



I N T E R V I E W S

The Interviews: An Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Organised peasant movements against landlords and the colonial power were an important feature of India's freedom movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Peasant agitations in the nineteenth century were sporadic and localised rather than organised. For instance, the Deccan riots in the Bombay Presidency, the Mappila revolts in Malabar, and the Santhal rebellion and the Indigo revolt in the Bengal Presidency were spontaneous, often violent, reactions of the peasantry against either British oppression or "landlord gangsterism." These uprisings were also quickly suppressed. For all the setbacks that these struggles suffered, they played a significant role in the history and consciousness of India's peasantry and people. In contrast, the more organised peasant movements of the twentieth century were often able to obtain lasting and long-term gains for the peasantry; these movements also laid the foundations for the establishment of peasant organisations, such as the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), in the 1930s, and for their growth in the post-Independence period.

In this issue, the *Review of Agrarian Studies* publishes three accounts of the trajectories of peasant movements in India after the early 1930s. These accounts are the products of long interviews that three students of agrarian India had with three leading figures of the AIKS, one each in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal. V. K. Ramachandran interviewed **P. Ramamurti** in 1982, 1983, and 1984; R. Ramakumar interviewed **E. K. Nayanar** in 2003; Aparajita Bakshi interviewed **Benoy Konar** in 2010. Together, these interviews present a remarkable picture of the modern history of peasant movements in India.

P. Ramamurti (PR) was a participant in the national movement from 1919. Inspired by Subramania Bharati, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and M. K. Gandhi, P. Ramamurti (1908–87) left school at the age of 11 and went to Allahabad to join the National School run by Jawaharlal Nehru and Purushottam Das Tandon. He later studied at the Presidency College, Madras (now Chennai), and at the Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. After 1929, PR became a Congress activist, and joined the movement of Dalit leather workers against practices of untouchability in the city of Madras. In 1933, PR began to read Marxist literature brought into India by the early Communists. In that year, he also met three of his future comrades in the Communist movement:

P. Sundarayya, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, and P. Krishna Pillai. In 1936, he joined the Congress Socialist Party and was a delegate at its second conference at Meerut. In 1937, he joined the Communist Party of India (CPI). In the 1940s, he was one of the first organisers of the agrarian movement in Thanjavur district. In 1952, PR was elected to the Madras Assembly from the Madurai North constituency. He was a founding leader of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and was elected its first General Secretary in 1970. In 1964, PR was elected to the first Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). P. Ramamurti, a Communist and mass leader renowned for his versatility and intellectual brilliance, and for a lifetime's commitment to class struggle, the worker-peasant alliance, and social reform and transformation, died on December 15, 1987.

In his interview with Ramachandran, PR draws on his close association with the national movement to provide deep insights into the complex relationship between landlords and the national movement. PR observes that it was in the 1930s that landlords finally joined the national movement, and the Congress party “acquired the character of a bourgeois-landlord party.” Two events impelled this change. First, by the 1930s, the Bardoli resolution had assured landlords that the Congress would not support rent default as a form of peasant protest. Secondly, the crash of agricultural prices after 1929 left landlords deeply disappointed with the British government.

PR also speaks about his role in the organisation of the agricultural labour movement in Tamil Nadu. In the 1940s, PR worked along with B. Srinivasa Rao to organise farm servants (*pannaiyal*) and other agricultural workers in Thanjavur. The frontline role of the Communists in organising Dalit agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu earned the Communist Party a special appellation: the “Pallan-Parayan Katchi,” or “the party of Pallars and Parayans.” In the interview, he speaks with this insight of experience on issues of caste and class in movements of agricultural workers.

E. K. Nayanar (1918-2004), who was Chief Minister of Kerala for three terms, was one of the most popular peasant leaders of the Malabar region of Kerala. He was born into a landlord family in the village of Kalliasseri in modern north Kerala. Like PR, Nayanar became a Communist in the 1930s after joining the national movement as a Congress worker. Nayanar's uncle, K. P. R. Gopalan, was a militant Congress organiser in Kalliasseri. It was under Gopalan's influence that Nayanar, as a schoolboy, was drawn to the national movement. As Nayanar says in the interview, his earliest activities in the national movement included participating in the struggles against untouchability and for Dalit children's rights to school education. Nayanar became a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the late 1930s and played an active role in the peasant movement in the 1940s. He was a participant in the Morazha and Kayyur agitations in the Kannur and Kasargode districts of Kerala. While he narrowly escaped being accused in the Morazha case (thanks perhaps to a mix-up to which he refers in the interview), he was listed as the third accused in the case related to the Kayyur struggle, when a policeman, in order to escape stoning by

peasant agitators, jumped into the Tejaswini river and drowned. The other accused in the Kayyur case were sentenced to death; Nayanar went underground until 1946, when the case against him was finally dropped.

During his six years underground in the Malabar and Travancore regions of Kerala, Nayanar continued his work in the peasant movement and the CPI. He worked for a while as a journalist in Alappuzha, and continued as a political organiser in Travancore. E. K. Nayanar was elected to Parliament (from Palakkad in 1967), and was elected six times to the Kerala Legislative Assembly. He was a member of the Polit Bureau of the CPI(M). He was Chief Minister of Kerala for three terms: 1980-1, 1987-91, and 1996-2001.

In the interview, Nayanar provides an overview of agrarian relations in colonial Malabar, where a most backward form of landlordism existed, and where the agrarian structure was characterised by complex forms of sub-infeudation of holdings and rack-renting. Agricultural workers were subjected to different types of social (particularly caste-based) and economic exploitation. The agrarian organisers of the 1930s were acutely aware that the caste system represented social oppression and class exploitation and of the need to fight both together. Nayanar makes the important observation that the early struggles in Malabar in respect of the cooperative movement and public distribution of food (and to this list, we may add the struggle for school education of Dalits), all important institutions in post-1957 Kerala, derived from the struggle for land reform. He notes: “That is the uniqueness of the political history of Malabar.” An important part of the interview is Nayanar’s description of the changes in the agrarian regime wrought by the land reform implemented by Kerala’s first government in 1957.

Benoy Krishna Konar (1930-2014) was a towering leader of the peasant movement in West Bengal. He was born into a peasant family in Memari in Bardhaman district. Even as early as his student days, he was influenced by Left leaders of the peasant movement such as Benoy Choudhury, and he joined the freedom movement. Konar was a student at the Bardhaman Raj College in 1948, the year the CPI was banned. He joined the Party in the same year, and helped coordinate the underground activities of the CPI in the district until the ban was revoked in 1952. From 1952 onwards, Konar was deeply involved in organising peasants and agricultural labourers in Bardhaman. In the 1970s and 1980s, he served as President and General Secretary of the AIKS in West Bengal. Between 1995 and 1999, he was the national president of the AIKS. Konar was elected three times to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly from Memari constituency.

In his interview with Aparajita Bakshi, Konar traces the history of land reform in West Bengal after the formation of the West Bengal Krishak Sabha in the 1930s. He explains how a peasant movement that began by raising local demands and providing relief to a famine-affected peasantry grew into a historic sharecroppers’ movement;

he calls the Tebhaga agitation “the first organised land movement in Bengal.” He also explains the political links that the Tebhaga movement had with other Indian peasant movements in the 1940s, and how hundreds of peasant activists gave their lives for the larger cause of emancipation. Konar traces the historical links between the food movement of the All India Kisan Sabha of the 1950s and the legacy of the Tebhaga movement.

The interview with Konar also deals with the two United Front governments of 1967 and 1969, in which Communists participated and initiated land reform with the participation of the peasantry. He describes how landlord elements colluded in the government’s downfall, and how renewed peasant struggles for land reform were instrumental in bringing a Left Front government to power in the State in 1977. Konar notes that, as a result of the struggles of the AIKS, ceiling laws were made applicable to households in practice even before any amendments were made to the law after 1977. Towards the end of the interview, Konar also makes insightful points about continuing challenges to the growth of the Left movement in rural West Bengal.

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