

Peasant Movements in India: A Historical and Socio-Political Analysis

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Abstract

Peasant movements in India have played a crucial role in shaping agrarian policies, socio-economic reforms, and political mobilization. From colonial exploitation to post-independence struggles, Indian peasants have organized themselves to resist oppression, demand land rights, and fight against unjust economic policies. This paper examines the major peasant movements in India, their causes, key leaders, and their impact on Indian society and politics. It also explores the role of peasant movements in influencing state policies and their relevance in contemporary agrarian crises.

Keywords: Taxation, zamindars, Landless labourers, Exploitation, Indigo, Corporate exploitation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Peasant movements in India have been a significant part of the country's socio-political landscape. These movements emerged as responses to exploitative land revenue systems, feudal oppression, and unjust agrarian policies imposed by colonial and post-colonial regimes. The Indian peasantry, comprising small farmers, landless laborers, and tenant cultivators, has historically been marginalized, leading to organized resistance. This paper analyzes the evolution of peasant movements in India, their ideological underpinnings, and their long-term consequences.

2. Historical Background of Peasant Struggles

2.1. Pre-Colonial and Colonial Exploitation

Before British rule, Indian agriculture was largely feudal, with zamindars (landlords) extracting surplus from peasants. The British colonial administration intensified exploitation through the Permanent Settlement (1793), Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems, which led to excessive taxation and indebtedness among peasants.

2.2. Early Peasant Uprisings

- Sanyasi Rebellion (1763-1800): One of the earliest peasant uprisings against British land revenue policies.
- Pabna Revolt (1873): Bengali peasants protested against zamindari oppression.
- Deccan Riots (1875): Maharashtra peasants revolted against moneylenders and landlords.

3. Major Peasant Movements in Colonial India

3.1. Champaran Satyagraha (1917)

- Led by Mahatma Gandhi, this movement in Bihar protested against the forced cultivation of indigo by British planters.

- Resulted in the Champaran Agrarian Act (1918), reducing peasant exploitation.
- Due to competition from German blue dye synthesis prices of indigo fell and imposition of high taxation and illegal dues from peasants.
- Gandhiji opposed and protested, leading to abolishing of Tinkatiya system.

3.2. Kheda Satyagraha (1918)

- Peasants in Gujarat refused to pay taxes due to crop failure.
- Gandhi's intervention led to tax relief for farmers.
- People of Kheda were unable to pay the high taxes levied by the British amid crop failure and Plague epidemic.
- Impact of success was also realized by peasants of Gujarat and neighbouring states.

Moplah Rebellion (1921)

- Muslim peasants in Malabar revolted against Hindu landlords and British authorities.
- Though rooted in agrarian discontent, it took a communal turn.
- Hike in revenue demand and reduction of field size, coupled with oppression of officials, resulted in widespread peasant unrest among the Moplahs of Malabar.

Bardoli Satyagraha (1928)

- Led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, peasants in Gujarat protested against excessive land revenue.
- The movement succeeded in reducing tax burdens.
- Against unjust raising of taxes, Patel called for no tax campaign, became a model peasant movement.
- Movement 1925, because of floods, because of floods and famine, crop production suffered.
- And government raised tax by 30% that year.
- Patel consulted Gandhi, Gandhi agreed but decided not to participate, as a result the government agreed to restore the confiscated lands and cancel revenue payment revoked 30% next year.

Tebhaga Movement (1946-47)

- Sharecroppers in Bengal demanded two-thirds of the harvest instead of half.
- Led by the Communist Party of India (CPI), it highlighted class struggle in rural India.

4. Post-Independence Peasant Movements

After independence, land reforms were introduced, but implementation remained weak, leading to continued peasant struggles.

4.1. Telangana Armed Struggle (1946-51)

- Communist-led revolt against feudal lords in Hyderabad state.
- Resulted in land redistribution but was suppressed by the Indian Army.

4.2. Naxalbari Movement (1967)

- Radical peasant uprising in West Bengal led by Charu Majumdar.
- Advocated armed revolution for land redistribution, inspiring Naxalism.

Farmers' Movements (1980s-2020s)

- Shetkari Sanghatana (1980s): Maharashtra farmers demanded better crop prices.
- Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) Protests: Led by Mahendra Singh Tikait, farmers protested against electricity tariffs and MSP policies.

- 2020-21 Farmers' Protest: Massive agitation against three farm laws, leading to their repeal.
- Impact and Significance of Peasant Movements
- Land Reforms: Abolition of zamindari, tenancy reforms, and land ceiling acts.
- Political Mobilization: Rise of farmer-based political parties like the Swatantra Party and BKU's influence.
- Policy Changes: Introduction of Minimum Support Price (MSP) and loan waivers.

5. Contemporary Agrarian Crisis and Peasant Unrest

- Despite progress, Indian farmers face challenges like:
- Debt and Suicides due to crop failures and low income.
- Corporate Exploitation via contract farming and land acquisitions.
- Climate Change affecting agricultural sustainability.

6. Conclusion

Peasant movements in India have been instrumental in challenging oppressive structures and advocating for agrarian justice. While some demands have been met, systemic issues persist. The continued relevance of these movements highlights the need for sustainable agricultural policies and equitable economic reforms.

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