

Peasant Movements 1857-1947

Peasantry Under Colonialism

The impoverishment of the Indian peasantry was a direct result of the transformation of the agrarian structure due to—

- colonial economic policies,
- ruin of the handicrafts leading to overcrowding of land,
- the new land revenue system,
- colonial administrative and judicial system.

The peasants suffered from high rents, illegal levies, arbitrary evictions and unpaid labour in zamindari areas. In Ryotwari areas, the government itself levied heavy land revenue. The overburdened farmer, fearing loss of his only source of livelihood, often approached the local moneylender who made full use of the former's difficulties by extracting high rates of interests on the money lent. Often, the farmer had to mortgage his land and cattle. Sometimes, the moneylender seized the mortgaged belongings. Gradually, over large areas, the actual cultivators were reduced to the status of tenants-at-will, share croppers and landless labourers.

The peasants often resisted the exploitation, and soon they realised that their real enemy was the colonial state. Sometimes, the desperate peasants took to crime to come out of intolerable conditions. These crimes included robbery, dacoity and what has been called social banditry.

A Survey of Early Peasant Movements

■ Indigo Revolt (1859-60)

In Bengal, the indigo planters, nearly all Europeans, exploited the local peasants by forcing them to grow indigo on their lands instead of the more paying crops like rice. The planters forced the peasants to take advance sums and enter into fraudulent contracts which were then used against the peasants. The planters intimidated the peasants through kidnappings, illegal confinements, flogging, attacks on women and children, seizure of cattle, burning and demolition of houses and destruction of crops.

The anger of the peasants exploded in 1859 when, led by Digambar Biswas and Bishnu Biswas of Nadia district, they decided not to grow indigo under duress and resisted the physical pressure of the planters and their *lathiyals* (retainers) backed by police and the courts. They also organised a counter force against the planters' attacks. The planters also tried methods like evictions and enhanced rents. The ryots replied by going on a rent strike by refusing to pay the enhanced rents and by physically resisting the attempts to evict them. Gradually, they learned to use the legal machinery and initiated legal action supported by fund collection.

The Bengali intelligentsia played a significant role by supporting the peasants' cause through newspaper campaigns, organisation of mass meetings, preparing memoranda on peasants' grievances and supporting them in legal battles.

The Government appointed an indigo commission to inquire into the problem of indigo cultivation. Based on its recommendations, the Government issued a notification in November 1860 that the ryots could not be compelled to grow indigo and that it would ensure that all disputes were settled by legal means. But, the planters were already closing down factories and indigo cultivation was virtually wiped out from Bengal by the end of 1860.

■ Pabna Agrarian Leagues

During the 1870s and 1880s, large parts of Eastern Bengal witnessed agrarian unrest caused by oppressive practices of the zamindars. The zamindars resorted to enhanced rents beyond legal limits and prevented the tenants from acquiring occupancy rights under Act X of 1859. To achieve their ends, the zamindars resorted to forcible evictions, seizure of cattle and crops and prolonged, costly litigation in courts where the poor peasant found himself at a disadvantage.

Having had enough of the oppressive regime, the peasants of Yusufshahi Pargana in Patna district formed an agrarian league or combination to resist the demands of the zamindars. The league organised a rent strike—the ryots refused to pay the enhanced rents, challenging the zamindars in the courts. Funds were raised by ryots to fight the court cases. The struggles spread throughout Patna and to other districts of East Bengal. The main form of struggle was that of legal resistance; there was very little violence.

Though the peasant discontent continued to linger on till 1885, most of the cases had been solved, partially through official persuasion and partially because of zamindars' fears. Many peasants were able to acquire occupancy rights and resist enhanced rents. The government also promised to undertake legislation to protect the tenants from the worst aspects of zamindari oppression. In 1885, the Bengal Tenancy Act was passed.

Again, a number of young Indian intellectuals supported the peasants' cause. These included Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, R.C. Dutt and the Indian Association under Surendranath Banerjea.

■ Deccan Riots

The ryots of Deccan region of western India suffered heavy taxation under the Ryotwari system. Here again the peasants found themselves trapped in a vicious network with the moneylender as the exploiter and the main beneficiary. These

moneylenders were mostly outsiders—Marwaris or Gujaratis. The conditions had worsened due to a crash in cotton prices after the end of the American Civil War in 1864, the Government's decision to raise the land revenue by 50% in 1867, and a succession of bad harvests.

In 1874, the growing tension between the moneylenders and the peasants resulted in a social boycott movement organised by the ryots against the “outsider” moneylenders. The ryots refused to buy from their shops. No peasant would cultivate their fields. The barbers, washermen, shoemakers would not serve them. This social boycott spread rapidly to the villages of Poona, Ahmednagar, Sholapur and Satara. Soon the social boycott was transformed into agrarian riots with systematic attacks on the moneylenders' houses and shops. The debt bonds and deeds were seized and publicly burnt.

The Government succeeded in repressing the movement. As a conciliatory measure, the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act was passed in 1879.

This time also, the modern nationalist intelligentsia of Maharashtra supported the peasants' cause.

Changed Nature of Peasant Movements after 1857

- Peasants emerged as the main force in agrarian movements, fighting directly for their own demands.
- The demands were centred almost wholly on economic issues.
- The movements were directed against the immediate enemies of the peasant—foreign planters and indigenous zamindars and moneylenders.
- The struggles were directed towards specific and limited objectives and redressal of particular grievances.
- Colonialism was not the target of these movements.
- It was not the objective of these movements to end the system of subordination or exploitation of the peasants.

- Territorial reach was limited.
- There was no continuity of struggle or long-term organisation.
- The peasants developed a strong awareness of their legal rights and asserted them in and outside the courts.

Weaknesses

- There was a lack of an adequate understanding of colonialism.
- The 19th-century peasants did not possess a new ideology and a new social, economic and political programme.
- These struggles, however militant, occurred within the framework of the old societal order lacking a positive conception of an alternative society.

Later Movements

The peasant movements of the 20th century were deeply influenced by and had a marked impact on the national freedom struggle. (Refer to the chapters on Freedom Movement for 'Champaran' and 'Kheda Satyagraha'.)

■ The Kisan Sabha Movement

After the 1857 revolt, the Awadh taluqdars had got back their lands. This strengthened the hold of the taluqdars or big landlords over the agrarian society of the province. The majority of the cultivators were subjected to high rents, summary evictions (*bedakhali*), illegal levies, renewal fees or *nazrana*. The First World War had hiked the prices of food and other necessities. This worsened the conditions of the UP peasants.

Mainly due to the efforts of the Home Rule activists, kisan sabhas were organised in UP. The United Provinces Kisan Sabha was set up in February 1918 by Gauri Shankar Mishra and Indra Narayan Dwivedi. Madan Mohan Malaviya supported their efforts. By June 1919, the UP Kisan Sabha

had 450 branches. Other prominent leaders included Jhinguri Singh, Durgapal Singh and Baba Ramchandra. In June 1920, Baba Ramchandra urged Nehru to visit these villages. During these visits, Nehru developed close contacts with the villagers.

In October 1920, the Awadh Kisan Sabha came into existence because of differences in nationalist ranks. The Awadh Kisan Sabha asked the kisans to refuse to till *bedakhali* land, not to offer *hari* and *begar* (forms of unpaid labour), to boycott those who did not accept these conditions and to solve their disputes through panchayats.

From the earlier forms of mass meetings and mobilisation, the patterns of activity changed rapidly in January 1921 to the looting of bazaars, houses, granaries and clashes with the police. The centres of activity were primarily the districts of Rai Bareilly, Faizabad and Sultanpur.

The movement declined soon, partly due to government repression and partly because of the passing of the Awadh Rent (Amendment) Act.

■ Eka Movement

Towards the end of 1921, peasant discontent resurfaced in some northern districts of the United Provinces—Hardoi, Bahraich, Sitapur. The issues involved were:

- (i) high rents—50 per cent higher than the recorded rates;
- (ii) oppression of *thikadars* in charge of revenue collection; and
- (iii) practice of share-rents.

The meetings of the Eka or the Unity Movement involved a symbolic religious ritual in which the assembled peasants vowed that they would

- pay only the recorded rent but would pay it on time;
- not leave when evicted;
- refuse to do forced labour;
- give no help to criminals;
- abide by panchayat decisions.

The grassroot leadership of the Eka Movement came

from Madari Pasi and other low-caste leaders, and many small zamindars.

By March 1922, severe repression by authorities brought the movement to an end.

■ Mappila Revolt

The Mappilas were the Muslim tenants inhabiting the Malabar region where most of the landlords were Hindus. The Mappilas had expressed their resentment against the oppression of the landlords during the nineteenth century also. Their grievances centred around lack of security of tenure, high rents, renewal fees and other oppressive exactions.

The Mappila tenants were particularly encouraged by the demand of the local Congress body for a government legislation regulating tenant-landlord relations. Soon, the Mappila movement merged with the ongoing Khilafat agitation. The leaders of the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement like Gandhi, Shaukat Ali and Maulana Azad addressed Mappila meetings. After the arrest of national leaders, the leadership passed into the hands of local Mappila leaders.

Things took a turn for the worse in August 1921 when the arrest of a respected priest leader, Ali Musaliar, sparked off large-scale riots. Initially, the symbols of British authority—courts, police stations, treasuries and offices—and unpopular landlords (*jenmies* who were mostly Hindus) were the targets. But once the British declared martial law and repression began in earnest, the character of the rebellion underwent a definite change. Many Hindus were seen by the Mappilas to be helping the authorities. What began as an anti-government and anti-landlord affair acquired communal overtones. The communalisation of the rebellion completed the isolation of the Mappilas from the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement. By December 1921, all resistance had come to a stop.

■ Bardoli Satyagraha

The Bardoli *taluka* in Surat district had witnessed intense politicisation after the coming of Gandhi on the national

political scene. The movement sparked off in January 1926 when the authorities decided to increase the land revenue by 30 per cent. The Congress leaders were quick to protest and a Bardoli Inquiry Committee was set up to go into the issue. The committee found the revenue hike to be unjustified. In February 1926, Vallabhbhai Patel was called to lead the movement. The women of Bardoli gave him the title of "Sardar". Under Patel, the Bardoli peasants resolved to refuse payments of the revised assessment until the Government appointed an independent tribunal or accepted the current amount as full payment. To organise the movement, Patel set up 13 *chhavanis* or workers' camps in the *taluka*. *Bardoli Satyagraha Patrika* was brought out to mobilise public opinion. An intelligence wing was set up to make sure all the tenants followed the movement's resolutions. Those who opposed the movement faced a social boycott. Special emphasis was placed on the mobilisation of women. K.M. Munshi and Lalji Naranji resigned from the Bombay Legislative Council in support of the movement.

By August 1928, massive tension had built up in the area. There were prospects of a railway strike in Bombay. Gandhi reached Bardoli to stand by in case of any emergency. The Government was looking for a graceful withdrawal now. It set the condition that first the enhanced rent be paid by all the occupants (not actually done). Then, a committee went into the whole affair and found the revenue hike to be unjustified and recommended a rise of 6.03 per cent only.

During the 1930s, the peasant awakening was influenced by the Great Depression in the industrialised countries and the Civil Disobedience Movement which took the form of no-rent, no-revenue movement in many areas. Also, after the decline of the active phase movement (1932) many new entrants to active politics started looking for suitable outlets for release of their energies and took to organisation of peasants.

■ The All India Kisan Congress/Sabha

This sabha was founded in Lucknow in April 1936 with Swami Sahjanand Saraswati as the president and N.G. Ranga as the general secretary. A kisan manifesto was issued and a periodical under Indulal Yagnik started. The AIKS and the Congress held their sessions in Faizpur in 1936. The Congress manifesto (especially the agrarian policy) for the 1937 provincial elections was strongly influenced by the AIKS agenda.

■ Under Congress Ministries

The period 1937-39 was the high watermark of the peasant movements and activity under the Congress provincial rule. The chief form of mobilisation was through holding kisan conferences and meetings where demands were aired and resolutions were passed. Mobilisation campaigns were carried out in the villages.

Peasant Activity in Provinces

Kerala

In the Malabar region, the peasants were mobilised mainly by the Congress Socialist Party activists. Many “Karshak Sanghams” (peasants’ organisations) came into existence. The most popular method was the marching of *jaths* or peasants groups to the landlords to get their demands accepted. One significant campaign by the peasants was in 1938 for the amendment of the Malabar Tenancy Act, 1929.

Andhra

This region had already witnessed a decline in the prestige of zamindars after their defeat by Congressmen in elections. Anti-zamindar movements were going on in some places. Many provincial ryot associations were active. N.G. Ranga had set up, in 1933, the India Peasants’ Institute. After 1936, the Congress socialists started organising the peasants. At many places, the summer schools of economics and politics

were held and addressed by leaders like P.C. Joshi, Ajoy Ghosh and R.D. Bhardwaj.

Bihar

Here, Sahjanand Saraswati was joined by Karyanand Sharma, Yadunandan Sharma, Rahul Sankritayan, Panchanan Sharma, Jamun Karjiti, etc. In 1935, the Provincial Kisan Conference adopted the anti-zamindari slogan. The Provincial Kisan Sabha developed a rift with the Congress over the '*bakasht* land' issue because of an unfavourable government resolution which was not acceptable to the sabha. The movement died out by August 1939.

Punjab

The earlier peasant mobilisation here had been organised by the Punjab Naujawan Bharat Sabha, the Kirti Kisan Party, the Congress and the Akalis. A new direction to the movement was given by the Punjab Kisan Committee in 1937. The main targets of the movement were the landlords of western Punjab who dominated the unionist ministry. 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 where feudal levies were being demanded by the private contractors. Here the peasants went on a strike and were finally able to win concessions.

The peasant activity in Punjab was mainly concentrated in Jullundur, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Lyallpur and Shekhupura. The Muslim tenants-at-will of west Punjab and the Hindu peasants of south-eastern Punjab (today's Haryana) remained largely unaffected.

Peasant activity was also organised in Bengal (Burdwan and 24 Parganas), Assam (Surma Valley), Orissa, Central Provinces and NWFP.

■ During the War

Because of a pro-War line adopted by the communists, the AIKS was split on communist and non-communist lines and

many veteran leaders like Sahjanand, Indulal Yagnik and N.G. Ranga left the sabha. But the Kisan Sabha continued to work among the people. It did notable work during the famine of 1943.

■ Post-War Phase

Tebhaga Movement

In September 1946, the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha gave a call to implement, through mass struggle, the Flood Commission recommendations of *tebhaga*—two-thirds' share—to the bargardars, the share-croppers also known as *bagchasi* or *adhya*, instead of the one-half share. The bargardars worked on lands rented from the *jotedars*. The communist cadres, including many urban student militias went to the countryside to organise the bargardars. The central slogan was "*nij khamare dhan tolo*"—i.e., sharecroppers taking the paddy to their own threshing floor and not to the *jotedar's* house, as before, so as to enforce *tebhaga*.

The storm centre of the movement was north Bengal, principally among Rajbanshis—a low caste of tribal origin. Muslims also participated in large numbers. The movement dissipated soon, because of the League ministry's sop of the Bargadari Bill, an intensified repression, the popularisation of the Hindu Mahasabha's agitation for a separate Bengal and renewed riots in Calcutta which ended the prospects of sympathetic support from the urban sections.

Telangana Movement

This was the biggest peasant guerrilla war of modern Indian history affecting 3000 villages and 3 million population. The princely state of Hyderabad under Asajahi Nizams was marked by a combination of religious-linguistic domination (by a small Urdu-speaking Muslim elite ruling over predominantly Hindu-Telugu, Marathi, Kannada-speaking groups), total lack of political and civil liberties, grossest

forms of forced exploitation by *deshmukhs*, *jagirdars*, *doras* (landlords) in forms of forced labour (*vethi*) and illegal exactions.

During the war, the communist-led guerrillas had built a strong base in Telangana villages through Andhra Mahasabha and had been leading local struggles on issues such as wartime exactions, abuse of rationing, excessive rent and *vethi*.

The uprising began in July 1946 when a *deshmukh's* *thug* murdered a village militant in Jangaon taluq of Nalgonda. Soon, the uprising spread to Warrangal and Khammam.

The peasants organised themselves into village *sanghams*, and attacked using lathis, stone slings and chilli powder. They had to face brutal repression. The movement was at its greatest intensity between August 1947 and September 1948. The peasants brought about a rout of the Razaqars—the Nizam's stormtroopers. Once the Indian security forces took over Hyderabad, the movement fizzled out.

The Telangana movement had many positive achievement to its credit.

- In the villages controlled by guerrillas, *vethi* and forced labour disappeared.
- Agricultural wages were raised.
- Illegally seized lands were restored.
- Steps were taken to fix ceilings and redistribute lands.
- Measures were taken to improve irrigation and fight cholera.
- An improvement in the condition of women was witnessed.
- The autocratic-feudal regime of India's biggest princely state was shaken up, clearing the way for the formation of Andhra Pradesh on linguistic lines and realising another aim of the national movement in this region.

Balance-Sheet of Peasant Movements

These movements created an atmosphere for post-independence agrarian reforms, for instance, abolition of zamindari.

They eroded the power of the landed class, thus adding to the transformation of the agrarian structure.

These movements were based on the ideology of nationalism.

The nature of these movements was similar in diverse areas.