

Chapter

14

Growth of Peasants' and Workers' Movements 1920s–30s

In the previous chapters, you have read about the peasant and working class movements during the second half of the 19th century. You saw how these movements were directed against the oppression of the colonial government as well as that of the landlords and the mill owners. In this chapter, you will learn about the workers' and peasants' movements in the 1920s and 1930s and how they were different from their predecessors.

Several novel factors had emerged on the Indian scene (such as the emergence of mass politics, socio-economic consequences of the First World War and the rise of communism and socialism) and they ensured that the working class and peasant movements of the 1920s and 30s were radically different from what we had seen in the previous era. The rise of communist movement in the 1920s lent a militant and revolutionary content to these movements in India. They were now organised into Trade Unions or Kisan Sabhas all over the country.

The two national mass movements of 1920–22 and 1930–34 further politicised the workers and peasants on a large scale. The world economic Depression of 1929 had worsened the condition of the workers and peasants all over the country and they began to demand relief and justice.

WORKER MOVEMENTS OF THE 1920s AND 1930s

Why did Trade Unions Emerge in India?

Problems of the Workers: the miserable living and working conditions of the workers were the main reason for the rise of trade unions in India. These included long hours of work, low wages, dismissal from work, unhygienic conditions in factories, employment of child labour, bad housing and absence of all other amenities.

The working-class population was concentrated in Bombay (main centre for cotton textile industry) and Bengal (main centre for jute and tea industry). The workers worked here from 12 to 18 hours a day. There was no provision for weekly off. They lived in slums with no provision for water supply, electricity or sanitation.

In the coal mines of Jharia and Giridih, even women and children worked underground, fines were imposed for late attendance and under production and wages paid were low and exploitative. The workers often turned to local 'Kabuli' money lenders and got trapped in vicious cycle of debt. Pension or provident fund was also non-existent.

Thus, labour in India suffered from all forms of exploitation that existed in the early stages of industrialisation in England and the West plus the evils of a rapacious colonial rule. The colonial situation gave a distinctive touch to Indian working class movement. The Indian working class had to face two basic antagonistic forces—an imperialist political rule and economic exploitation at the hands of both imperialist and native elements. It was under these circumstances that the Indian working class movement got inevitably intertwined with the political struggle for national freedom.

Such exploitative conditions urged the workers to come together and form trade unions in order to increase their bargaining power vis-a-vis the employers.

Meaning of Trade Unions

Trade Unions are worker associations formed with the aim of improving their work conditions in factories and mills. These factories and mills emerged in India in large numbers in the 19th century and hundreds of workers began to interact with one another on daily basis. They shared their problems and developed an urge to unite. Even though most of the workers were uneducated, there were always some intellectuals (or 'outsiders' such as nationalists or socialists) among them who tried to educate them, organise them into trade unions and improve their lot.

Early Associations

Trade unionism slowly grew through the following efforts:

- In 1870s, in Bengal, **Sasipada Banerjee** (a Brahmo), founded the working men's club. In 1874, he published a journal **Bharat Sramjibi** and also organised night schools to educate the jute mill workers.
- In 1880, in Bombay, **NM Lokhande** started the weekly **Dinabandhu** and founded the Bombay Mill-Hands Association in 1890.
- **First Trade Union in India**- in April 1918, in Madras, the first trade union was founded by **BP Wadia** (an associate of Annie Besant) known as the Madras Labour Union.
- In 1918, in Ahmedabad, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had led a strike of textile mill workers. The strike went on for 21 days, Gandhi sat on hunger strike and finally a compromise was reached.
- In 1920, Gandhi founded the **Majdur Mahajan** for arbitration between workers and employers and also advocated harmonious relations between them.

Gandhi's Philosophy on Labour

Mahatma Gandhi rejected the idea of class war and instead put forward the **theory of trusteeship** (the capitalist being the trustee of the workers' interest). He did not believe in the need for abolition of capitalism, zamindari or princely states. What he advocated was the need for a change of heart in the capitalist, zamindars and the princes so that they considered themselves not as owners but as trustees for their workers, tenants and subjects.

Gandhi's philosophy on labour reflected the need of the time, i.e. giving primacy to the anti-imperialist movement which could ill-afford an all out class war among the different classes of an emerging nation. Often, Gandhiji's principle of trusteeship and arbitration had been dismissed as class collaborationist, and mistakenly so. In the words of **Acharya JB Kripalani**, one of the staunchest followers of Gandhiji, "trustee" by the very term meant that he was not the owner. The owner is one whose interest he is called upon to protect.

In 1918, Gandhiji founded the **Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association (TLA)** with 14000 workers on roll, making it perhaps the largest single trade union of its time.

Note: The period 1919-22 saw a resurgence of working class activity, both to protect their own rights and also to gain freedom from the colonial rule.

- In April 1919, following the Punjab wrongs and Gandhi's arrest, the working class in Gujarat resorted to strikes and demonstrations.
- During 1919-21, railway workers struck in support of the Rowlatt agitation and the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movement.
- In November 1921, during the visit of the Prince of Wales, the workers responded to the Congress call of a country-wide general strike.

Formation of All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC, Bombay, 31st October 1920)

The year 1919-20 saw a wave of strikes in many industrial centres such as Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Ahmedabad, Jamshedpur and Kanpur. This helped mobilise thousands of workers and it was against this backdrop that on 31st October 1920, in Bombay, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed. Lokmanya Tilak, who had developed a close association with Bombay workers, was one of the moving spirits in the formation of AITUC.

The inaugural session was presided over by **Lala Lajpat Rai** (also INC President of the year) and **Diwan Chaman Lal**, who later emerged as a prominent name in Indian labour movement, was the general secretary. The session was attended by several prominent leaders like **Motilal Nehru**, **Annie Besant**, **CF Andrews**, **BP Wadia** and **NM Joshi**.

The AITUC was formed as the central organization of the Indian workers. Chaman Lal, while moving a resolution on swaraj, declared- "It was to be a Swaraj, not for the capitalists but for the workers".

Congress Response

The Congress at its Gaya Session in 1922 (presided by CR Das) welcomed the formation of the AITUC and also formed a committee of prominent Congressmen to assist its work. In addition to Lajpat Rai, many other Congressmen became closely associated with the AITUC, these included CR Das (who presided over its third and fourth sessions), CF Andrews, JM Sengupta, Subhas Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru and Satyamurti.

Throughout the 1920s, worker awareness grew and there were several strikes. Yet by 1929, majority of workers were not yet organised into trade unions. Differences of language and

community as well as opposition by jobbers (sirdars) and employers were the main reasons that kept the workers away from trade unions.

Period of Growth of Trade Unionism (1920–29)

After 1922, there was a lull in the working class movement and a reversion to purely economic struggles. The next wave of working class activity came during 1927–29, spurred by the emergence of a clearly defined Left-block on the national scene.

The Trade Union Act of 1926: It recognized trade unions as legal associations, laid down conditions for regulation and registration of trade union activities, secured their immunity from prosecution for legitimate activities but put some restrictions on their political activities.

The Geneva-Amsterdam group and the Moscovite group of AITUC: During 1926–27, the AITUC got divided into groups called the Geneva-Amsterdam group (the reforming group) and the Moscovite group (revolutionary group). The former wanted AITUC to be affiliated to the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) with its headquarters at Amsterdam while the later group wanted affiliation with the Red Labour Union (RILU), based at Moscow. The communist thinking ultimately carried greater influence.

By 1927, various communist groups had organised themselves into **Workers' and Peasants' Parties** (WPP) under the leadership of activists like SA Dange, Muzaffar Ahmed, PC Joshi and Sohan Singh Josh. The WPPs functioned as left wing within the Congress and rapidly gained strength at provincial and all India level.

In November 1927, AITUC decided to boycott the Simon Commission and many workers participated in the massive anti-boycott demonstrations.

By 1928, communist influence on trade union movement became very strong and the year witnessed unprecedented industrial unrest. The communist led **Girni Kamgar Union (GKU)** shot to prominence after the historic six-month long strike by textile workers in Bombay (April to September 1928). Communist influence also spread to workers in railways, jute mills, municipalities, paper mills etc.

Bombay

In 1924, more than one lakh textile workers struck work against refusal of bonus. In 1926, Textile Labour Union was formed with NM Joshi as President. The strike forced the government to intervene. Again in 1928, there was a historic six month long general strike by textile workers.

Bengal

In 1928, the workers of Fort Gloster Mills in Bauria in Howrah district struck work. The strike was remarkable in the sense that it was carried out by some 15 thousand jute workers for more than six months. This strike also forced the government to intervene.

Jamshedpur

In 1928, the workers of Tata Steel Factory struck work for nearly six months against the dismissal of a large number of workers (The Tata Steel Factory was the first modern steel factory in India in Jamshedpur founded by Jamshedji Tata. Some 20 thousand workers worked here and had formed their Labour Association). Even though the strike was not fully successful, it forced the employers to recognize the Labour Association.

Ahmedabad and Madras were also important centres of trade union movement.

Thus, during 1927–29, several strikes occurred in mills and factories in Bengal, Bombay and Madras. By 1929, the government anxiously reported, "there was hardly a singly public utility service or industry which had not been affected in whole or part, by the wave of communism which swept the country."

In 1923, in Madras, the **first May Day** (a day celebrated in honour of workers) was celebrated by Singaravelu.

Period of Decline of Trade Unionism (1929–35)

Government Repression of the Communists (1929)

By now, the government had grown nervous about the militancy and political involvement of the working class, particularly the coming together of the nationalists and the leftists. The government now launched a two-pronged attack on the labour movement of repression and concession. It passed repressive laws like Public Safety Act and Trade Disputes Act, and arrested in one swoop the entire radical leadership of labour movement (Meerut Conspiracy Case). On the other hand, concession was offered in the form of appointment of Royal Commission on Labour in 1929, to wean away as many labour activists and commit them to constitutional and corporatist mould.

Sectarian politics of the Communists (1929)

As if this was not enough, the labour movement in India suffered a further setback when, in 1929, the communists reversed their policy of working within the mainstream national movement. This not only isolated the communists from the national movement, but also greatly reduced their hold over the working class. The membership of GKU fell from 54000 in 1928 to 800 in 1929. They also got isolated within the AITUC and were thrown out in 1931.

Split in the AITUC

There occurred two splits in the AITUC in the aftermath of the Great Economic Depression that started in 1929 in the USA and spread throughout the world. It lasted in India until 1936. During this period, hundreds of factories closed down, thousands of workers lost their job and trade unions also declined. The splits further weakened the trade union movement.

First Split

It took place in 1929, when Jawaharlal Nehru was the President of AITUC. It occurred over the issue whether the AITUC should boycott the Royal Commission on Labour or not. While the extremists wanted to boycott it, the moderates wanted to join it. Finally, the moderates led by NM Joshi and VV Giri left the AITUC and formed the **All India Trade Union Federation** with VV Giri as President.

Second Split

It took place in 1931, when the communists left the AITUC and formed the **Red Trade Union Congress**.

The communists withdrew from the **Civil Disobedience Movement**, leaving the field entirely to the Congress. The workers now followed the lead of the Congress and participated in large numbers in the first civil disobedience. In Bombay, the Congress slogan during the civil disobedience was that the "workers and peasants are the hands and feet of the Congress". But a dip in the working class activity was seen during 1931 and 1935 and they did not actively participate in the second civil disobedience (1932–34).

Period of Expansion of Trade Unionism (1935 onwards)

A period of expansion of trade unionism in India began 1935 onwards. The communists abandoned their suicidal sectarian politics and joined the mainstream national movement. They also joined the AITUC in 1935 and unity in the AITUC was restored.

The impact of economic depression ended and economy began to improve 1936 onwards. When the campaign for 1937 elections began, the AITUC in general, extended its support to Congress candidates. The Congress manifesto also declared several measures for securing the rights of the labour class.

Formation of Congress Ministries and Growth of Trade Unionism

In 1937, Congress Ministries were formed in the provinces and in the period 1937–39, the trade union movement showed a phenomenal rise; the number of trade unions doubled. Number of strikes also went up considerably with most of them ending in full or partial victory. The most successful strike during this period was the Kanpur worker strike which continued for 55 days and involved 10,000 workers. The government appointed Kanpur labour enquiry Committee under the chairmanship of **Babu Rajendra Prasad**.

The Congress ministries showed a sympathetic attitude towards worker demands. Some beneficial legislations like the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act (1938), the Bombay Shop Assistants Act (1939), the C.P. Maternity Act (1939), the Bengal Maternity Act (1939) were enacted.

In 1939, when the Second World War broke out, the workers of Bombay were amongst the first in the world to hold an anti-war strike on 2nd October 1939.

Flashforward: Impact of Second World War: After the Nazi attack on Soviet Union in 1941, the communists insisted that now it was the duty of the working class to support the Allied powers to defeat fascism that threatened the socialist birthplace (the Allied Powers composed of France, Britain, Russia, Japan, Italy, and in the later years, the U.S.; and the Central Powers composed of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey).

Thus, the communist party distanced itself from the Quit India Movement of 1942. They also followed a policy of industrial peace with employers so that production and war effort would not be hampered. However, the working class did not remain totally aloof from the Quit India Movement and they struck work and observed hartals in many parts of the country.

During this entire period, the communists and the socialists made efforts to unite the workers and the peasants of the country under a single movement.

PEASANT MOVEMENTS OF THE 1920s AND 1930s

Earlier in this book, you have learnt about the peasant uprisings in the second half of the 19th century. You have learnt how the peasants were exploited both by the colonial government as well as the landlords and how they rose in arms against this exploitation. In this chapter, we learn about the peasant uprisings during the 1920s and 1930s and see how these were different from their predecessors. By now, the peasants had learnt to organise themselves and put up a united front against the oppressive forces.

Problems of the Peasantry

The peasants in India suffered great hardships and were always relegated to the lowest rungs of Indian society. Some of the common peasant grievances included:

- The peasants were crushed under the heavy burden of land revenue. This not only impoverished them but also made them indebted to local money lenders who charged high rates of interest. The peasants often found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of debt that got transferred from one generation to the next.
- As if the burden of land revenue was not enough, the landlords compelled the tenant to pay "**abwabs**", "**nazaranas**" and other forms of gifts on various pretexts.
- The peasants often did not have occupancy rights over the land they tilled, with the effect that they lived under constant threat of eviction.
- The outbreak of the First World War added to the miseries of the peasants as they were made to contribute to war fund, military service, etc.

In such circumstances, it was the duty of the government to protect the peasants. But the government itself was hand in gloves with the landlords and this forced the peasants to stand up in revolt for their own emancipation.

Abwabs refer to miscellaneous kinds of fines, cesses or taxes levied by native chiefs upon the subjects like the house tax, grazing tax, irrigation tax, etc.

Peasant Movement during 1920s

U.P.

U.P. emerged as a main centre of peasant activity during this period. Here **Baba Ram Chandra** took the initiative to organise the peasants of Oudh against the zamindars and taluqdars. He would tell the peasants that they were kept in bondage by the government and the zamindars and that they could break free only by unifying themselves against their oppressors.

Baba Ram Chandra was a Maharashtrian Brahmin by birth. In 1905, he went to Fiji as an indentured labourer and came to Oudh countryside in 1917-18. There he worked among the peasants, dressed like a sanyasi and quoting the Ramcharitmanas, and mobilised them for struggle against the oppressors.

In 1920, this peasant movement got associated with the Non-Cooperation Movement. In 1921, the movement became militant and spread to Rae Bareilly, Faizabad and Sultanpur, forcing the government to amend the Oudh Rent Act of 1921.

Eka Movement—In early 1922, **Eka Movement led by Madari Pasi** was started by peasants in districts like Hardoi, Barabanki and Sitapur. The initial thrust was given by the leaders of Congress and Khilafat and the movement grew under the name Eka or unity movement. The main reason of movement was higher rent, which was generally higher than 50 per cent of recorded rent in some areas. Madari Pasi was a radical peasant leader and posed serious challenge to the landlords and the administration. By March 1922, due to severe repression of British the Eka Movement came to an end.

Bihar

In north Bihar, the peasant movement was led by **Swami Vidyanand** and was chiefly directed against the Raja of Darbhanga who owned large estates and oppressed the peasantry. This movement against Darbhanga Raj was not as militant as that in U.P.

Bengal

Peasants joined the no-tax agitation and refused to pay the **Union Board taxes**. Midnapore district emerged as the main centre of agitation which ended in victory with the government deciding not to process with the Union Boards.

Malabar

In 1921, the Muslim Moplah peasants revolted against continued landlord oppression as well as British government's anti-Khilafat policies. The Moplah peasants' movement of 1921 got inextricably merged with the Khilafat movement (a worldwide protest moment of the Muslims against the harsh treatment meted out to the Sultan of Turkey by the victorious Allied powers). While the Indian Muslims united under the leadership of Ali brothers, the Moplahs rose under the leadership of **Ali Musaliar**, a respected priest and local Khilafat leader. The Moplah rebels blocked roads, cut off telegraph lines, uprooted railway lines and even killed some Europeans.

In October 1921, the government sent a strong contingent to suppress the rebellion. Surrounded on all sides and suspecting a Hindu complicity, the desperate Moplahs resorted to brutal killings of Hindus including women and children. The government retaliated with heavy round of suppression, killing thousands of Moplahs (unofficial figure puts the number at 10,000). About 3,000 Moplahs were sentenced to life and sent off to Andaman Jail.

The ruthless crushing of the Moplah rebellion greatly demoralised the community and thereafter it remained aloof from any peasant or national political activity so long as the British remained in India.

Gujarat and Bardoli Satyagraha (1928)

The Bardoli taluqa in Surat district had witnessed intense politicisation after the emergence of Gandhi on the political scene. The movement was triggered in 1927 when the government raised land revenue in Bardoli by 30 per cent despite fall in prices of cotton. Congress leaders quickly protested and formed the **Bardoli Enquiry Committee** to enquire into the issue. The committee found the revenue hike to be unjustified. This prepared the context for Bardoli Satyagraha in 1928. Leaders like Vallabhbhai Patel and Kunwarji Mehta mobilised the peasants who refused to pay revenue to the government. **Bardoli Satyagraha Patrika** was brought out to mobilise public opinion. **An intelligence wing** was set up to ensure that all tenants follow the movement resolutions. Those who opposed the movement faced social boycott. Special emphasis was paid on the mobilisation of women. KM Munshi and Lalji Naranji resigned from the Bombay Legislative Council in support of the movement.

Despite severe repression by the government and seizure of lands, the agitation succeeded as the government was forced to reassess revenue at reduced rates. It was during the agitation that the women of Bardoli gave Vallabhbhai Patel the title of '**sardar**'.

In addition to above regions, peasants also revolted against exploitation in Malabar, Rajasthan, Orissa and Assam.

Peasant Movement during the 1930s

The 1930s saw a nationwide awakening of Indian peasants in the context of Great Depression (beginning 1929) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930). Even during the Depression, the government did not scale down its own taxes, nor did it care to ask the zamindars to scale down their rents. Consequently, the Civil Disobedience saw mass participation of peasants and in many parts of the country it took the form of no-tax no-rent movement. The Civil Disobedience Movement also contributed to the peasant movement in yet another way—it prepared a whole new cadre of young, militant political activists who were first born from the womb of civil disobedience and later nurtured under the influence of leftist ideology. Once the civil disobedience was suspended, these men and women found their calling in organising the peasants. Further, formation of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) in 1934 gave a further consolidated the left and acted as a spur to the kisan movement.

U.P.

As in the 1920s, even in the 1930s U.P. emerged as the main centre of peasant revolt. While Congress gave a call for no-revenue movement, some leaders also began no-rent agitation. Leaders like **Kalka Prasad of Rae Bareilly** asked the peasants to stop all kinds of payments. But the government resorted to severe repression and the movement was effectively crushed.

What is the difference between no-revenue and no-rent movement? No revenue (or No-tax) movement is directed against the government while the no-rent movement affects the landlords (as rent is paid by tenants to landlords)

Bengal and Bihar

Here the movement confined itself to no-tax agitation. The tribal peasants of Manbhum, Singbhum and Dinajpur joined the salt satyagraha and went to jail. The region also saw the launch of powerful agitation against the hated **chowkidara tax** by which the villagers were made to pay for the upkeep of their own oppressors.

Madras Presidency

In 1928, the **Andhra Ryots' Association** was formed under the leadership of Professor NG Ranga that launched a powerful anti-zamindari struggle. Its first target was the **Venkatgiri zamindari in Nellore** district. The Association voiced demands of the peasantry including reduction of rent affecting the landlords. The agitation grew vigorously during the Civil disobedience movement and became particularly strong in Tanjore, Madura and Salem. Another feature of the movement in Andhra was the organization of **Summer Schools of Economics and Politics** for peasant activists. These training camps were addressed by major Leftist leaders of the time.

In Kerala

A powerful peasant movement developed as a result of the efforts of CSP activists and led to the setting up of **karshak Sanghams** (peasant associations). The main demands of the peasants included abolition of feudal levies (akramapirivukal such as vasi, nuri, etc.), renewal fees (the practice of policceluthu) and advance rent. The Karshak Sanghams also organised a powerful campaign around the demand for amending the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929. The campaign successfully created an awareness on the tenancy question that ensured that in later years their demands would inevitably have to be accepted.

Punjab

Earlier, peasant mobilisation had been organised by the Punjab Naujawan Sabha, the Kirti Kisan Party, the Congress and the Akalis. A new vigour was given by the Punjab Kisan Committee in 1937. The immediate issues taken up were resettlement of land revenue in Amritsar and Lahore and increase in water rates in canal colonies of Multan and Montgomery. Here the peasants went on strike and were finally able to win concessions.

In Maharashtra, Bihar and Central Provinces, peasants and tribals resorted to **forest satyagrahas** and defied forest laws that prohibited them from using forest resources.

Formation of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS, Lucknow, 1936)

During the 1920s, provincial kisan sabhas (or ryotu) had already been formed by the efforts of communists and socialists. But the need was felt for a central organisation of peasants and therefore, in 1936 in Lucknow, the All India Kisan Congress was formed (which later changed its name to All India Kisan Sabha).

Swami Sahajanand, the militant kisan leader and founder of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (1929) was elected the President, and **NG Ranga**, the pioneer of the kisan movement in Andhra, the General Secretary. Participants of the first session included Jawaharlal Nehru, Ram Manohar Lohiya, Indulal Yagnik, Jayaprakash Narayan, Sohan Singh Josh, Ahmed Din and Kamal Sarkar. The Conference decided to bring out a kisan manifesto and a periodical edited by Indulal Yagnik. The kisan manifesto considerably influenced the agrarian program adopted by the Congress at its **Faizpur session**.

Flash Back: At Faizpur Session of Congress (end of 1936), held under the presidentship of Jawaharlal, the **Congress adopted an agrarian program**, including items such as reduction of rent and revenue, abolition of feudal dues and levies, provision of cheap credit, security of tenure for tenants, introduction of cooperative farming, living wages for agrarian labourers and the right to form peasant unions.

Objectives—the Kisan Sabha explained its objective as, “securing complete freedom from economic exploitation and achievement of full economic and political power for peasants and workers and all other exploited classes.” It also demanded the following:

- Protection of peasants from economic exploitation
- Abolition of landlordism, such as zamindari and taluqdari systems and vesting of land in the tiller of the soil
- Reduction of revenue and rent
- Licensing of moneylenders
- Moratorium on debts
- Minimum wages for agricultural labourers
- Fair price for commercial crops
- Irrigation facilities etc.

All these objectives were to be achieved by proper organization and active participation in the national struggle for independence.

The AIKS proclaimed that the emancipation of the peasants lay in “their own organization” and decided to work independently of the Congress.

AIKS urged: “all anti-imperialist forces in the country, specially the kisans and the workers to develop their day to day struggles against the exploiters, as represented by the British government, the zamindars, the landlords, the industrialists and the moneylenders.”

Second Session of the AIKS: was held at Faizpur, in Maharashtra, along with the Congress session. It was presided by NG Ranga and attended by over 500 kisans who were welcomed by Jawaharlal Nehru, MN Roy, Narendra Dev, SA Dange, MR Masani, Yusuf Meherally, Bankim Mukherji and many others. In his presidential address, Ranga declared, "We are organising ourselves for the final inauguration of a Socialist state and society".

Congress Ministries in the Provinces and Growth of Peasant Movements

1937–39: Years of high-watermark of Peasant Movement

With the formation of Congress Ministries in the provinces, a new phase in peasant movement began. The whole atmosphere of the country got enthused with new expectations, freedom and power born out of the feeling that "our own people are in power". The different ministries also introduced several pro-peasant legislations. The chief form of mobilisation was through holding kisan conferences and meetings where were aired and resolutions were passed.

Bakasht Movement (Bihar, 1937–38)

It was a peasant movement directed against landlords to fight forceful eviction of peasants from bakasht lands. Bakasht lands were those which the occupancy tenants had lost to zamindars, mostly during the Depression years, due to non-payment of rent, and which they often continued to cultivate as share-croppers. The landlords often evicted the tenants from Bakasht land. In 1937, when the Congress Ministry was formed, the Kisan Sabha thought that it was an appropriate time to raise the issue of bakasht and demand for restoration of bakasht lands. The passing of the **Restoration of Bakasht Land Act** and the **Bihar Tenancy Act** in 1938 brought much relief to the peasants.

Hat tola Movement (Bengal)

This was a peasant movement launched in the northern districts of Bengal against the landlords to fight a levy collected from peasants who sold their produce in 'hats' (weekly markets).

Burdwan Satyagraha

Burdwan Satyagraha was launched under the leadership of Bankim Mukerji in the Burdwan district of Bengal to protest against the **Canal Tax** imposed on the peasants after the construction of the Damodar Canal. The movement was withdrawn after the government partly accepted the demand of the Kisan Sabha.

Movement of the Share Croppers

Movement of the share croppers began in Bengal in 1939. Share croppers were very poor peasants who tilled the land of the landlord and gave a portion of the produce to him but they had no security of tenure and could be evicted anytime. The movement gained vigour in Dinajpur district in north Bengal and the government came to a compromise with the peasants.

In Gujarat, the main demand was for the abolition of the system of **hali (bonded labor)** and a significant success was registered.

In this way, through the above movements the peasants learnt the power of organization.

Congress Response to the Peasant Movement

Congress leaders were well aware of the strength of the peasantry and their importance in the anti-imperialist struggle. They were also concerned about peasant issues and their grievances. In 1937, Nehru had observed, "the outstanding problem of India is the peasant problem. All else is secondary".

Yet, the right wing within the Congress that belonged to the landed aristocracy, felt uneasy about the rise of class consciousness among Indian peasantry and their demands, particularly the demand for abolition of landlordism. They wanted the peasants to participate in the anti-British struggle but tried to overlook their grievances against the landlords. As a result, whenever the peasants revolted against the landlords, the Congress tried to restrain them. The Congress also hesitated much in sanctioning no-rent movements directed against the landlords.

Consequently, the kisan leaders chose to work independently from the very beginning. Though they had full faith in the Congress leadership in securing freedom from the British rule and at no stage the kisan leaders worked against the Congress, they preferred to rely on themselves in their struggle against the zamindars and the capitalists.

Sahajanand- "We all cling to the Congress not for its magic or mystery, but because it represents the nation, it has not taken any false step at critical junctures. All our attempts are simply to strengthen its hands in taking opportune decisions at this most critical juncture of our national struggle for deliverance".

In 1939, the rising tide of peasant movement was checked with the outbreak of the Second World War which not only brought about the resignation of the Congress Ministries but also saw severe repression of the left wing due to their anti-war stand.



Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. Assertion (A): The effect of labour participation in the Indian Nationalist upsurge of the early 1930's was weak
[UPSC 2002]

Reason(R): The labour leaders considered the ideology of Indian National Congress as bourgeois and reactionary.

2. Who was the leader of the Bardoli Satyagraha (1928)? [UPSC 2003]
(a) Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel
(b) Mahatma Gandhi
(c) Vitthalbhai J Patel
(d) Mahadev Desai



Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. Which of the following was/were associated with peasant movements?

1. Anti-chowkidara tax agitation
2. Summer Schools of Economics and Politics
3. No rent movement

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3
(c) 1 and 3 (d) 1, 2 and 3

2. Lala Lajpat Rai was associated with which of the following?

1. All India Trade Union Congress
2. Anti Simon agitation
3. All India Kisan Sabha
4. Bakasht Movement

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 only
(c) 2 and 3 (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

3. Which of the following statements is/are true?

1. All India Trade Union Congress boycotted the Simon Commission.
2. The communists actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement.
3. In 1937 elections, the AITUC in general, extended its support to Congress candidates.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 2
(c) 2 only (d) 1 and 3

4. Examine the following statements with reference to All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)-

1. The AIKS was originally formed as All India Kisan Congress in 1936.
2. NG Ranga, the pioneer of the kisan movement in Andhra, was elected the President.

Which of the above statements is/are false? Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) both (d) neither

5. Which of the following statements is/are true regarding the Eka movement?

1. The initial thrust was given by the leaders of Congress and Khilafat.
2. It was led by Madari Pasi.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3
(c) 1 and 3 (d) 1, 2 and 3

6. With reference to early working class movement, consider the following statements.

1. Sasipada Bannerjee published a journal 'Bharat Sramjibi'.
2. BP Wadia started the weekly 'Dinabandhu'.
3. NM Lokhande founded the Majdur Mahajan for arbitration between workers and employers.

Which of the above statements is/are correct? Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 2
(c) 2 and 3 (d) 3 only

7. Which of the following prepared the context for Bardoli satyagraha in 1928?

1. The government raised land revenue in Bardoli.
2. Bardoli had witnessed intense politicisation after the emergence of Gandhi on the political scene.
3. Bardoli Enquiry Committee found government stand to be unjustified.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 2
(c) 2 and 3 (d) 1, 2 and 3

8. Which of the following are false regarding Gandhi's approach to labour movement in India?

1. Gandhi rejected the idea of class war.
2. He put forward the theory of trusteeship.
3. He did not believe in the need for abolition of zamindari or princely states.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 3
(c) 1, 2 and 3
(d) None of the above

9. Which of the following are true regarding All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)?

1. The AITUC was formed in 1920 in Delhi.
2. Lokmanya Tilak was one of the moving spirits in the formation of AITUC.
3. Its formation was opposed by the Congress at its Gaya session.

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 2
(c) 2 only (d) 1 and 3

10. What was meant by 'abwabs' in the context of modern Indian history?

- (a) Officials of Nawabs.
- (b) Cesses or taxes levied by native chiefs upon the subjects.
- (c) System of cheap credit.
- (d) Extortionists in villages.

11. 'An intelligence wing was set up to ensure that all tenants follow the movement resolutions. Those who opposed the movement faced social boycott.' Which movement is referred to here?

- (a) Eka movement
(b) Bakasht movement
(c) Burdwan satyagraha
(d) Bardoli satyagraha

12. Which of the following pairs is/are incorrectly matched?

1. Baba Ram Chandra-Punjab
2. Swami Vidyanand-Bihar
3. Kalka Prasad-Rae Bareilly

Choose the correct answer from the following options.

- (a) 1 only (b) 1 and 2
(c) 2 and 3 (d) 3 only

13. Bakasht movement was a peasant movement directed against landlords to fight forceful eviction of peasants from bakasht lands. It took place in _____.

- (a) Bengal (b) Bihar
(c) Maharashtra (d) Gujarat

14. Hat tola movement was a movement launched in the northern districts of Bengal to fight-

- (a) An extra charge collected from workers by mill owners.
- (b) A malpractice of incorrect measurement by traders.
- (c) A levy collected from peasants who sold their produce in 'hats'.
- (d) Increase in rent.

15. In Gujarat, the main peasant demand was for the abolition of the system of hali, where hali referred to-

- (a) a system of assessment of land revenue.
- (b) an agricultural cess.
- (c) a system of bonded labour.
- (d) a system of credit in exchange for a portion of produce.



Practice Questions – Main Exam

1. What were the main grievances of the workers and the peasants during the first half of the 20th century? Discuss some early initiatives for their redressal.
2. Write short notes on the following:
 - (a) All India Kisan Sabha
 - (b) All India Trade Union Congress
3. "The working class and peasant movements in the first half of the 20th century were radically different from what we had witnessed in the earlier periods." Examine.
4. What do you know about the Congress response to the working class and peasant movements of the 1920s and 1930s? Critically analyse.
5. "The years 1937-39 were the years of high-watermark of Peasant Movement". Do you agree with the statement? If yes, then why?

Answers

Previous Years' Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (c)
2. (a)

Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

- | | | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (d) | 2. (a) | 3. (d) | 4. (b) | 5. (a) |
| 6. (a) | 7. (d) | 8. (d) | 9. (c) | 10. (b) |
| 11. (d) | 12. (a) | 13. (b) | 14. (c) | 15. (c) |