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## PEASANT MOVEMENT IN INDIA

**POTHARAJU VENKATESHWARLU**

Lecturer in History Siddhartha Degree College, Tirumalagiri, Nalgonda, Telangana

### ABSTRACT

The peasants 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. The growth of peasant movement's exercised considerable pressure on the Indian National Congress. Despite this, the Karachi Congress Charter did not even touch the fringe of the peasant problem. But the political pressure of the Kisan Sabha succeeded in the Faizpur Congress agrarian programme. However, the Congress could not under the pressure of the native bourgeoisie grant any radical concession to the peasant demands, at the cost of jeopardizing the interests of zamindars This was amply demonstrated by the performances of the Congress ministers during the short period that they were in office before independence.

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 hand and cattle. Sometimes, the money-lender 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 tyranny of zamindars along with the exorbitant rates of British land revenues led to a series of spontaneous peasant uprisings in different parts of the country during this period. The periodic recurrence of famines coupled with the economic depression during the last decades of the 19th century further aggravated the situation in rural areas and consequently led to numerous peasant revolts. 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.

### Introduction

Indian economy is primarily an agrarian economy. The main occupation of majority of the population is agriculture. Before Independence, India was a poor country and its agriculture was primitive in nature. Further, feudal lords had complete domination over the lands and there was an unequal distribution. After independence, the government's agriculture policy evolved a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, there was a need to modernize agriculture and increase production, and on the other, bring about a uniform ownership system. In the early 1960s, new agricultural policies were introduced popularly under the banner of Green Revolution primarily to increase production. The policies were designed to provide financial support to the landowners and in turn increase their output by assuring access to all irrigational facilities. It was, however, only the rich and



middle-class farmers, who could secure loans, invest in fertilizers and procure high-yield variety seeds. As the agriculture policies did not touch upon redistribution of the agriculture produce, the condition of small and marginal farmers deteriorated drastically. Further, constant oppression and exploitation by the rich farmers became rampant.

The failure of governmental measures in resolving agrarian problem has been widely recognized and admitted today. The land reforms and community programmes meant for promoting capitalist footing in India have only succeeded in intensifying the agrarian crisis. The Congress Government has not only failed in providing relief to the vast bulk of deficit farmers and agricultural proletariat, but its agrarian policy has aggravated their miseries. This fact has been sufficiently demonstrated by the various Government Evaluation Reports and non-official enquiries on the impact of welfare measures on rural society. Consequently, Indian agrarian society is seething with discontent-even after independence. This has led to a series of peasant struggles in different parts of the country.

The following were the notable agrarian movement of this phase –

#### **Santhal's Revolution (1855)**

This revolution was not only against the British Raj as such but also against the zamindars who were vested with unjustified and unaccounted power of ownership of land that peasants had customarily considered and cultivated for millenniums as their own. The resolution was also directed against lenders who were given power to get peasants imprisoned for failure to repair their debts and against the autocracy of the officials. The santhals never thought that they could be evicted from their ancestral home states holdings due to their failure to pay taxes and debts. It had happened.

The self-respecting, proud, unorganized, Indian peasants could never reconcile themselves to the preposterous right conferred by the British Government on the zamindar to distain their properties, including their draught cattle, grain crops but that too came to be the order of the day. So they rose in revolt against that unjust order, imposed upon them by the British imperialism through the convenient media of its allies viz, the Indian zamindars and moneylenders.

The peasant, 'landed themselves (especially in Patna District) to resist short measures; illegal cases and forced deliveries of agreement to pay enhanced rates. Also there had been combination of Raiats in east Bengal, who refuse to pay anything except what they considered just;

The santhals found their leaders in two brothers who claimed to have received some occult blessing from gods to put an end to the zhulum of officers and the deceit of merchants. As many as 35,000 Santhals formed their bodyguard. They armed themselves with their traditional weapons of lows, arrows, axes and swords.



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They began to march to Calcutta to place their petition before the governor to free them from their oppressors.

On 7th July 1855 one of the Government Inspector obstructed their march and provoked them into violence. Thus on the commenced their rebellion and their resultant massacre at the hands of the British. The British officers who had been smitten with remorse later conferred that it was it was execution; we had orders to go out whenever we saw the smoke of a village rising about the jungle. The magistrate used to go with us I surrounded the village with my repays and magistrate called upon the rebels to surrender. To such an unjust and peremptory order, the brave santhals knew only one answer to give that was defiance. There upon they were brutally tried upon and butchered in masses. The santhals displayed such exceptional courage and military discipline that they faced successive volleys of British bullets with reckless heroism and abandon.

### **Bombay Peasants' Revolts (1871-75)**

These revolts were neither well planned, nor were they wide spread. They took place haphazardly in many districts like Kaira, Ahmednagar, Poona, all unconnected with each other. The peasants aimed their blows not on government but on moneylenders and even when whole villages were in revolt, great care was taken not to harm anyone else but marwari moneylenders. General object of the rioters was to obtain and destroy the bonds, decrees, etc. in the possession of their creditors, when these were peaceably given up to the assembled mob, there was usually nothing further done. When the moneylender refused violence was used to frighten him into surrender or to get possession of the papers. Again the might of British Raj came down on them and suppressed their risings. Yet it had to yield and redress their grievances, at least in part. Hence the Deccan Agriculturists Relief act, was passed whereby an exception was made for the Maharashtra peasants from the operations of the civil procedure code in that they could not be imprisoned for failure to repay debts.

### **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:**

- i. Peasants emerged as the main force in agrarian movements, fighting directly for their own demands
- ii. The demands were centred almost wholly on economic issues.
- iii. The movements were directed against the immediate enemies of the peasant—foreign planters and indigenous zamindars and moneylenders.
- iv. The struggles were directed towards specific and limited objectives and redressal of particular grievances.
- v. Colonialism was not the target of these movements.
- vi. It was not the objective of these movements to end the system of subordination or exploitation of the peasants.
- vii. Territorial reach was limited.
- viii. There was no continuity of struggle or long-term organisation
- ix. The peasants developed a strong awareness of their legal rights and asserted them and outside the courts.

### **Weaknesses:**

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

### **The Kisan Sabha Movement:**

After the 1857 revolt, the Awadh Talukdars had got back their lands. This strengthened the hold of the Talukdars 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 UP 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.

### **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 Pradesh:**

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.

### **Indigo Revolt**

Indigo growers' revolt had flared up in Bengal in autumn of 1959. On the one hand, this revolt was directed against the indigo planters, on the other, it grew into a rent strike against the planter zamindars. We shall refer briefly to the system of indigo cultivation in order to comprehend the issues involved in this peasant uprising, which was a landmark in the history of peasant movements in Bengal. The British merchants embarked upon indigo cultivations in Bengal and built factories in Malda, Padna, Nadia, Jessore, Midnapore, Rangpore, Rajshahi and Purnea. There is a great deal of evidence to show that the planters had to pay rent to the Bengal zamindars to get land for indigo cultivation. Some of them, notably Dwarkanath Tagore, chose to be planters. The value of land increased in villages where indigo cultivation had extended. Apparently the Bengal zamindars had a stake in indigo cultivation.

There were two forms of indigo cultivation—one of the system represented the cultivation on the planters' land with the help of hired labour. Under the other system, peasants grew indigo on their own land under contract and received advances from the planters: they had to hand over the entire produce to the planters at fixed prices. The system based on advance, virtually became forced cultivation, further more it was becoming un-remunerative, since peasants could get better prices when they grew jute or tobacco, the evidence of Ashley Eden before the indigo commission reads, "Cultivation is not the result of free agency, but it is always compulsory. First, I believe it to be unprofitable and therefore, cultivator will not consent to take up that cultivation; second, it evokes an amount of harassing interferences; recently as soon as the ryots became aware of the fact that they were by law and practically free agents they at once refused to continue the cultivation".

The indigo revolt started in Barasat, which had been the center of farazi disturbance in 1838. In March 1859 Eden, the magistrate of Barasat, declared that the ryots were free to grow whatever crops they liked. Hem Chandra Kar, a deputy magistrate, issued a parwana, based on Eden's instructions, on 20 August. As the knowledge of this parwana spread to villages, the peasants refused to sow indigo. By 1860 the revolt had spread to Nadia, Jessore, Palna, Rajshahi, Malda, Faridpur



and Murshidabad. In February 1860, Herschel, the magistrate of Nadia reported that “there appeared among the ryots a general sense of approaching freedom”. The peasants resisted the planter’s attacks with whatever weapons they could collect, indigo factories were raided and burnt: the factor servants were beaten. Kling vividly describes the form of peasant resistance in this passage.

The fact was that power still remained with zamidars, who wanted to teach the Sahib planters. a lesson. In the decade following the indigo revolt, which surely radicalized the peasants, rent disturbances continued to occur in a few regions and snowballed into an uprising in 1873.

### **Contribution of the Indian National Congress.**

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian National Congress began to champion the cause of the oppressed peasants. It imported a political significance-common cause with the nationwide freedom movement and anti-imperialist bias in to every one of struggles that peasants had to wage in order to free themselves from new imperialist impositions and machinations. Thus countrywide campaigns were organized with nationalism as their dynamo and economic pressure as their propellers against the vicious indenture labour system, contract labour in plantation-exploitation by European planters in India and other parts of British Empire. Now that political consciousness and organization were added to economic grievances, success began to dawn on the horizon of Indian peasant movement. The indenture system was abolished and some relief was obtained for plantation labour. A large number of risings took place in Malabar both in the last and present centuries. They were misnamed communal riots. Their basic causes which were the political and economic grievances of peasants against the local landlord were not sought to be removed, of course there was always the tendency for communal leaders to exploit these basic factors. But thanks to the sacrifices made by the Mopilla peasants, the Madras Government had to pass the Malabar Tenancy Act., which conferred permanency of tenancy upon a very large section of peasantry.

### **Gandhi and Peasants Satyagraha**

An entirely new dynamic and political revolutionary tendency has come to be imported into peasant struggle by Mahatma Gandhi since his advent on the Indian Politico-economic theatre in 1916. He familiarized the peasants of Champaran in Bihar and Kaira in Gujarat. With his new weapons of Satyagraha, an open, non-violent, organized politically alive revolt-against injustice in their struggles against the indigo planters and land revenue collectors respectively. He introduced the technique of first enquiring into the essential facts of the peasants grievances, then formulating their demands, educating them as to the nature and magnitude of their needs articulate demands, training them in the art of internal self-sufficiency pointing out the need for economy in case of a prolonged struggle against the authorities and steeling their mind to the rigours of jails, and other harassment of imperialism. He convince the peasants that the satisfaction of their



carefully moderated minimum demands was most urgently called for by Dharma or Social justice and that it would be their sacred duty to force the authorities to perform their Dharma towards them. The injection of this inspiring and ennobling conception of serving Dharma by revolting against injustice and by seeking redress for their own grievances steeled the determination and fighting morale of the peasants. As the Champion of Dharma peasants went ahead to face all their enemies without fear and with perfect confidence in their own cause and in their duty to and capacity for, teaching their opponents how to conform dharma. As Calvin strengthened the laugeoisie by his casuistry proving that they were helping society by helping themselves: as Marx put new life into the proletariat by demonstrating that they were the heirs of capitalism, chosen by Dame History, so Mahatma Gandhi invested the peasants as well as the colonial peoples with the saintly staff of Satyagraha to achieve the protection of Dharma for themselves and to office their opponents to conform to Dharma and thus save humanity from injustices.

### **The Second Phase: Emergence of class conscious Organization.**

The Congress policy of safeguarding the interests of zamindars and landlords led to the emergence of independent class organizations of kisans in rural India. Radical sections in the peasants movements increasingly realized that the Congress was solicitous of the capitalists and land magnates. They Felt that to protect the interests of kisans, their own class organization and leadership must be evolved. Conse quently, the kisan organizations came into existence in different parts of the country.

The first kisan Congress held at Lucknow in 1935 led to the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha. The programme of the Sabha reflected the aspirations and needs of the entire peasantry in agrarian India. The All India Kisan Sabha was composed of radical petty bourgeois individuals, within and outside the Indian National Congress It was also supported and strengthened by the Congress Socialist Party and later on by the Communist Party of India. We shall now refer to some of the significant struggles launched by the Kisan Sabha in different parts of the country during the initial period of its inception.

In Indian Pradesh it launched an anti-settlement agitation against zamindars 'Zulumi' in 1927. Swami Sahjanand, one of the eminent leaders and pioneers of the All India Kisan Sabha led a heroic movement for the abolition of zamindari in Bihar. A powerful struggle was initiated against the oppressive forces & laws in South India in 1927. Similarly, in UP and other parts of India, agitations were launched against the tyranny of zamindars.

### **Telangana Movement:**

This was the biggest peasant guerrilla war of modern Indian history affecting 3000 villages and 3 million populations. The princely state of Hyderabad under Asajahi Nizams was marked by a combination of religious-linguistic domination (by a mall 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 much positive achievement to its credit**

In the villages controlled by guerrillas, vethi and forced labour disappeared.

- i. Agricultural wages were raised.
- ii. Illegally seized lands were restored.
- iii. Steps were taken to fix ceilings and redistribute lands
- iv. Measures were taken to improve irrigation and fight cholera
- v. An improvement in the condition of women was witnessed.
- vi. 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.

### **Conclusion**

The history of peasant movements can be traced to the economic policies of the Britishers, which have brought about many changes in the Indian agrarian system. The consequences of the British colonial expansion were felt the most by the Indian peasantry and it rose in revolt from time to time. These peasant uprisings certainly did take place but were not recorded as such under colonial history, and they were considered acts of bandits and dacoits in the official records. A vast amount of information can be found in the archival data, which has only recently been uncovered and written about. India is basically an agrarian economy with the bulk of rural population following the occupation of agriculture. Peasants formed the backbone of the civil rebellions, which were often led by zamindars and petty chieftains.

The best example of this is the revolt of 1857. Another set of peasant revolts occurred primarily on the issue of religion. Although they started out as movements of religious and social reform and purification, they could not hide their agrarian interests for long and openly attacked the new zamindars, landlords, and moneylenders, irrespective of their religion. At the end, they clashed with British



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political and economic hegemony, which led to the mass peasant movements. Even after independence, interests of the peasants have not been safeguarded. There were many peasant movements in the post-independent India.

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