

Walter Hauser, Kailash Chandra Jha, eds. and trans.. *Culture, Vernacular Politics, and the Peasants: India, 1889-1950: An Edited Translation of Swami Sahajanand's Memoir*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2015. 708 pp. n.p., cloth, ISBN 978-93-5098084-2.

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As the subtitle indicates, this is an edited translation of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati's *Mera Jivan Sangharsh (My Life Struggle)*. Sahajanand wrote this memoir, in Hindi, while jailed in 1940 for opposing British rule. By age fifty-one, he had lived many lives: as a boy from a village family, an avid student, a *sannyasi* (ascetic or wandering holy man), a scholar of Hindu scripture, a campaigner for Brahman self-respect, a Gandhian leader in the freedom movement, and (in the 1930s) an organizer of peasants fighting oppressive landlords. Even for India, this was a remarkable sequence of vocations, testifying to Sahajanand's intellectual brilliance, asceticism, and devotion to the poor. Serving the peasants, he found, was his best way of serving God.

Walter Hauser, professor emeritus of history at the University of Virginia, edited and translated this memoir with Kailash Chandra Jha. Much of Hauser's career has been devoted to Sahajanand's life and works. Hauser's generous endnotes to each chapter provide essential background on Indian society, religion, history, and politics. These notes show meticulous attention to detail plus a broad and convincing grasp of the changes confronting India in the first half of the twentieth century. Careful reading of notes and text is rewarding but challenging. (For example, chapter

IIIC, on the peasant movement of the 1930s, is eighty-seven pages long; the accompanying notes are eighty-one pages.)

In homage to Sahajanand and his editor, it seems appropriate to offer a few words on the varied phases of Sahajanand's life. He grew up in a village in Ghazipur district in the eastern United Provinces, near Bihar. His parents were poor but encouraged his schooling. One day in the harvest season, he was told to stay home and tend the oxen, yet "it was not acceptable for me to absent myself from school even for a day" (p. 15). The oxen ate part of the harvest, but Sahajanand went unpunished. It seems that he decided what was acceptable, then and later.

In high school he took a new direction, deciding to become a *sannyasi* and seek salvation through renunciation. He had been married at about the age of fourteen, but his wife died soon after. While his family was planning a second marriage, he slipped away to Varanasi, the holy city; took the vows of *sannyas*; and severed all family ties.

For the next few years, Sahajanand traveled far and wide, mostly on foot, begging for food and eating once a day. He hoped to find a guru, a guide to salvation—hidden deep in a forest, perhaps. But the holy men he met were disappointing:

some were ignorant, others waxed fat on donations, still others were obsessed with meaningless austerities. Disillusioned, he returned to Varanasi.

There he decided to focus on scriptural studies. He learned a great deal but found that some printed texts contained errors that went uncorrected. And some teachers taught whatever was in demand, whether they were trained in a given tradition of Hindu philosophy or not. Moreover, he found the schools too worldly, permeated with striving for wealth and influence.

In 1914, as salvation continued to elude him, Sahajanand accepted an invitation to a regional meeting of Bhumi-har Brahmans, a large caste of landlords and tenant cultivators in the United Provinces and Bihar. Not known as priestly or religious, Bhumi-hars felt that other Brahmans looked down on them. Steeped in the pious tradition of his own (Jujhautiya) Brahman caste, Sahajanand decided it was his duty to promote Bhumi-har self-respect.

Many castes had started self-respect movements, but Sahajanand took an unusual, possibly unique, approach. Rather than write Sanskrit verses on the divine ancestry of this caste (for which there were many precedents), he gathered empirical evidence. Touring several districts, he documented marriages between Bhumi-hars and others, such as Maithil and Kanyakubja Brahmans, including some families of great nobility and wealth. These marriages went both ways. (If brides go only one way, bride givers are assumed to be lower in status than bride receivers.) All this evidence was published in a four-hundred-page book, Sahajanand's first of many. If you wonder how a *sannyasi* and religious scholar became a systematic ethnographer, I have no explanation except that he was brilliant and eccentric.

In the 1920s his relations with Bhumi-har leaders (who were great landlords) turned sour. Sahajanand had assumed that society could be improved—made more pious, educated, even ethical—from the top down. He later decided this

was a mistake. In the 1929 meeting of the Bhumi-har assembly, Sahajanand opposed the landlord who was elected president. The meeting fell apart and was never reconvened. That same year, he founded the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (or Peasant Assembly), the organization to which he devoted the rest of his life.

In 1919 Sahajanand had started reading newspapers and learning about politics. He met Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 and attended the historic meeting of the Indian National Congress in Nagpur. There the Congress adopted a stance of non-cooperation toward British rule and also resolved that the Congress would “seek the support of the voiceless and oppressed citizens of the nation—the peasants, the agricultural labourers, and the factory workers” (p. 201). The idea of grounding the nationalist movement in the will of the common people was Gandhi's, but Sahajanand would take this far more seriously than most Gandhians.

One step in his new vocation was focused on cows. In 1921 he organized a campaign, near Buxar in south Bihar, aimed at delinking the annual *mela* or religious fair from the regional trade in cattle. Cow slaughter was a growing pretext for anti-Muslim agitation, and the fair provided a venue for the sale of cattle to Muslim butchers. Sahajanand thought that if this trade were suppressed there would be less Hindu-Muslim antagonism and disunity. He and other Congress workers asked the butchers to leave the fair, but this move was furiously opposed by Hindu landlords, temple priests, shopkeepers, and ferrymen—all who derived incomes, directly or indirectly, from the cattle trade, including many Hindu cultivators looking to offload surplus cattle. Sahajanand neatly described these interest groups and his growing suspicion of institutional religion, which “could be entirely superficial and a matter of complete hypocrisy.” He concluded that “it is in fact Hindus who are 100 per cent responsible for cow slaughter” (pp. 213-214).

Sahajanand was arrested in 1921 along with many other Congress workers. Jail was educational. While he followed Gandhi's instructions on civil disobedience to the letter, others did not. Some of the "first class [educated] political prisoners" demanded special treatment: good food, including milk, ghee, and sweets (p. 225). Sahajanand wondered what sort of mass movement had leaders demanding such treatment. The 1920s was a period of growing idealism for many, but he sensed the moral rot in some quarters.

The last half of the book concerns Sahajanand's work with the Kisan Sabha, or Peasant Assembly, which he founded in 1929. At first, he saw this as an extension of his work for the Congress, though later the Kisan Sabha was opposed by the Congress. He began by organizing meetings and demonstrations urging the government to set limits on landlord oppression. (Bihar was largely controlled by *zamindars*—great and small landlords who, in exchange for loyalty to the British, wielded unchecked power over the countryside. Their agents used violence to extort rents and other cesses from villagers in dire poverty.)

The Kisan Sabha gradually became more militant, partly in response to the 1934 earthquake that destroyed homes and fields over a wide area of north Bihar. The Kisan Sabha raised funds and organized relief camps, but instead of helping, the landlords seized relief loans granted to their tenants and forced them to sell whatever they had left—"utensils, goats, cattle"—to pay their rents (p. 414). Sahajanand appealed to Gandhi for help in shaming the landlords. Gandhi suggested that well-documented complaints be forwarded to the maharaja of Darbhanga, whose vast *zamindari* was in the earthquake area. After all, the maharaja's manager was a congressman; he would surely help. Sahajanand was appalled at this response. To document every complaint was not feasible during a massive relief operation. After years of fighting landlords, including this maharaja, Sahajanand knew that big landlords were not going to

express sympathy or even neutrality. His devotion to Gandhi ended abruptly.

Gandhi's reaction was shaped by high policy in the Indian National Congress, which was wooing landlords away from loyalty to the British. Unity against the British, not social justice, was paramount. In 1937, as a step toward self-rule, legislative elections were held in a number of provinces, including Bihar. Uncertain of his strategy, Sahajanand and the Kisan Sabha helped the Congress to victory in Bihar. Yet except for appointing committees that never issued reports, the new Congress ministry did nothing to curtail the *zamindars*.

That alliance between the Congress and landlords forced Sahajanand into doubt, though he remained committed to peasants. Some of his lieutenants were members of the Communist Party, and he began reading up on Marxism. When he was jailed, he wrote (after his memoir) a lengthy treatise interpreting the Hindu religious classic, the *Bhagavad Gita* in Marxist terms.

The long concluding chapter on peasant unrest in the 1930s was, to me, disappointing. Some passages recall the author's skill as ethnographer. For example, there was a prolonged struggle in Reora, in Gaya district: we read of the precipitating act of *extra* oppression, the brutalities of the landlords' agents, the tactics of resistance, and the peasants' gains. This partly appeases the hunger of anthropologists and historians for a participant's description of peasant resistance. But in general, Sahajanand's attention in this chapter is fixed less on his peasant base and more on his maneuvers vis-à-vis other national and provincial leaders. This focus will interest historians of the Indian freedom movement, but they already have abundant sources.

Straying into the geopolitical realm, Sahajanand lost his direction. In 1940 the Congress declined to oppose the British war effort, but the Communist Party of India (following Moscow's lead) did oppose. Sahajanand was so fed up with

the Congress and the Brits that he followed suit. That's what got him thrown in jail in 1940. This arrest was of no use to the villagers, yet shortly before it happened, he had vowed "to invest all my time and energy in the activities of the kisans" (the peasants) (p. 569).

It did not help when Adolf Hitler invaded Russia in 1941. The Communist Party reversed itself, declaring that the war against Hitler was not an imperialist war but a people's war. Sahajanand agreed, but this again meant nothing to the peasants. All this maneuvering fractured the leftist alliance that had supplied educated leaders to the peasant movement. Sahajanand lost touch with his base, and the left alliance fell in tatters. The villagers got national liberation instead of justice.

Sahajanand died in 1950, writing about class oppression but now without an active peasant movement to lead. This was sad, but the cumulative effects of his life struggle included the eventual abolition of *zamindari* landlordship in Bihar. He also left us this memoir, which offers a vivid portrait—much enhanced by the editorial notes—of life in India during the late colonial period.

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