

LAST OF THE FREETHINKERS*

J. N. SINHA**

Sachchidanand Sinha, the noted writer, thinker and activist, believes that in socialism without violence lies the best hope for mankind. The 82-year-old lives in happy anonymity in the wilderness of Bihar. ..

It is a beautiful October morning lit up with sunshine and the winds rippling on the green foliage flanking the road. Driving from Muzaffarpur in the east, we take a left turn on to a narrow road. It meanders through stretches of thick vegetation, dotted with clusters of thatched hutments. Rivulets, canals and bridges change the scenario; and, off and on, groves of mangoes and litchis break our monotony. Soon, the horizon clears up however, and an unending lake emerges in view. It is hemmed by aquatic plants and lavishly decked with lotus flowers. The region is home to some great souls of history; but, today, it is known for crime and violence.

It is in this bizarre ambience that we are moving in to meet an equally unique person — Sachchidanand Sinha, the noted writer, socialist thinker and activist. As we are led to his modest cottage, a slim figure waves us to drive in. It is Sachchidaji, as we call him — calm and composed, unassuming and brimming with warmth as usual. He leads us into his room and pleasantries follow. Years back, we had lived together in Delhi, the memories of which have remained a treasure for us.

Born in 1929 at Parsawani in the Muzaffarpur district of Bihar, Sinha has had a chequered history. He hails from a noted family with a considerable political background of diverse ideologies. His father was a Congress MLA in the Bihar Assembly, his maternal grandfather a prominent minister in the Bihar Cabinet, and his maternal uncle a noted Communist leader. Of Sinha's two brothers, one is a linguist and human rights activist and the other a theoretical

physicist and a Naxalite. Sachchidanand Sinha joined the Quit India movement in 1942 when yet a student of Std. IX. By the time he passed I. S.C. from Patna Science College in 1947, he had plunged into the freedom struggle. Soon, he came in touch with the noted Socialists of his time and gave up studies to join the labour movement, initially in Bihar and, from 1949, in Bombay. During the course of the ideological conflict within the Socialist Party, he had to give up his fulltime party work; and in order to sustain himself and continue his political mission, he worked as a Khalasi (coolie) for some time in Bombay. He came in touch with Rammanohar Lohia in 1956, and got associated with his noted journal Mankind; later, he participated in the JP Movement and has, ever since, contributed to the socialist movement in very many ways.

Prolific Writer

Sinha shifted to Delhi in 1969 and stayed there till 1987. This was the most productive period of his life intellectually. In 1973, he wrote *The Internal Colony: A Study in Regional Exploitation* on Centre-State relations focused on Bihar, one of the earliest discussions on regional imbalance in development in India. *Socialism and Power* (Orient Longman, 1974) established him as a political thinker. *The Bitter Harvest: Agriculture and Economic Crisis* (1975) called for long term planning and management of agriculture and environment. *Chaos and Creation* (Lalit Kala Akadamy, 1980) was a profound discourse on art and creativity, probing their biological roots. Many books and hundreds of articles have appeared ever since, dealing, besides topical themes, with such diverse subjects as the problems of urbanisation and the

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caste system. Amazingly, every book is virtually on a new subject!

They contain seminal ideas presented in simple language but they are yet to reach a wider audience. Sinha is media-shy and his distributors have failed him to reach them. He does not write for money or fame. He writes because he has ideas and he wants to share them to promote his ideology.

He has 'declassified' himself: He comes from an aristocratic family but lives like a commoner. He often ventures to cross the traditional boundaries of knowledge, and the freethinker in him, at times, disconcerts even his own fraternity of Socialists.

You may not have read him, yet he has left many questions to reflect: Is the present rush for large-scale industrialisation the only alternative for social progress? Does not our democracy need a thorough overhaul? What is the place of environment and nature in our developmental initiative? And, what is the role of intellectuals in this whole context?

Life at Manika

Sinha was in Delhi during the national Emergency and was disgusted and disturbed by the assault on civil liberty. He reacted through his *Emergency in Perspective: Reprieve and Challenge* (1977). The change of the regime and coming of the new government seemed to present a prospect of hope; but the performance of the Janata regime probably left him dismayed. He reflected on the subject in *The Permanent Crisis: After Janata What?* (1978), and long back visualised a bleak future for one-party government in India. He left Delhi for Bihar in 1979. But, instead of staying in Patna or Muzaffarpur, where his relations live, he settled at Manika Gaon, a sleepy, remote village in the Musehary Block of Muzaffarpur district. This is the area where the Naxalbari movement had had its early stirrings which Jayaprakash Narayan tried to tame.

Sinha's cottage at Manika sits on the bank of a huge lake in the midst of wilderness. He lives a spartan, disciplined life, without any domestic help; his wherewithal is just enough to survive. The locality is poor economically but rich in exotic flora and fauna. All this provides him

food for thought and creativity and a mission to work. He is happy and self-contented. He grows his cereals, greens, and shares them with guests with child-like delight. He paints and photographs his surroundings, and has also published a book on birds. The lake offers him an unending vista to look into the horizon and beyond.

He has a busy schedule: daily chores over, he has sessions of reading and writing. But behind his quiet persona, there is a restive soul. He is sensitive to the happenings around him and elsewhere, to which he reacts instantly. He has written on Naxalism, capitalism and consumerism; but to socialism, he returns again and again, because he finds in it the only hope for mankind. Yet he has reservations about its means and methods. There is no place for violence in his scheme of things; instead, he calls for a better democratic system based on ethics and people's participation. For him, it is essential to be a good man to become a good socialist. No wonder, he underlines in *The Unarmed Prophet* (1988) the relevance of Gandhi in the present global crisis.

Occasionally, media persons visit him for interviews on issues ranging from poverty and politics to culture. For the locals, he is an open school. He enlightens them on whatever issues they come with — farmer's problems, corruption, health, working of democracy and so on. He has great expectations from the youth and wants them to strive for a change of substance.

Sinha has memories of the British Raj; but after decades of Independence, he has nothing much to celebrate on his 82nd birthday. He is dismayed and, probably, bewildered. He is not alone in that.

The real *azaadi* is yet to come for him and many. So, he holds on and strives for a better tomorrow. Hopefully he is not the last generation of the social workers inspired by inner conscience and dedicated to the public cause without expecting any Padma award. His cottage has the ambience of a hermitage. By the time we take leave of him, the sun has mellowed down in the west. Fishing boats wade through the tranquil lake, glistening with the crimson rays of the setting sun. The birds fly home and the world is at peace — probably, a slice of life Sinha wants to create for all! □