



## Peasant Agitations in India Before Independence

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### ABSTRACT

*Historically the peasant movements in India can broadly be grouped in three distinct phases. The initial phase (1857-1921). This phase was characterized by the sporadic growth of peasant movements in the absence of proper leadership, the second phase (1923-1946). This phase was marked by the emergence of the class conscious peasant organizations. Its distinct feature was that during this period peasant movements were led by people who gave priority to agrarian problems in the struggle for national liberation. The third phase was post-Independence phase. This era witnessed the uninterrupted continuity of the agrarian movements due to the failure of the ruling classes to resolve any of the basic problems of the toiling masses in rural India. The main aim of this article is to analyze the major reasons for the peasant revolts during colonial rule.*

**KEYWORDS :** Zamindari, Raitwari, Civil Procedure Code, Inamdari

The policies of the British government had the most direct impact on revenue and agrarian systems in India. When the experiment of Warren Hastings to auction the right to collect revenue to the highest bidder failed during 1773-1785, the permanent revenue settlement system, also commonly known as the Zamindari system, was introduced in Bengal and Bihar in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis with the help of Sir John Shore. This led to exploitation and suppression of peasants by Zamindars. This was followed by the Ryotwari settlement system in Madras Presidency by Governor Thomas Munro in 1820<sup>1</sup>. In this system, the land revenue fixed was exorbitant, the government had retained the right to enhance land revenue whenever it wanted and the people had to pay revenue in spite of partial agricultural production or total failure of crops. This again led to exploitation of the people in the hands of the state, leading to upheaval and gross discontentment amongst the masses<sup>2</sup>.

The peasants suffered from high rents, illegal levies, arbitrary evictions and unpaid labor 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 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 laborers<sup>3</sup>. The peasants often resisted the exploitation, and soon they realized that their real enemy was the colonial state.

This anger and resentment among the people across the country gradually led to their uprising and revolt, taking the shape of popular and historic movements that changed the course of modern Indian history and history of land reforms in India<sup>4</sup>. We will, in the subsequent sections in this unit, try to get an insight into the various movements and their impact on land reforms, and also study the role of Indian National Movement in this rural awakening that led to further changes in the system and mitigation of the exploitative system.

### EARLY PEASANT MOVEMENTS Indigo Movement (1859-60)

The movement that cultivators launched was due to many reasons. The principal reason was to force the British government to concede to their economic demands. The Indigo movement is considered to be the largest and a more rigorous movement against the atrocities of the Government. It was a direct fight of the cultivators against their exploitation. The largely European planters used totally arbitrary and ruthless methods to force peasants to grow the indigo crop on a part of their land in eastern India. The peasants were kidnapped, illegally confined<sup>5</sup>, women and children were attacked, and crop was looted, burnt and destroyed if the peasants did not obey the privileges and immunities enjoyed by the British planters placed them above the law and beyond all judicial control. By 1860, these oppressed indigo peasants launched non cultivation of indigo movement. It started with Govindpur village in Nadia district and rapidly spread to other neighbouring areas and by 1860, the whole Bengal

was in the grip of this movement. The most important factor of this movement was that it got support from the intelligentsia, the press and the missionaries of Bengal. Besides, there was complete Hindu-Muslim unity in this movement<sup>6</sup>. In November 1860, the government issued a notification that the ryots could not be compelled to grow indigo and that it would ensure that all disputes were settled by legal means. This was great victory for the indigo peasants. This was the first strike of Indian peasants and it was successful. This indigo movement was a source of great inspiration during India's struggle for freedom.

### 2. Pabna Agrarian Unrest (1873-76)

Most of the areas of Bengal, especially the East Bengal, were under the grip of cultivator unrest during 1870s because of the Permanent Settlement System<sup>7</sup>. The zamindars used crafty methods to deprive the ryots of their occupancy rights which were granted by the Act of 1859. Among these methods were enhancing rents beyond legal limits through a variety of cesses (Abwab), short changing in measurement, costly legal affairs and forced eviction. In reaction to these high handedness of the zamindars, the peasants of a number of districts of Bengal launched a movement during 1870 to 1885<sup>8</sup>. In May 1873, an agrarian league was formed in Pabna, a prosperous jute growing district, to resist the unjust demands of the zamindars. The Pabna league raised funds to fight legal battle against the zamindars and organized nonpayment of rent campaign. The overall objective of this league was that the -resistance should be legal and peaceful. The first noteworthy feature of this unrest was that it provided a sound platform to the peasants at a time when there was no kisan sabha or any political party to organize the peasants. Secondly there was a complete unity between the Hindu and Muslim communities even though majority of the Zamindars were Hindus while majority of peasants were Muslims<sup>9</sup>. This unrest resulted into Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 which did not fully protect the tenants from the zamindari oppression, but it gave rise to a powerful jotedar groups, some of whom turned out to be as exploitative as the zamindars.

### 3. Deccan Riots (1874-75)

In the ryotwari areas of Pune and Ahmadnagar of Maharashtra, the land revenue was very high and it had to be paid even when there was bad crop in succession. In the meantime, there was a boom in the export price of cotton due to American Civil War in 1860. In 1864 when this boom ended, it resulted into acute depression in cotton export and crash in cotton prices. Due to this situation, the peasants had to mortgage a very large part of their agricultural land to moneylenders, who were mostly Gujaratis and Marwaris. The situation became more explosive as the peasants faced the alternative of mortgaging land or eviction. Some moneylenders even compelled the peasants to compromise the honor of their women to get relief from their debts. This provided a spur to riots from Sirur taluk in December 1874 and by September 1875<sup>10</sup>, these riots had affected 33 places in six taluks. The object of this riot was to destroy the dead bonds, decrees, etc. in possession of their creditors. Personal violence was used only when the moneylenders refused to hand over the documents. The uprising was crushed with the assistance of military to police and thousands of peasants were arrested. The government appointed a

commission to look into the nature and cause of these issues and it unanimously held that poverty and indebtedness of the peasants were the two main causes of the riots. On the recommendation of the commission, government passed Agriculturists Relief Act in 1879 and on the operation of Civil Procedure Code, the peasants could not be arrested and sent to jail if they failed to pay their debts.

#### 4. No-Revenue Movement In Assam

The British tried to hike the land revenue by 50 to 70 per cent in temporarily settled areas of the districts of Kamrup and Darrang. This was resisted by village assemblies which enforced non-payment of revenue as a social boycott of those who decided to pay because of which they gained some concession in land revenue from the administration. A similar no-revenue campaign was launched in Maharashtra after the outbreak of famines of 1896-97 and 1899-1900 under the auspices of Poona Sarvajani Sabha<sup>11</sup>. These campaigns spread to Surat, Nasik, Khera and Ahmedabad. A revolt of peasants who were threatened by moneylenders with loss of their land took place in Punjab towards the end of 19th century. This led to assault and murder of moneylenders by the peasants. This resulted into the enactment of Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1902 which prohibited for 20 years transfer of land from

#### 5. Champaran Satyagraha (1917)

The cultivators in Champaran district of Bihar were forced by European planters to cultivate indigo on 3/20th of their land holding popularly known as tinkathia system. Under this system, European planters holding thikadari leases from the big local zamindars forced the peasants to cultivate indigo on part of their land at un-remunerative prices and by charging sharahbeshi (rent enhancement) or tawan (lump sum compensation) if the peasants wanted to be exempted from the obligation of growing indigo. The peasants refused to either grow indigo or pay illegal taxes. In 1917, Mahatma Gandhi launched an agitation and demanded a detailed enquiry and redressal of grievances of the peasants<sup>12</sup>. Faced by the success of this agitation, government appointed an enquiry committee which recommended the abolition of tinkathia system and payment of compensation to the peasants for illegal increase in their dues which was accepted by the Government.

#### 6. Kheda Satyagraha (1918)

Because of a severe drought in the Kheda district of Gujarat, the peasants appealed for remission of land revenue which was ignored by the Government. Gandhiji launched no-revenue campaign in Kheda along with Sardar Patel. After a hard struggle, Government issued orders directing that revenue should be recovered only from those who could pay. vii) Kisan Movement: The 20th century witnessed pathetic conditions of peasantry because of the following reasons. Lack of occupancy rights on land in many regions. Exaction by landlords of tributes, cesses, gifts, forced labour and excessive rent<sup>13</sup>. Periodic revision of land revenue in ryotwari areas. Heavy indebtedness to the village land lords or money lenders.

Coupled with these reasons, the outbreak of World War I added to the problems of the peasants. There was steep rise in the price of food grains benefiting middlemen and merchants at the cost of the poor. Further after War, Government encouragement to Talukdari and zamindari made the lot of peasantry miserable in UP. Some leaders of Home Rule League like Gauri Shanker Mishra and IndraNarain Dwivedi with the support of Madan Mohan Malviya organized the peasants under the banner of Kisan Sabha in 1918. A notable contribution was made by Baba Ramchandra towards organizing the peasants of Awadh against the landlords<sup>14</sup>. Up to 1920, the peasant movement of UP got associated with Non-Cooperation Movement launched by the Congress. Due to differences of opinion between the supporters of Non-Cooperation and those who preferred constitutional agitation, led to the setting up of Awadh Kisan Sabha (AKS) in October 1920. This Sabha united 330 grass-roots, kisan sabhas under its umbrella. The AKS persuaded the peasants to refuse to till bedakhli land, not to offer unpaid labour, boycott those who did not accept these conditions and solve their disputes through Panchayats. By 1921, this movement turned militant and spread to districts of Eastern UP. The agitators raided the houses of landlords and moneylenders, looted bazaars and granaries and there were clashes with the police. The violent edge of the movement got a break with the amendment of Awadh Rent Act in 1921<sup>15</sup>.

#### 7. Moplah Revolt (1921)

The oppression and exploitation of Muslim Moplah peasants of Malabar (Kerala) by Hindu zamindars (Jemis) and the British government was the main cause for Moplah revolt. It started in 1921 when police raided Tirurangadi mosque in search of arms. This sparked off major rebellion with attacks on police stations, public offices and houses of oppressive landlords and moneylenders. The gravity of the situation can be analyzed by the fact the British government lost control over Ernad and Walluvanad taluks for several months. The rebellion was suppressed brutally by British. This movement was termed as anti-British as well as anti-Zamindars and, to some extent, as anti-Hindu, as most of the local zamindars were Hindus<sup>16</sup>. Freedom Movement and

#### 8. Bardoli Satyagraha (1928)

A no-revenue campaign was organized by the Independent India Bardoli peasants under the leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to oppose the enhancement of land revenue by 22% in the Bardoli district of Gujarat<sup>18</sup>. Under this agitation, the peasants refused to pay land revenue at the enhanced rates. Under the pressure of the movement, Government was forced to reach a settlement on the basis of a judicial enquiry and return of confiscated land. A result of the Maxwell-Broomfield Enquiry was that enhancement was rescinded and land revenue was reduced from 22% to 6.03%<sup>19</sup>.

**10. Organization of Kisan Sabhas:** As we have already seen a Kisan Sabha was formed in Awadh province in 1920 and Kisan Sabha, or associations were formed in, other provinces on the similar lines. The Andhra Provincial Ryots Association was started in 1928, followed by Bihar Kisan Sabha set up by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. Since all the sabhas were scattered in different provinces, it was felt that a Kisan Sabha at the national level should be formed as an apex organization of Indian peasants. The first All India Kisan Congress was held at Lucknow which led to the formation of Kisan Sabha in 1936 with Swami Sahajanand Saraswati as its President and N.G. Ranga as General Secretary. From 1936 onwards, All India Kisan Day was celebrated on 1st September every year<sup>20</sup>. A Kisan Sabha manifesto was launched which included protection of peasants from economic exploitation, demand of 50% reduction in land revenue, security of tenure for tenants, living wages for labourers, recognition of peasant unions, abolition of begar (forced labour) etc. The Sabha also launched struggles in different parts of India such as Movement against oppression of zamindars in Andhra Pradesh, abolition of zamindari system in Bihar and UP, movement against oppressive forest laws, etc.

#### 11. Peasant Struggles in Andhra

The Peasant struggles in Andhra had long history of one and half centuries. The Government manuals and gazetteers recorded their revolt against Estate management one place and against police troops at another. Thus the taluk and District level Peasant movements taken up by some individuals finally helped in establishing the Kisan Organisation. The Kisan Sangh of 1922 in Andhra State, the Andhra State Zameen Rytu of 1929, the Andhra State Agricultural Labourers Organization of 1937, belonged to this category. The agricultural laborer organizations established in 1937 and come into the fold of the communist party by the year 1945.

#### Telangana Movement: (1946)

This was the biggest peasant guerrilla war of modern Indian history affecting 3000 villages and 3 million populations. The princely state of Hyderabad under Asafjahi Nizams was marked 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. The uprising began in July 1946 when a Deshmukh's thug murdered a village militant in Jangaon taluq of Nalgonda. 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 storm troopers. Once the Indian security forces took over Hyderabad, the movement fizzled out.

#### Conclusion

The peasant movements and struggles during 1857-1947 is known for Indigo Movement (1859-60), considered to be the largest and the most rigorous movement against the atrocities of the Government. It was a direct fight of the cultivators against their exploitation, Pabna

Agrarian Unrest (1873-76), Deccan riots (1874-75), No-Revenue Movement in Assam, Maharashtra, and Punjab (towards the end of 19th century), and Champaran Indigo Satyagraha (1917). Besides, popular Congress Ministries in provinces such as Bihar, UP and Bombay also contributed towards the struggle of peasants against exploitation of Zamindars and other intermediaries. The people of Andhra were not satisfied with the rule of the East India Company. They became subject to too many taxes, which were all oppressive in character. The administration of justice was both slow and costly. Very little was spent by Government on irrigation, roads and other works of public utility. Education was totally neglected. It was precisely from this period onwards that the Andhra Peasants showed an increasing awareness of the cultural, Ideological dimension of colonial rule and simultaneously started articulating the national integration.

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