



Peasant Uprisings in India

For Prelims: [Land Revenue Settlements](#), [Absentee Landlordism](#), [Sanyasi Rebellion](#), Rangpur Peasant Uprising, [Mysore Rebellion](#), [Faraizi Movement](#), [Wahabi Movement](#), Indigo Rebellion, Deccan Riots, Pabna Movement, [Champaran Movement](#), Kheda Satyagraha, Eka Movement, [Mopla Rebellion](#), [Bardoli Satyagraha](#), [All India Kisan Sabha](#), Tebhaga Movement, [Telangana Movement](#), [Bengal famine](#), [East India Company](#), [Communist Party of India](#), [Sardar Vallabhai Patel](#), [Civil Disobedience Movement](#), [satyagraha](#), [Poona Sarvajanik Sabha](#)

For Mains: Role of peasant community in struggle against colonial exploitation.

Who are the Peasants?

- It broadly represents a vast mass of [landless agricultural laborers](#), sharecroppers, tenants, **poor artisans** and [small and marginal farmers](#).
- They personally cultivated the land.
- They are socially and economically **marginalized**, culturally **subjugated** and politically **dis-empowered** social groups.

Why the Peasants Revolted?

- **Reasons for tribal revolt included:**
 - **Destruction of Indian Handloom and Handicraft Industries:** It led to [migration](#) of large scale workers from industry to agriculture.
 - **British Land Revenue Settlements:** Heavy burden of **new taxes** made the peasants completely dependent on the mercy of the [revenue intermediaries](#) and officials.
 - **Encroachment on Tribal Lands:** Expansion of British revenue administration over tribal territories led to the [loss of tribal people's hold](#) over agricultural and forest land.
 - **Intermediary Revenue Collectors:** Rising tenants and moneylenders, corrupt practices and harsh attitude of the tax collecting officials further aggravated the problem.
 - **Indebtedness:** Peasants borrowed money from the moneylenders to pay land revenue. The impoverished peasants could never pay back this borrowed money.
 - **Absentee Landlordism:** The British auctioned confiscated land to the highest bidder, who often came from the [urban areas](#). The new zamindars from the city had little or no interest in the land. They did not invest money in seeds or fertilizers to improve the fertility of the land but only cared to collect as much revenue as they could.
 - **Institutional Exploitation:** British law and judiciary did not aid the peasantry. It **safeguarded** the interest of the **government** and its **collaborators** i.e., landlords, merchants and money-lenders.
- The simmering discontent of the peasants broke out into popular uprisings in different parts of India at different points of time.

What are the Important Peasant Uprisings?

▪ Sanyasi Rebellion (1763-1800)

- The Sanyasis and Fakirs were **religious mendicants**. Originally they were peasants.
- Growing **hardship** of the peasantry, **increasing revenue** demand and the **Bengal famine** of 1770 brought a large number of dispossessed small Zamindars, disbanded soldiers and rural poor into the bands of Sanyasis and Fakirs.
- They moved around different parts of Bengal and Bihar in bands of 5 to 7 thousand and adopted the **guerilla technique** of attack.
 - Their target of attack was the **grain stocks** of the rich and at later stage, **government officials**.
- They established an **independent** government in **Bogra** and **Mymensingh**.
- One noticeable feature of these insurrections was the equal **participation** of **Hindus** and **Muslims** in it.
- Some of the important **leaders** of these movements were **Manju Shah, Musa Shah, Bhawani Pathak** and **Debi Chaudhurani**.
- In **1872**, **Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay** published **Anandamath**, a historical novel set in the background of the **Sanyasi Rebellion**.

▪ Rangpur Peasant Uprising (1783):

- **Rangpur** and **Dinajpur** were two of the districts of Bengal which faced all kinds of **illegal demands** by the **East India Company** and its revenue contractors.
- **Debi Singh** (revenue contractor) and his men used to beat and flog the peasants, burn their houses and destroy their crops and not even women were spared.
- The rebel peasants gathered a large number of peasants, armed with swords, shields, bows and arrows.
 - They elected **Dirjinarain** as their **leader** and attacked the local cutcheries and store houses of crops of contractors and government officials.
- The rebels stopped payments of revenue and levied "**insurrection charges**" to meet the expenses of the rebellion.
- Both **Hindus** and **Muslims** fought side by side in the insurrection.

▪ Mysore Rebellion (1830-31):

- The financial pressure from the company on the Mysore ruler compelled him to **increase revenue** demands from the Zamindars.
- The growing discontent of the peasants broke out into an open revolt in the province of **Nagar**.
 - The rebel peasants found their leader in **Sardar Malla**, the son of a common ryot of **Kremsi**.

▪ Faraizi Movement (1838-1848):

- The **Faraizi sect** was founded by **Haji Shariatullah** of Faridpur.
- The Faraizis under **Dudu Miyan**, the son of the founder of the sect, became united as a **religious sect** with an egalitarian ideology.
 - He preached that all **men are equal** and **land** belongs to god and no one has the right to levy tax on it.
- They raided the Zamindars' houses and cutcheries and burnt the indigo factory at Panchchar.

▪ Wahabi Movement (1830's-1860's):

- The leader of the movement was **Syed Ahmed Barelvi** of Rae Bareilly who was greatly influenced by the teachings of **Abdul Wahab** of Arabia and **Shah Waliullah**, a Delhi saint.
- The movement was primarily **religious** in its origin but it soon assumed the character of a **class struggle** in some places, especially in Bengal.
 - It united peasants against their landlords.

▪ Indigo Rebellion (1859-1862):

- Heavy pressure was put on the zamindars and peasants to pay **high taxes** and grow **commercial crops**.
 - One such commercial crop was **Indigo**.
 - The cultivation of indigo was determined by the needs of the English cloth markets.
- The peasants launched a movement for non cultivation of indigo in Bengal.
- They were supported by the **press** and the **missionaries**.
 - **Harish Chandra Mukherjee** described the plight of peasants of Bengal in his

newspaper "**The Hindu Patriot**".

- **Dinabandhu Mitra**, in his play "**Nil Darpan**" depicted the treatment of the Indian peasantry by the indigo planters.

- The government passed orders in **November 1860**, notifying that it was **illegal** to force the raiyats to **cultivate indigo**. This marked the victory for the rebels.

▪ **Deccan Riots (1875):**

- The British administration had systematically **ruined agriculture** coupled with **exaggerated revenue** demands and **maladministration**.
- Causes:
 - During the **American Civil War (1861-1865)**, most peasants had switched to **cotton farming**, attracted by the high prices, but the prices **crashed** dramatically when the war concluded, and supply of Cotton resumed from America.
 - The situation was made **worse** by a series of **bad harvests** over the next several years.
 - It was during this period of crisis that the British administration suddenly **raised** land revenue by **over 50%**.
 - It began spontaneously on 12th May 1875, in **Supa**, located in **Pune**.
 - Peasants launched **attacks** on the **moneylenders** and destroyed the **debt contracts** and **bonds**.
 - Organizations such as the **Poona Sarvajanik Sabha** supported the peasantry and **campaigned** actively for **relief** to the struggling agriculturalists.
 - The **Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act, 1879** was passed to extend protection to peasants against the moneylenders.

▪ **Pabna Movement (1873-1885):**

- It was a resistance movement against the oppression of the zamindars in the **Yusufshahi pargana of Bengal**.
- **Bengal Rent Act, 1859** allowed the zamindars to **enhance rent** only on three specific grounds but zamindars routinely collected money from the peasants by the illegal means of forced levy, abwabs (cesses) and so on.
- The peasants organized a **no-rent union** and launched **armed attacks** on the zamindars and their agents.
- The **Pabna Raiyats' League** came into existence in **May 1873**.
 - It **raised funds** to mitigate litigation expenses, held mass meetings.
 - One of the leaders of the League was **Ishan Chandra Roy (Ishan Raja)**.
 - Koodi Molla and Shambhu Nath Pal were prominent among his followers.
 - They even set up a '**rebel army**' to fight the zamindari **lathials (clubmen)**.

▪ **Champaran Movement (1917):**

- Farmers in the **Champaran region** of Bihar were forced to produce indigo on **3/20 part of the entire land area (Tinkathia system)** leaving them in great distress.
 - They were **unable** to grow the **food** they needed, nor were they paid enough for indigo, further adding to their misery.
 - Also, they were forced to give up the best part of their land to plant specific crops according to the wishes of the landlord.
- **Mahatma Gandhi** had arrived at Champaran on the request of **Raj Kumar Shukla**.
- Champaran Satyagraha was the **first civil disobedience movement** which was launched by Mahatma Gandhi in **1917**.
 - It is widely regarded as the place where Gandhi made his first **experiments in satyagraha** and then replicated them elsewhere.
- Mahatma Gandhi involved many eminent **personalities** such as **Brajkishore Prasad, Rajendra Prasad, Anugrah Narayan Sinha, Ramnavmi Prasad** and others including **J. B. Kripalani** for the cause.
- **Champaran Agrarian Act, 1918** was passed which led to the abolition of the **tinkathia system** of plantation.

▪ **Kheda Satyagraha (1918):**

- A **bad harvest** in 1917-18, coinciding with the **price surge** of essentials, was the immediate backdrop to the agitation.

- The peasants had demanded **remission** of revenue for the year to reduce their sufferings, but the colonial government paid no heed to their concerns.
- In response, local leaders like **Mohanlal Pandya** took the initiative for the **no-revenue movement** in November 1917.
- Through the **Gujarat Sabha**, a political body at the front line of this movement, the satyagrahis reached out to Gandhiji to take up their leadership.
 - **Gandhiji** was accompanied by **Sardar Patel, Ansuyaben Sarabhai, Miraben, Anandibai, Maniben Patel** (Sardar Patel's daughter), and **Kasturba Gandhi**.
- The satyagraha was concluded on a **quid-pro-quo agreement** that if the well-to-do peasants paid up, the poor would be permitted not to pay, and all the confiscated properties would be returned.
- **Eka Movement (1921-1922):**
 - Peasants were forced to give **more rent** than the stipulated rent. They were oppressed by revenue collectors.
 - Under this movement, peasants refused to pay more than the recorded rent and **renewal fees** called **Nazrana**. They also decided to not do any forced labor.
 - It was led by **Madari Pasi**.
- **Moplah Rebellion (1836-1921):**
 - **Moplah Rebellion** was a series of riots by the **Moplah muslims** of Malabar, Kerala in the **19th century** and the **early 20th century (1836-1921)** against mainly Hindus landlords and the state.
 - The Moplah Rebellion of 1921 is often considered its **culmination** point.
 - Moplahs are the **descendants** of the **Arab settlers** and **converted Hindus**.
 - Majority of them were cultivating tenants, landless laborers, petty traders and fishermen.
 - The British occupation of Malabar led to the transfer of **"Janmi"** from that of traditional partnership with the Moplah to that of an **independent owner** of land.
 - Janmis were owners of land that was passed from one generation to the other.
 - The Moplahs revolted against the British and landlords due to over-assessment, illegal taxes, eviction from their land, and the hostile attitude of government officials.
- **Bardoli Satyagraha (1928):**
 - It demanded a **tax hike of 22%** by the **Bombay Presidency** in the backdrop of famine and flood be **repealed**.
 - Spearheaded by **Sardar Vallabhai Patel**, it became a strong foundation for the larger **Civil Disobedience Movement** in 1930.
 - He earned the **title "Sardar"** from the **women** who participated in the movement and emerged as a **national leader**.
 - The **Bardoli Satyagraha Patrika** was used as a means of **mobilizing** the peasants during the Satyagraha.
 - It was edited by **Jugatram Dave** from Surat.
 - The other methods used for mobilizing the masses were **bhajan mandali**, holy imagery and **'bhuvras'** (used to communicate with adivasis).
 - Some of the prominent **women** leaders were **Bhaktiba, Shardaben Mehta** and **Mithuben Petit**.
- **All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) (1936):**
 - **Swami Sahajananda Saraswati** spearheaded the formation of **AIKS** at the **Indian National Congress' (INC) Lucknow** Session in **1936**.
 - It was graced by leaders like **N. G. Ranga, R. M. Lohia, Indulal Yagnik, Acharya Narendra Dev, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, Jayaprakash Narayan** and others.
 - **Jawaharlal Nehru** too lent his **support** to the AIKS.
 - The 1936 AIKS Manifesto propounded **4 fundamental goals**:
 - Abolition of the zamindari
 - Cancellation of rural debt
 - Land revenue reduction
 - Shift of land ownership to tillers.
- **Tebhaga Movement (1946-47):**
 - It was a peasant resistance that erupted in **Bengal** in **1946-47** under the leadership of **Bangiya Pradeshik Kisan Sabha (BPKS)**.
 - It demanded a **reduction** in the **jotedars' (landlords) share** in the crop harvest from

half to **one-third**.

- In the **South 24 Parganas** district in West Bengal, **Kakdwip** emerged as one of the **centers** of the movement.
- Approximately 40% of sharecropping peasants obtained **tebhaga rights (two-third shares)** willingly granted by landholders, repeal or reduction of unjust and illegal exaction.

▪ **Telangana Movement (1948-51):**

- It was an **armed revolt** of peasants under the leadership of the **Communist Party of India** against oppressive landlordism patronized by the **Nizam of Hyderabad**.
- Peasants were subjected to increasing numbers of **exploitative taxes** and levies and forced to perform **'vetty' (forced labor)**.
- Peasants were organized by the Communists into **armed guerilla squads** to fight armed battalions of the Nizam called **"razakars"**, who were increasingly deployed to crush the movement.

Conclusion:

During British colonial rule, Indian peasants experienced significant upheaval due to changes in agricultural production and land relationships. Traditional agrarian bonds were disrupted as land became a commodity and commercial agriculture grew in the late 19th century. This shift led to unrest among peasants, who faced changes like landlords collecting rent in high-priced grain instead of cash. These movements laid the groundwork for post-independence agrarian reforms, such as the abolition of the Zamindari system, which reduced the influence of the landed elite and transformed India's agrarian landscape.

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