police resorted to more repression than anywhere else, people in large number offered Satyagraha after the siege of the villages. When the terror regime was established in the stronghold of the movement a *jatha* of a hundred women took up the challenge and began touring the district. The reception which was given to this *jatha* of women before their arrest, was unprecedented. It showed that no force could crush the peasant movement. The decisions which the Action Committee took on March 15 to intensify the struggle were responded to in such a way that at the time of the withdrawal of the struggle on 22nd, 250 Satyagrahis had already reached Chandigarh to open a second front, and hundreds of Satyagrahis were squatting in Moga, Bhatinda, Sangroor and other places while thousands were ready to join them. Even people of the

districts of Hoshiapur, Gurdaspur and Amritsar, which were not affected by the betterment levy tax, had decided to join the movement in support of the peasants of the other districts. The scale of the movement being what it was, no measure of the Government was able to suppress the movement.

The picture would not be complete if I fail to mention the role which the women played during the struggle. Three women became martyrs due to the police firing. Women from Sangroor and Jullunder districts courted arrest, defying all types of repression and oppression. They accepted the challenge when the police encircled the villages and fought back. They showed unparalleled heroism in the face of police repression.

The story of the anti-betterment levy struggle will be incomplete without reference to the help rendered by the late Comrade A.K. Gopalan, at that time President of the AIKS, and other Communist members of Parliament. Comrade A.K. Gopalan was man of the masses and after getting the news of struggle anywhere, he would reach the place to raise his voice against oppression and in defence of the interests of the people fighting their battles. I was underground then and came to know about the firing in Dhariwal, Jullundur district, on March 2, within hours of its happening. I established contact with A.K. Gopalan and, before sunrise, he was in Dhariwal inspiring the people who were still being terrorised by the huge police force camping in the village. Defying police he went from house to house, addressed the villagers and expressed solidarity. Again, when firing took place in Aitiana he left Delhi to be with the people at this hour of trial but this time the Government was able to stop him on the way and served with the externment orders. But the Government could not stop his voice being raised in support of the Punjab peasants in struggle through press and on the floor of the Parliament, condemning the unheard of repression unleashed against the peasants of Punjab. Because of his active participation in the struggle he is even today remembered by the peasants in all corners of the state. The Communist parliamentary group also sent another delegation to visit Punjab when police had laid a siege of villages. They were able to see for themselves as to how the Government had instituted a regime of lawlessness and terror in Punjab in utter violation of every

right that is guaranteed under the Indian constitution. They said in the Parliament that neither civil nor criminal law appeared to be in operation in Punjab.

The Action Committee was constantly reviewing the situation and overcoming the weaknesses to further intensify the movement. With the massive support it acquired, it was estimated that movement could be continued easily for another two months. Arrangements were also made to see that during the harvest season the movement continued in some form. The strength of the movement became further confirmed to the Government when it resorted to the tactics of releasing the Satyagrahis after arresting them. The Government was not able to collect the betterment levy anywhere, excepting some isolated villages in far away areas. Thousands of volunteers were ready to offer Satyagraha. In spite of warrants and confiscation of properties of the workers of Kisan Sabha, large number of workers could not be arrested and remained active, organising and developing the movement. This movement was creating significant impacts on the other states too. The state Kisan Sabha of Rajasthan had started organising demonstrations against the betterment levy tax and started Satyagraha. In March 1959, the peasants of Bihar organised a demonstration of 20,000 in Patna on various demands of the peasants, including the cancellation of betterment levy.

Severe repression had only enraged the people. Because of all these factors it was not possible for the Government to continue repression against the movement for a long time. The whole administration was paralysed. Punjab had become a police state. The Government was left with no alternative but to surrender before the movement. The weakness of the Government was shown from the fact that the President and the General Secretary of the state Congress were moving from March 3 onward for a compromise. They met Ajoy Ghosh, General Secretary of CPI, in this connection and promised further reduction in the tax, increase in the instalments and exemption of poor peasants from the tax. The Chief Minister himself announced the reduction of tax from Rs. 104 crore to 50 crore; and accepted the demands of the Kisan Sabha to assign 50 per cent of the expenditure to power projects which caused a further reduc-

tion of Rs. 8 crore. Everybody knew that the Government would not stand against this mass upsurge of the peasants for long. It was only a question of a few days.

### *WITHDRAWAL OF THE STRUGGLE*

Unfortunately, the Congress leaders and the Chief Minister succeeded in resorting to manoeuvre for the withdrawal of struggles. They approached the General Secretaries of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha for this purpose and made various proposals, including those mentioned earlier. The Central leaders could not assess the mood of the masses and were afraid of growing repression. They did not know that the peasantry did not always come into action, but when it moves it has a big potential. They fell into the trap and agreed to withdraw the struggle without reference to the Action Committee which was guiding the struggle on the spot. This was unheard of. In fact, it was only on the 19th that, on the basis of the decisions of the Action Committee, I had warned the Central leaders not to fall in the trap of the Congress leaders. On 20th again, when the Chief Minister approached me with the same proposals through the Speaker of the Assembly, Gurdial Singh Dhillon, I rejected them. Then, on 22nd, I heard the news about withdrawal of the movement.

It was a big question now : what to do ? There was a danger of disruption in the ranks of the Kisan Sabha which could affect the unity of the peasantry which was forged during the struggle. This withdrawal was a great set back to the movement. It created such a situation that had the Action Committee not taken certain steps, the kisan movement would have faced a great disruption.

### *AFTER THE WITHDRAWAL*

The Action Committee assessed the whole situation arising out of the withdrawal, took note of the overall promises made about the acceptance of the demands, and announced that if the Government did not fulfil the promises made to the Central leaders, it would again start the struggle after the harvest. It was a well known fact that the Kisan Sabha had called off the anti-betterment levy Satyagraha on March 22, 1959, in res-

response to the oft-repeated appeals of the Governor, the Irrigation Minister and the Speaker with the object of creating a cordial atmosphere for a negotiated settlement. In a statement issued on March 22 it said in response to the appeals and requests, the Punjab Kisan Sabha had decided to withdraw the Satyagraha. It earnestly hoped that this would pave the way for negotiations between the Government and itself. On March 21, when Com. Ajoy Ghosh, Com. Prasad Rao, General Secretary, Kisan Sabha, and Pandit Ram Kishan Bhadolia met the Chief Minister, he again gave a categorical assurance regarding substantial reduction in the levy, spreading it over a longer period of instalment payments, and ending all repressive measures. It was at their advice that the movement was withdrawn by the Punjab Kisan Sabha on March 22.

But after the withdrawal the Government changed its attitude. It could not bear with the tremendous unity of the peasants forged during the movement. Some steps were taken in accordance with the assurances. Satyagrahis were released and warrants against the leaders of the Kisan Sabha were cancelled. Realisation of fines was also stopped. But it was most astonishing that the Chief Minister suddenly went back over his assurances for further reduction in the quantum of levy, spreading over several instalments and other possible reliefs to the peasants. The forcible collection of advance payment were stepped up with aid of police force in a most provocative manner. Cases were not withdrawn against some 500 kisans who were charged with alleged violence ; on the other hand, fresh cases were cooked up against Kisan Sabha leaders and workers and militant Satyagrahis. To give one glaring example, late Com. Hardit Singh Bhathal, Vice President of Punjab Kisan Sabha, a veteran, was assaulted by the police. 40 kisans were arrested from his village under Section 107/151, a reign of terror was let loose in the village, and a police post of 25 was deployed there. Thus, repression in a very vindictive and crude form continued in the post-withdrawal period.

I will be failing in my duty if I do not mention that such a peaceful movement, defying all types of repression and oppression, could not have been led to the successful conclusion without the proper and timely guidance provided by the Action



Committee. Punjab was then turned into a police state but the Action Committee which was underground was regularly meeting, almost every week, taking stock of the situation, deciding about the measures to counter the propaganda of the Government as well as its repressive measures. We were in constant touch with the district action committees. This collective functioning helped us to meet all the exigencies and, even at the time of withdrawal, inspite of serious blunders, we were able to keep the organisation and cadre united. We had evolved such a mechanism that we were in regular touch with daily developments. People, irrespective of their political affiliations, were providing protection to us. Whether they were Congressmen, Akalis or Communists, they were acting as peasants and were looking towards us as defenders of their interests. This massive support enabled us to meet any difficult situation. I myself had visited all the places which were targets of attack by the Government to crush the movement. Timely intervention and guidance helped very much. People themselves had evolved various forms of struggle and did not allow any demoralisation to set in. One day at 11 p.m. I was informed by a courier that the police had laid a siege of Bundala and Rurka Kalan with the machine guns directed towards the villages. I, along with Darshan Singh Canadian, immediately left for those villages and reached there at 2 a.m. We established contact with our people and came to know that women and children have organised in various *jathas* to fight back the police. They showed such a determination that police could not dare attack the villagers. All other members of the Action Committee were doing the same. Throughout the struggle the Action Committee remained unified and thus became a great source of strength.

### *IMPACT OF THE MOVEMENT*

Apart from the concessions it could win for the peasantry, the movement had a bid impact on the democratic movement of the state. This movement gave a big blow to the communal forces, and a great sense of unity developed amongst the peasantry, and between the peasantry and the agricultural workers. In the preceding years the communal forces were very active and successfully created a wedge between the different communities.

Living in the state. Even the democratic movement did not remain unaffected by communal propaganda. But the anti-betterment levy struggle created a new atmosphere of unity and communal harmony. Satyagrahi *jathas*, which used to come to the cities to court arrest, apart from raising slogans about their demands, used to raise the slogan "one who instigates Hindus against the Sikhs and vice versa is the enemy of the country". This made the people of the cities realise that there was a force which stood for communal harmony in the state, and peasants in the villages realised that those who arouse communal passions had no interest in their demands, that it was only through their unity that they could win their demands. The movement came as a set back to those who were trying to create a wedge between rural and the town population. Punjab was able to witness the growing unity between peasants and the agricultural workers, and the sympathy and support of urban population.

This struggle also strengthened the unity between people of Haryana and Punjab. Earlier, during the Hindi Samiti movement, communal forces had begun influencing Haryana. They tried to instigate people of Haryana against people of Punjab, especially Sikhs. The movement gave a rebuff to these forces. The peasants of Haryana realised that their interests were linked up with those of the Punjab peasants. While 70 per cent of the total betterment levy tax was imposed on the peasants of Haryana, it were the Punjabi peasants who were in the forefront of the struggle and made tremendous sacrifices. It was for the first time that the peasants of Haryana and Punjab unitedly fought the struggle.

Through this struggle the Kisan Sabha was able to spread its influence to newer areas and emerged as an independent organisation of the peasantry, capable of rallying the peasantry irrespective of their political affiliations. The struggle was a great set back for the Congress party, whose anti-peasant and anti-people character was exposed.

### LESSONS OF THE STRUGGLE

In organising a struggle on a major policy question it is necessary to use all methods such as public meetings, representations, demonstrations, etc., so that the backward sections of the

masses, through their direct experience, come to realise the necessity of direct action. It is also necessary to win the support and sympathy of the broad, democratic masses by convincing them of the justness of the demands. This enabled the movement to widen its base and to fight against all types of repressive measures.

If a struggle is conducted on the issues affecting the whole peasantry, broadest possible unity of the peasantry can be forged. The experience of the anti-betterment levy struggle shows that, in spite of the efforts of the Government to divide the peasantry, even the rich peasants became active supporters of the movement.

The experiences of the anti-betterment levy struggle also proved that if Kisan Sabha takes up the demands of agricultural workers and supports them, it is easy to mobilise them in support of the peasantry.

The anti-betterment levy struggle also proved what important role women are capable of playing in such struggles, defying all types of repression and oppression, courageously facing lathis and bullets. They even inspired the menfolk through their heroism and spirit of sacrifice.

The struggle also proved that a united movement can face any kind of repression and no amount of attack can cow it down.

### MOVEMENT CONTINUED

As a result of the movement the betterment levy was reduced from Rs. 123 crore to 33 crore but the Government went back on many prior promises made. It wanted to break the unity of the peasantry forged in the struggle.

Immediately after the harvest was over, we again began mobilising the peasantry and gave a call of state-wide demonstrations on June 15, 1959, for the fulfilment of promises made. Two lakh peasants participated in the demonstrations.

In July again, the Kisan Sabha decided to send a *jatha* of 25 veteran kisan leaders led by Com. Dalip Singh Tapiala, President of Punjab Kisan Sabha, to tour the state for two weeks to further mobilise the peasantry behind its demands and to reach Chandigarh on the 10th to meet the Governor and the Chief

Minister. Starting from Jullundur on July 25, 1959, the *jathas* visited all the districts affected by betterment levy. Thousands of peasants gathered everywhere and assured their full support for the fulfilment of their demands. The Governor assured the deputation that "the whole question is under consideration of the Government and the decisions of the Government with respect to the question of betterment levy will soon be arrived at". But there was no response from the Chief Minister.

The Kisan Sabha was simultaneously fighting legal battles in the courts. It collected Rs. 70 thousand for defence, and many lawyers offered their services voluntarily. We were able to get the comrades released who were involved in false cases, punitive posts were also withdrawn and fines were returned.

In spite of the adamant attitude of the Government we continued to mobilise the peasantry. Our demands had won the support of the whole peasantry, irrespective of political affiliations, and the Government had failed to break this unity.

This issue was again taken up in 1962 elections. During 1963-65 we had to face severe repression at the hands of the Government. Most of the leading cadres were to spend more than two years in prison. After coming out from prison in 1966, the issue of acceptance of remaining demands in connection with betterment levy tax was again taken up. The Congress party was getting isolated. The 1967 elections saw the breaking of the monopoly of Congress rule and coming into existence of 8 non-Congress Ministries, including those in West Bengal and Kerala where our Party was a strong force and Kisan Sabha exercised universal influence. In Punjab, too, Akali Coalition Ministry came into power. We again raised the question of the remaining demands of the anti-betterment levy struggle and forced the Government to accept them. The whole of the betterment levy was cancelled, proving the justness of the cause of the peasantry and the stand of the Kisan Sabha. The total tax of betterment levy which originally was Rs. 123 crore and later with interest came to Rs. 142 crore and was reduced to Rs. 33 crore after the struggle, was now fully abolished, putting an end to the unjust attitude of the Government on this issue. The sacrifices made by the peasants in the anti-betterment levy struggle where 11 persons, including three women, had laid down their lives,

hundreds were tortured, and thousands faced lathis, bore fruit.

In the post-independence India one does not find other examples where such a wide struggle was conducted against major policies of the Government and which forced the Government to cancel betterment levy tax of as high an order as Rs. 142 crore. The Punjab peasants, under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha, thus wrote another glorious chapter in the history of organised peasant movements. □

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

The first pamphlet in the series, *Revolt of the Workers*, by Godavari Parulekar (Vice-President, AIKS) the second pamphlet, *Tehsaga Struggle of Bengal*, written by Abdullah Rasul (Vice-President, AIKS) and the third pamphlet, *Kerala, Pannappu-Vijayar and Other Struggles*, written by V. Achuthanandan (member, CPI(M) Polit Bureau) and L.K. Ramakrishnan (President of the Kerala unit of the AIKS) who were participants in these struggles, are already on sale.

The fourth pamphlet, *Anti-Betterment Levy Struggle of Punjab*, written by Harkishan Singh Surjeet (member, CPI(M) Polit Bureau) is now in your hand.

The other pamphlets are :

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

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

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

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

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