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Bronze sculpture by K.S. Radhakrishnan.

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“Education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world”.

Nelson Mandela

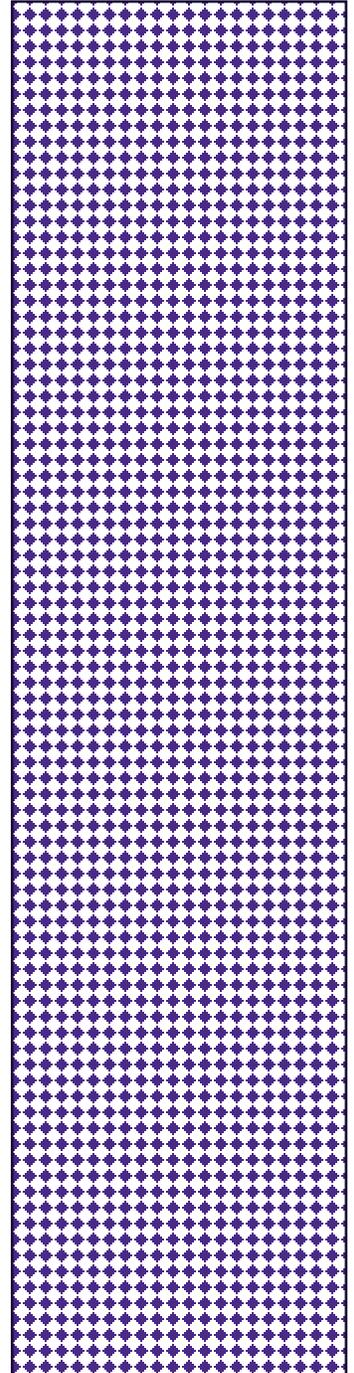
From Editor's Desk

Our aim through our Quarterly Nesletters is to introduce a very distinguished person in each issue who lived in our midst, but is generally unknown to the genaral piblic. In this issue of the Newsletter, we talk about **Walter Houser, Professor Emeritus, University of Virginia (USA)** and his connection to Bihar. As mentioned in the first issue of the Newsletter, a beginning has been made with the Bihar chapter. We would move on to the other states subsequently.

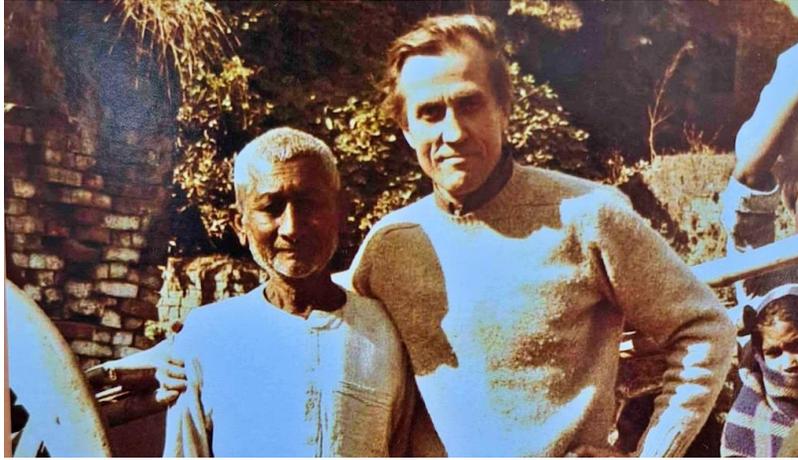
The 'Special Article', in this issue is on '**Economic resurgence of Bihar**'. This article is spread over several issues as it involves covering a large area. The article on '**Ashram Bhajanavali**', on the other hand, introduces the reader to the different kinds of *devotional songs* sung in the morning and evening prayers of Mahatma Gandhi.

In the last section on '**Poem**', we have once again a poetry written by Manoj Ranjan Sinha. I look forward to helpful suggestions from readers to make the Newsltter more popular. As usual, I request you to send us short aticles appropriate for the Quarterly Newsletter.

Sharat Kumar



WALTER HOUSER



(1927- 2025)

By Sharat Kumar

Walter Houser and Tomasson Jannuzi are two American scholars who did seminal works on the peasantry of Bihar. Walter Houser came to Bihar in the late 1950s and Jannuzi in the mid 1960s. While the former did his Ph.D. dissertation titled '*The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, 1929-1942: A Study of an Indian Peasant Movement*', Jannuzi's book titled '*Agrarian Crisis in India: The Case of Bihar*' was published in 1974. Walter Houser's thesis was published much later in 1990.

Walter Houser joined the University of Virginia (USA) after submitting his Ph.D. thesis. He was Professor Emeritus of the University at his death. Prof. Houser's Ph.D. research, in great measure, revolves around the **Kisan Movement** led by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati (1889-1950). Quite obviously, he did not have the opportunity to meet Swamiji. Nevertheless, together with his collaborator Kailash Jha, he translated Swamiji's autobiography, which was published in 2015.

Prior to the publication of this biography, a Conference on Sahajanand Saraswati was organised in Delhi that was attended by me. Significantly, the background paper circulated during the Conference suggested that Swamiji took "Sanyas" on India's Independence and did not take interest in the country's politics thereafter. At the request of the organizers, I had carried with me copies of the letters that Swamiji had written to Parmanand Prasad, my father. I handed over these letters to the organizers, which were written in 1948 and 1949. Essentially, these letters showed Swamiji's opposition to the partition of the country and his strong appeal for 'left unity'.

Later, the organizers told me that on receipt of these letters Prof. Houser enquired if Parmanand Prasad is the same person who was teaching at B.N. College, Patna University. As he was correct, this familiarity indicated that both these persons had met. Dr Parmanand prasad, however, passed away quite an early age in 1967.

Prof. Houser kept coming to Bihar again and again in the midst of his teaching assignments in the USA. His love for Bihar and her people gets full expression in his last wish that his ashes be immersed in the Ganges near Patna. As reported by several dailies of Bihar, his family came to Patna in June 2025 to immerse his ashes in the holy Ganges (pictures below).



Photos above,

Courtesy: i) Patna Press dated 25.6.2025, ii)The Indian Express dated 26.6.2025, iii) Danik Bhaskar dated 27.6.2025.

Special Article

Economic Resurgence of Bihar

by Sharat Kumar

In his book '**Bihar Breakthrough: The Turnaround of a Beleaguered State**' (2013), Rajesh Chakravarti observes that "for the first two decades after independence, power was in the hands of upper caste Chief ministers, with the first switch coming with the election of Karpoori Thakur for two short stints first in 1970 and then in 1977'. What escapes the author, however, are the tectonic changes on India's landscape arising from the election results of the fourth Lok Sabha and of the State assemblies that were held simultaneously in 1967.

The socialist parties had performed very well both in the Lok Sabha as well as in the State Assemblies. In great measure, this was the result of Ram Manohar Lohia who made a determined effort to unseat the Congress Party from power. The Sanyukta Socialist Party (SSP) led by Karpoori Thakur won 68 seats and was the second largest party in the State Assembly of Bihar after Congress. Together with the Communist Party of India and other minor parties, they formed the government in Bihar where Karpoori Thakur was the deputy Chief minister.

The government in Bihar lasted for merely one year as defections took place and the Congress in Bihar returned to power. However, Karpoori Thakur became Chief minister again in 1970 - for a very short period of 6 months and subsequently in 1977 for a period of 2 years. The most controversial decision taken by Thakur during his second term as Chief minister was that of reservation of jobs in the government for the backward castes, in the year 1978.

The whole state was divided on this issue as the people of the upper castes felt threatened of losing further in matters of job opportunities. This decision, however, did not go through because of opposition within the ruling party and Karpoori Thakur had to relinquish his Chief ministership in 1979. Henceforth, however, the socialist ideology in the state acquired more of a casteist tinge and has made "caste" entrenched in the realm of politics in Bihar.

Notwithstanding the above, the Janata Dal government (1977-79) led by Karpoori Thakur launched a project called Kosi Kranti. The objective of this project was first to update

land records, including recording of the rights of sharecroppers; and only then implement rural development programmes. This laudable intention was subsequently watered down out of fear that it would become a mini survey operation and lead to disturbance of agrarian peace' (Prasad, Shankar, 2001).

Fast forward, Lalu Prasad Yadav became the Chief minister of Bihar in 1990; Karpoori Thakur was no more on the scene as he had passed away in 1988. Ten years later in 2000, Lalu Prasad's wife Rabri Devi became the Chief minister. Together with her Chief ministership, Lalu Prasad held sway over the government for fifteen years until 2005. This period of Lalu-Rabri rule became notorious as "jungle raj" on account of the failure of 'law and order' in the state.

As alleged, this failure of governance was the result of criminals, willy nilly, enjoying the protection of the state. It was, nonetheless, observed that 'Lalu accomplished something that decades of socialist speeches had failed to do in Bihar. He made being a backward caste an acceptable and respectable identity construction' (Chakravarti, 2013). According to others, however, this was the result of the changes that were taking place in the land ownership in the state. 'A majority of those who benefited were the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris..... Much of the Lalu phenomenon was rooted in the celebration of the shift in the land ownership pattern' (Sinha, 2020).

Regarding the stand of the Communist Parties on 'reservation in jobs based on caste', it may be said that their support for the same was far from enthusiastic. They had earlier criticized Ambedkar for raising the issue of castes as it was not in line with their emphasis on class struggle. According to them, it was yet another ploy of the British to 'divide and rule'. In later years, however, they gave their support for "job reservations" arguing that there was a need 'for affirmative action' for social justice.

(To be continued)

References:

Chakravarti, Rajesh (2013), *Bihar Breakthrough: The Turnaround of a Beleaguered State*, Rupa Publications, New Delhi.

Prasad, Shankar (2001), *Land Reforms Legislations in Bihar* in 'Development of Bihar and Jharkhand: Problems and Prospects', Shipra Publications, Delhi.

Sinha, Arun (2020), *Battle for Bihar*, Penguin Books, Gurugram, pp.274.

Ashram Bhajanawali

'Ashram Bhajanawali' in Hindi is a booklet on bhajans (devotional songs) published by Navjivan Press, Ahmedabad. It contains "the bhajans" that were sung during the morning and evening prayer meetings in the ashrams of Mahatma Gandhi. This was so when Gandhiji was alive; hopefully, this convention continues even today in those ashrams. In the preface of this booklet, Gandhiji writes that the main purpose of this collection of devotional songs is to encourage moral sentiments amongst the people. It is worth mentioning that all the residents of these ashrams had to take the vow of "truthfulness", "non-violence" and "self-reliance".

Gandhiji set up all together five Ashrams in his lifetime: two in South Africa and three in India. 'Sarvodaya Ashram' near Durban and 'Tolstoy Ashram' near Johannesburg were set up in 1904 and 1910 respectively, in South Africa. The three Ashrams in India that were set up in 1915, 1917 and 1936 are: 'Satyagraha Ashram' and 'Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat and 'Sewagram Ashram' in Wardha in Maharashtra. The most famous of these ashrams is the Sabarmati Ashram where Gandhiji stayed from 1917 to 1930. The famous Dandi March for the Salt Satyagraha (1930) began here.

'Ashram Bhajanawali' contains bhajans selected from different religions and languages. As mentioned by Kaka Kalelkar - one of the inmates of the ashram - any devotional song if found objectionable was excluded from this collection. Most of the bhajans were included in the 'Ashram Bhajanawali' on the recommendations of the people who joined the ashram from time to time.

The collection a bhajans comprises devotional songs from Ved-Upanishad, Bhagwat Gita, Ramayan, Mahabharat, Bible, Quran, Buddhist and Zoroastrian scriptures as well as the poems of Kabir Das, Guru Nanak, Surdas, Tulsi Das, Mirabai, Dadu, Raidas, Narsingh Mehta, Haridas, Nazir, Nishchalanand, Keshav, Tukaram, Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath Tagore. The two more famous bhajans sung during the prayer meetings of Mahatma Gandhi were:

‘रघुपति राघव राजा राम, पतित पावन सीताराम,

ईश्वर अल्लाह तेरो नाम, सबको सन्मति दे भगवान'।

and

वैष्णव जन तो तेने कहिये जे पीड़ परायी जाणे रे,
वैष्णव जन तो तेने कहिये जे पीड़ परायी जाणे रे।
पर दुख्खे उपकार करे तोये मन अभिमान ना आणे रे,
वैष्णव जन तो तेने कहिये जे पीड़ परायी जाणे रे॥

Equally significant is the conversation between Gandhiji and Kaka Kalelkar relating to 'Ashram Bhajanavali'. As mentioned by Kaka Kalelkar, Gandhiji once shared with Kaka kalelkar that we have more bhajans sung from Hindu scriptures as we have more people residing in the ashram from that community. He therefore wanted to know what we should have done if more people were there from other communities. To this query, Kaka Kalelkar replied we would have chosen more devotional songs from their scriptures. Gandhiji added to this saying that we would have replaced Geeta with Bible or with Quran or any such scripture suited to the background of the people.

I leave it to the reader to decide what weighed more on the mind of Gandhiji: **'the holy scriptures or 'mankind'?** Attached below is one of the usual discourses of Gandhiji meant for the people, who had gathered at the ashram to listen to him after the evening prayer meeting:

<https://youtu.be/DtFmFYJA-IA?si=hcBuPP6fpaXDoRL4> .

POEM



पेड़ की शाख के उच्चतम ऊँचाई पर बैठी,
प्यारी सी, सुन्दर सी चिड़िया,
दूर से दूर, गगन की ऊँचाई से भी उपर,
तलाश करती अपने जोड़ीदार को,
कहाँ छोडकर चला गया भला,
कब आओगे, इंतजार बड़ी लंबी हो चली,

मन बहुत उदास है लेकिन, विरह के प्रचंड वेग में,
प्रिय, दूर सुदूर कहीं, जहां भी हो, आ जाओ कि अब रहा जाता नहीं,
प्रियतम की दूरी सही जाती नहीं, आ जाओ कि जिंदगी फिर से,
गुले गुलजार हो जाये , जिंदगी में फिर से नया बहार हो जाये,
जिंदगी में फिर से नया बहार हो जाये, पेड़ की ऊंची टहनी पर बैठी, राह
निहारती ये सुन्दर चिड़िया, खुशियों की राह निहारती ये चिड़िया,
खुशियों की राह निहारती ये चिड़िया !!

Manoj Ranjan Sinha