

Armed Peasant Struggle In The Palia Area of Lakhimpur

(Report of an interview with the revolutionaries of the Palia area)

[From Liberation, Vol. II, No. 6 (April 1969).]

What we call Palia area is a part of Lakhimpur district in U.P. and is situated in its northern *Terai* region. When we began our Kisan struggle in this area, we had influence only in 11 villages. These 11 villages stretch in a line to the south of Nepal.

Viewed from the angle of topography and life of the people, this area is a very long belt stretching from Nainital district and covering all the *Terai* region of Pilibhit, Lakhimpur, Bahraich and Gonda, and extends south from Bahraich to Sitapur district along the banks of the river Sarjoo.

The whole of this area was previously covered with forests and was inhabited by the tribal people, the Tharus, and other very poor peasants of the districts.

The Congress Government invited the landless people from the Eastern districts of U.P., namely, Gorakhpur, Deoria, Ballia, Azamgarh and Gazipur, to plough the land. Promises of 10 to 20 acres of land to each peasant and offers of aid and loan were made. Lakhs and lakhs of landless and poor people, oppressed and exploited by landlords and money-lenders, migrated to these areas in quest of land.

But very few got the promised land. Landlords, Congress and Jana Sangh leaders and even some capitalists got huge plots of land ranging from 500 acres to 2000 acres and more. Besides, thousands of acres were forcibly occupied by them illegally with the help of *goonda* gangs. They had most of these legalized afterwards by fraudulent means. The Tharus were driven out to Nepal; other poor peasants were also driven out.

The land actually belonged to the poor peasants who had cut down the forests and ploughed the land. But the rich landlords tried to drive them out of it and grab it. The poor peasants who had had to fight against the beasts of the forest when they first came here, had now to fight against human beasts.

But the fight of these poor people had been mostly defensive for the last ten years. Different parties invariably came to this area, especially before elections, shed crocodile tears at the fate of these peasants, preached "peaceful" occupation of the land, used the landless as their election cadre and vanished when the elections were over. The peasants remained in occupation till they were strong and lost the land the moment their vigilance slackened or their organization grew weak. Then they worked either as share-croppers or as agricultural labourers or as debt slaves.

After the last general election the people of this area had a new experience. The non-Congress parties, which had been shedding tears previously, themselves began to drive the peasants out of their lands as soon as a non-Congress Government came to power. Pratap Singh, a P.S.P. minister, who himself had established a colony of "illegal" occupants (in Nainital district) just before the elections and had named it Pratapnagar after his own name, used 'liquor-drunk' elephants to smash the colony at the behest of his own ministry almost immediately after becoming a minister.

All the peaceful methods have failed. People have seen the result of peaceful *satyagraha* in Sampurnanagar in our Palia area. All legal measures go against the peasants.

The above *satyagraha* was much disliked by the revisionist leaders of the State. Even the neo-revisionist leaders opposed developing the area as a base 'lest the battle there might turn into armed struggle'. Every party knows that the land problem cannot be solved by peaceful means. It is only a long, protracted guerrilla struggle that can resolve it, so no political party thinks of a sustained movement for land. The revisionist and neo-revisionists do not like to develop even a Party unit for fear of armed struggle by the peasants.

Just after Naxalbari, the whole of this *Terai* region resounded with the call of the peasants' struggle for land. The renegade Dange clique and the socialists at once rushed into the area to administer their "sweet" dose of "peaceful" struggle with impotent calls from their non-existent "peaceful Bhoomi and Hal Senas." But the medicine did not serve the purpose. The renegades ran away and vanished as soon as they saw approximately 600 guns in the hands of the landlords' and rich farmers' *goonda* gangs in Naupara (Bahraich) area alone.

Our unit in Palia then consisted of only 12 regular members, only three of whom were ready to take up arms, and the rest were at best sympathizers.

The art of warfare can be learnt only through warfare. We could not fully assimilate the teachings of Comrade Mao and thought that the 'rural base area of peasant struggle' could be built up only by a handful of revolutionaries sitting in the forest. Several months passed before we again cared to study the mass line of Chairman Mao and began to go to the people. The mass line is being assimilated by us only gradually during the course of our struggle.

Though we mainly popularized the *Quotations* from Chairman Mao and could not properly link the thought of Mao Tse-tung with the revolutionary practice of our own area or the country, yet the little work that we did in popularizing the thought has proved that once the thought of Mao Tse-tung is grasped by the people, it will become a material force for the furtherance of the revolution. Our people could not have become so firm and persistent but for the little work that we did in the beginning.

The peasants began their struggle for land in the months of January and February 1968 and the area witnessed a great upheaval in the months of May and June when there were big peasant fights in a Pilibhit Terai farm and Patian, Ghola and Ibrahimपुरi farms in our area against the *goonda* gangs of the big farmers, and lands were occupied. It was during these months that the people saw the police force trembling and the S.D.O. (Sub-Divisional Officer) pale at the sight of

the armed people. The Gholia farm struggle, in which the *goondas* got a good thrashing at the hands of the people, turned the whole course of events. 15 of the *goondas* fell down on the field wounded; in three big farms the rich farmers were deprived of their properties and their arms captured.

All the 11 villages remained just a P.A.C. (Provincial Armed Constabulary) camp for about two weeks. Then three of these police camps were maintained for about three more months. Now in the last two months, the police organized sudden raids on the villages five times. However, almost all our fighters are safe. The people hide them in their midst. Only a few have gone to the forest.

Since then, we have also been trying to organize guerrilla activity, specially against the farmers, to seize their guns. In some of the cases we failed. Failures could not be avoided in the beginning. After all, we were neither thieves nor dacoits nor trained in military affairs. Military knowledge and courage come only after some experience. Now in some cases we have succeeded. Our failures have taught us important lessons, our successes have enthused us. We hope to gain more successes in the future.

But there are many failings and shortcomings, which we have discussed in our meetings. They are of a very general character. But they are there.

Just after the police raids we went into passive defence. For some time defence was necessary as "a means of supplementing attack or preparing to go over to the attacks." But now the time has come to proceed further towards attack. We find that our preparations are not yet thorough.

This failing of ours arose because of certain difficulties, which we are trying hard to overcome.

Our second failing arises out of our wrong understanding, our underestimation of the role of people's organization. We have neither a Party, nor any mass organization but some units. We tried to set up revolutionary peasant committees in three of our villages, but the manner in which they were constituted appears to be faulty; they could not function.

It is only now that we have begun to discuss the programme of our area. Previously we declared that our intention was to drive out all the big farmers of our area. Now we have formulated our policy. Big farmers, *goondas*, corrupt political leaders and money-lenders are our enemies. The area has to be cleared of these elements. The big farmers are the landlords of this area, but those farmers who do not engage in feudal forms of exploitation and oppression and side with the revolution will get lenient treatment at the hands of the revolutionary power. The landless and poor peasants, who constitute about 70% of the people of this area, are our own force. It is on them that we mainly rely. Whether they are Tharus, Raisikhs, original residents of the district, people from the eastern districts or Punjabis, all the poor people are our friends. The settlers who have got legal rights over their plots of land ranging from 10 to 20 acres are also our allies. They are also being oppressed by the big farmers, landlords and money-lenders. We will maintain firm alliance with them and fight for their interests.

Till now our struggle was confined to the problem of land. This issue is no doubt the most important issue. The struggle for land will be carried on. One of the biggest farmers, who was most notorious for his anti-people crimes, has fled away giving his land to another fellow on sharecropping basis. Others are also trying to do the same. We are declaring that no such sharecropping will be permitted by the people's revolutionary force. All the land of such landlords belongs to the people. Only the revolutionary committee can make a settlement of such vacant lands. We will allow only landless, poor and even ordinary peasants to plough such lands, but if one gives any share of the produce to the landlord, one would be liable to punishment and forfeiture of all the grains.

Now we have decided to take up other issues also. We are going to appeal to the peasants to stop all payment of a share of the produce to the landlords and big farmers.

Here, in this area the rent a peasant has to pay is Rs. 5.60 per acre, whereas for a farmer it is only Re 1 or a maximum of Rs. 1.50. We will ask the people to stop all payment of land rent. Payment of dues on production basis will be charged by the revolutionary committee.

We will also ask the peasants to stop all payments of old debts to the money-lenders.

The armed struggle for land will become a mighty torrent when it is combined with these mass struggles.

Till now, our area of influence has extended from 11 to 30 villages. The sparks of armed struggle have begun to shine in Nainital also. We expect that our slogans will give a new impetus to the movement there. Of course, the Party, mass organizations and more organized batches of fighters are required to lead the struggles of the people. The thought of Mao Tse-tung will be our guide.

Nine members of our first squad have taken a vow with the Red Book in their hands to work as a disciplined party and lead the revolution through to the end.

We are very glad that the Indian revolutionaries are organizing a genuine Communist party

The necessity for such a Party was being felt by us for a long time.

Under the leadership of such a Party we will be able to overcome all the difficulties and to lead the revolution in our region.