



Peasant Movements in India

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Introduction

- **Peasant Struggles:**

- In these struggles, the peasants emerged as the main force, fighting directly for their own demands.
- The movements in the period between 1858 and 1914 tended to remain localised, disjointed and confined to particular grievances, contrary to the movements after 1914.

- **Causes of the Movements:**

- **Peasant Atrocities:** The peasants suffered from **high rents, illegal levies, arbitrary evictions and unpaid labour** in Zamindari areas. The Government levied heavy land revenue.
- **Massive Losses for Indian Industries:** The movements arose when **British economic policies resulted in the ruin of traditional handicrafts and other small industries** leading to change of ownership and overburdening of agrarian land, and massive debt and impoverishment of peasantry.
- **Unfavourable Policies:** The economic policies of British government used to **protect the landlords and moneylenders and exploited the peasants**. The peasants rose in revolt against this injustice on many occasions.

- **Rise of Peasant Organisations:**

- Between 1920 and 1940 peasant organisations arose.
- The first organisation to be founded was the **Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha** (1929) and in 1936 the **All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)**.
- In 1936, at the **Lucknow session of the Congress**, **All India Kisan Sabha** was formed with **Sahajanand** as its first president.

It later issued a **Kisan manifesto** which demanded abolition of zamindari and occupancy rights for all tenants.

19th Peasant Movements (Pre-Gandhian Phase)

- **Indigo Rebellion (1859-62):**

- In order to increase their profits, the European planters persuaded the peasants to plant Indigo instead of food crops.
- The farmers were discontent growing indigo because:
 - Low prices were offered for growing indigo.
 - Indigo was not lucrative.
 - Indigo planting decreased the fertility of the soil.
- The peasants suffered at the hands of the traders and the middleman. Consequently, they launched a movement for non cultivation of indigo in Bengal.
- They were **supported by the press and the missionaries**.
 - **Harish Chandra Mukherjee**, a Bengali Journalist, described the plight of peasants of Bengal in his newspaper '**The Hindu Patriot**'.
 - **Dinabandhu Mitra**, Bengali writer and dramatist, in his play '**Nil Darpan**' depicted the treatment of the Indian peasantry by the indigo planters. It was first published in 1860.

His play created a huge controversy which was later banned by the East India Company to control the agitation among the Indians.
- The government appointed an **Indigo Commission** and issued an order in November 1860, notifying that it was illegal to force the ryots to cultivate indigo. **This marked the victory for the peasants.**

- **Pabna Movement (1870s-80s):**

- In larger parts of Eastern **Bengal**, landlords forcefully collected rents and land taxes, often enhanced for the poor peasants.
- The peasants were also prevented from acquiring **Occupancy Right under Act X of 1859**.
- In May 1873 an **Agrarian League was formed in the Yusufshahi Pargana** of Pabna district, Patna (East Bengal).
 - Rent strikes were organised, funds were raised and the struggle spread throughout Patna and to other districts of East Bengal.
 - The struggle was **mainly legal resistance and little violence**.
- The discontent continued till 1885 when the Government by the **Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885** enhanced the occupancy rights.
- The struggle was supported by **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, R.C. Dutt** and the **Indian Association** under **Surendranath Banerjea**.

- **Deccan Riots (1875):**

- The Deccan peasants uprising was directed mainly against the excesses of the **Marwari and Gujarati money lenders**.
- The ryots suffered heavy taxation under the **Ryotwari system**. The land revenue was also raised by 50% in 1867.
- **Social Boycott:** In 1874, the ryots organised a **social boycott movement** against the moneylenders.
 - They refused to buy from the moneylenders' shops and cultivate their fields.
 - The barbers, washermen, and shoemakers refused to serve them.
- This social boycott spread rapidly to the villages of Poona, Ahmednagar, Solapur and Satara and was transformed into agrarian riots with systematic attacks on the moneylenders' houses and shops.
- The Government succeeded in repressing the movement. As a conciliatory measure, the **Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act** was passed in 1879.

20th Century Peasant Movements (Gandhian Phase)

- **Champaran Satyagraha (1917):**

- The peasantry on the indigo plantations in the **Champaran** district of Bihar was excessively oppressed by the European planters and compelled to grow indigo on at least 3/20th of their land and sell it at prices fixed by the planters.
- In 1917, **Mahatma Gandhi** reached Champaran and began to conduct a detailed inquiry into the condition of the peasantry.
- He defied the orders of district officials for leaving Champaran.
- In June 1917, the Government appointed an enquiry committee with Gandhiji as one of the members.

The enactment of the **Champaran Agrarian Act, 1918** freed the tenants from the special imposts levied by the indigo planters.

- **Kheda Satyagraha (1918):**

- It was chiefly **directed against the Government**.
- In 1918, the crops failed in the **Kheda district of Gujarat** but the government refused to remit land revenue and insisted on its full collection.
- Gandhiji along with **Sardar Vallabhai Patel** supported the peasants and advised them to withhold payment of revenues till their demand for its remission was met.
- The satyagraha lasted till June 1918. The Government conceded the demands of the peasants.

- **Moplah Rebellion (1921):**
 - The **Moplahs were the Muslim tenants** inhabiting the Malabar region where most of the landlords were Hindus.
 - Their grievances centred around **lack of security of tenure, high rents, renewal fees** and other oppressive exactions.
 - The Moplah movement merged with the ongoing **Khilafat agitation**. Mahatma Gandhi, **Shaukat Ali and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad** addressed Moplah meetings.
 - Many Hindus were seen by the Moplahs to be helping the British authorities. The anti-government and anti-landlord movement **acquired communal overtones**. Communalisation isolated the Moplah from the Khilafat & **Non-Cooperation Movement**.
 - The movement was called off by December 1921.
- **Bardoli Satyagraha (1928):**
 - Enhancement of land revenue by 30% in the Bardoli district of Gujarat by the British government led to the organisation of a **'No-Revenue Campaign'** by the Bardoli peasants under the **leadership of Vallabhai Patel**.
 - A woman in Bardoli **gave Vallabhai Patel the title of 'Sardar'**.
 - Unsuccessful attempts of the British to suppress the movement by large scale attachment of cattle and land resulted in the appointment of an enquiry committee.
 - The enquiry came to the conclusion that the increase had been unjustified and reduced the enhancement to 6.03%.

Difference between 19th and 20th Century Peasant Movements

Characteristics	19th Century Peasant Movements	20th Century Peasant Movements
Objective of Movements:	The objective of these movements were centered almost wholly on economic issues rather than ending the exploitation of the peasants.	The peasants were brought into the broader struggle against colonialism beginning with Champaran, Kheda and later Bardoli movement.
Leadership:	The leadership of these revolts were from the peasantry itself .	The movements were led by Congress and communist leaders.

Extent of Movements:	Territorial reach was limited to a particular local region.	All India movements. The chief form of mobilisation was through holding kisan conferences and meetings.
Understanding of Colonialism:	Directed towards specific and limited objectives and redressal of particular grievances. Colonialism was not the target of these movements.	There was an emergence of anti-colonialism consciousness among peasants.
Formal Organization:	No formal organization. These caused movements to be a short term phenomenon.	Emergence of independent class organisations of kisans in rural India. The All India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936.

Significance of the Movements

- **Awareness among the Indians:** Though these revolts were not aimed at uprooting the British rule from India, they created awareness among the Indians.
The peasants **developed a strong awareness of their legal rights** and asserted them in and outside the courts.
- **Inspired other Revolts:** They felt a **need to organise and fight against exploitation and oppression.**
These rebellions prepared the ground for various other uprisings such as **Sikh Wars in Punjab** and finally the **Revolt of 1857.**
- **Unity Among the Peasantry:** Because of the non-differentiation in the peasantry, and the all-embracing nature of the anti imperialist struggle, the Peasant Movement was able to **unite all sections of the peasantry including the landless labourers** and its anti-feudal and anti-imperialist crusade.
- **Peasants' Voices were Heard:** Due to the peasants fighting directly for their own demands, their voices were heard.
 - In the Indigo rebellion, Bardoli Satyagraha, Pabna movement and Deccan riots, the demands of peasants were responded to.
 - Formation of various Kisan Sabhas to hear the peasants' demands during the Non Cooperation Movement.
- **Growth of Nationalism:** The ideology of non-violence had given much strength to the peasants who participated in the movement.
The movement also contributed to the growth of nationalism.

- **Encouraged Post-Independence Reforms:** 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.