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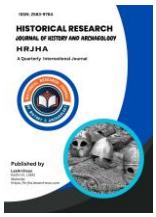

Peasant Movements in India: Historical Trajectories, Class Struggles, and Contemporary Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical evolution, ideological foundations, and socio-political dimensions of peasant movements in India. It traces agrarian unrest from colonial exploitation, which transformed land into a commercial commodity and destabilized rural livelihoods, through the rise of organized movements in the twentieth century and the radicalization seen in post-independence uprisings. Examining landmark struggles — from the Santhal Rebellion and Champaran Satyagraha to the Telangana and Naxalite movements — the study highlights peasants' shift from spontaneous resistance to ideological militancy. The analysis also reflects on post-liberalization farmer agitations, which articulate new demands amid globalization, land acquisition, and neoliberal reforms. The emergence of middle-class farmers' movements alongside radical leftist struggles marks a diversification in agrarian mobilization.

INTRODUCTION

Social movements are dynamic events ingrained in the larger course of society change. Alternatively, they endeavour to oppose such changes when needed by means of persistent, orderly group activities aiming at changing prevailing ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes, relationships, and

institutional structures. Scholars such Blumer (1951), Haberle (1972), and Guesfield (1971) have seen these movements as manifestations of group unhappiness resulting from accepted political, social, and economic systems. Though the particular forms of collective action vary depending on the historical and geographical setting, some fundamental elements—such as ideology, organisation, leadership, and goals—always help to define the nature and results of social movements.[1] In India, peasant movements hold a major role within this terrain of group action. One may classify these movements mostly into two different streams. The first covers the hardships of tiny, marginal, and impoverished farmers whose livelihood depends directly on subsistence farming and whose unstable living circumstances often make them targets of exploitation. The second group consists of quite wealthy farmers who can produce excess food whose aims and methods usually differ from those of the more underdeveloped peasants. In sociologically and anthropologically speaking, peasants have often been presented as politically disenfranchised populations with cultural lack. Redfield (1956) and Kroeber (1948) regarded peasants as part of the "little tradition"—unsophisticated, tradition-bound, and incomplete in their social development. Presenting them as historically underpowered players, Shanin (1984) and Wolf (1984) underlined their political subjection and organisational inadequacy even further. Economically, peasants have long been marked as tiny producers orientated on subsistence farming rather than market-oriented output, hence sustaining their marginalisation within more general systems of trade and accumulation.[2]

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, peasants have always been involved in different and complicated ways in societal transformation. Their place in hierarchical agricultural systems has been moulded by, and thus, the lines of socio-economic change. The definition of the peasant in India is far from uniform. Instead, it covers a wide spectrum of players, from tenants, craftspeople, and smallholders to landless labourers and sharecroppers. Interactions with caste, tribe, and gender further accentuate this diversity, therefore stratifying the peasants in both social and cultural terms. The language utilised across regions—terms like kisan, krishak, roytu, and chashi—as well as those indicating sharecroppers and labourers, reveals the complex and often excluded status of peasants in rural India. Thus, peasantry in India is not just an economic category but also a profoundly ingrained social structure distinguished by political disempowerment and cultural subjection.[3] Analysing peasant movements in India through the prism of production relations and class struggle, academics such Rao (1989), Dhanagare (1976), and Mukherjee (1979) have regarded them as unique variations of social movements. According to Singha Roy (1992), peasant movements are coordinated, group actions meant to change patterns of land ownership, access to agricultural output, pay structures, credit facilities, and other institutional systems that support agricultural enslavement. Especially, premodern India had few instances of major peasant upheavals, a phenomena often ascribed to the integrated purposes of the caste system, which organised village life and reduced collective opposition. Deeply ingrained in religious and cultural standards, the caste-based social system often inhibited peasant dissent by directing complaints inward or towards local elites rather than towards the general political order.[4]

But the colonial era radically changed established agricultural relations and sparked fresh peasant discontent. British land tax systems and economic policies turned ground into a commercial commodity and exposed peasants to the fluctuations of world markets. Rural poverty was exacerbated by the destruction of indigenous handicaps as well as the demands of commercialisation and high taxes. While in ryotwari districts direct state extraction left farmers equally poor, in zamindari areas peasants suffered outrageous rents, unlawful levies, arbitrary evictions, and forced labour.[5] Dependency on moneylenders set off debt cycles, foreclosure, and finally landlessness. Periodic famines and economic crises in the late nineteenth century aggravated rural suffering against a background of systematic exploitation, hence igniting a sequence of small but quite strong peasant uprisings. From random acts of resistance against local rulers to more coordinated demonstrations of anti-colonial sentiment, these movements progressively came to identify the colonial state itself as the main enemy. Within the Indian setting, peasant movements have often swung between radical and reformative impulses. Although analytically different, in reality these two groups usually cross and interact.[6]

Driven by ideas supporting quick and basic changes to social and economic institutions, radical movements are usually distinguished from others by their non-institutional techniques of public mobilisation. Though usually fleeting, these motions may have a significant influence across a great

area. Reformative movements, on the other hand, stress little changes in the life of the peasants and promote slow transformation via institutional channels. Since they try to accomplish their goals within the current socio-political framework, such movements usually have longer endurance. These two kinds, however, are not mutually exclusive. Reformative movements may develop into reformative ones as they institutionalise and widen their support base; they may also embrace radical techniques in reaction to changing socio-political environment.[7]

PHASES OF PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Three historically important eras, each distinguished by unique traits moulded by the dominant socioeconomic and political environment, help one to generally understand the course of peasant movements in India. Mehta (1965) presents a generally agreed periodizing that divides these movements into three main phases: the first phase (1857–1921), the second phase (1923–1946), and the post-independence phase, although other academics have created alternative classificatory systems.[8]

From 1857 to 1921, the first phase was marked by mostly episodic and localised peasant discontent. These upheavals often started naturally in reaction to the high-handedness of landowners and repressive land tax laws set under British colonial control in the lack of centralised leadership or organised peasant groupings.[9] Recurrent famines and economic crises compounded the situation by aggravating rural suffering and sparking a sequence of peasant upheavals throughout different areas. Among the noteworthy upheavals of this time were the Santhal rebellion of 1855, the Maratha uprising of 1875, tenant fights in Bengal between 1870 and 1885, the Oudh revolt, and the Punjab peasant agitations around the turn of the century. Especially important were the Kheda Satyagraha (1918) and the Champaran Satyagraha (1917–1918), both of which saw the Indian National Congress under Mahatma Gandhi engaged. These latter campaigns were unique in that they started the practice of nonviolent resistance in agricultural settings, but they were mostly limited in addressing complaints against tax demands rather than questioning the more general feudal system.[10] More class-conscious and orderly peasant movements emerged in the second phase, which lasted from 1923 until 1946. Independent kisan (peasant) groups sprang from Congress-led agitations' narrow focus and avoidance of direct confrontation with zamindars. Founded 1929 by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) embodied this change. It aimed to organise people against the mounting attacks on their rights to live. Similar rallies gathered steam in other areas as unhappiness grew, including anti-zamindari agitations in Andhra Pradesh and demonstrations against repressive forest rules in South India. Under Swami Sahajanand Saraswati as its first president, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) emerged during Lucknow session of the Indian National Congress towards the end of this wave. Comprising radical elements both within and outside the Congress, notably the Congress Socialist Party and subsequently the Communist Party of India (CPI), the AIKS became the main means of peasant mobilisation during this era.[11]

The CPI's participation proved to be absolutely crucial in changing the peasant movement in the 1940s. Rich and medium peasants first supported the AIKS, but under CPI leadership—especially from 1941 to 1945—the group progressively turned its focus to impoverished peasants, sharecroppers, renters, and landless workers. By mid-decade, the CPI had strengthened its hold on the AIKS, therefore turning it into a militant group ready to lead intense agricultural campaigns. Among them were the Tebhaga agitation in Bengal (1946–47) and the Telengana rebellion (1946–51), both of which highlighted the Communist-led mobilisation of rural poor against feudal landowners and official persecution.

The period after independence represents a convoluted and changing chapter in the annals of Indian peasant movements. Notwithstanding official political freedom, the agricultural system was mostly intact, and next administrations failed to address basic concerns about land allocation, tenant rights, and rural poverty.[12] Though at first the Congress-led administration was expected to implement drastic land reforms, these expectations were mostly disappointed. Consequently, pushed mostly by Leftist political organisations, the post-independence era has been distinguished by the relentless continuance of agricultural fights. The main organisers of peasant opposition turned out to be the Communist parties, especially the CPI and the CPI(M.). By means of their mass fronts—the Kisan Sabhas and other agricultural labour organizations—they mobilised peasants on problems ranging from land

redistribution to pay hikes. States like Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura—where Left-led governments adopted progressive agricultural policies—found especially success from these initiatives.[13]

Especially from the late 1960s forward, increasingly extreme Left groups such the CPI(M-L), the Marxist Coordination Committee (MCC), and the People's War Group (PWG) began to emerge simultaneously. Movements like the 1967 Naxalbari rebellion indicated a new militant phase of peasant struggle marked by armed resistance and revolutionary philosophy. States like Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh where acute poverty and exploitation persisted found rich ground for these organisations.[14] Other political players also participated in post-independence peasant mobilisation outside of formations headed by Communists. Up to the 1960s, the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) was active in areas like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh; the Republican Party of India aimed to combine Dalit liberation with agricultural challenges. Tenant protests reflecting regionally specific complaints about tenancy rights and debt in southern India included the Kagodu Satyagraha in Karnataka during the 1950s and the Uttara-Kannada agitations.[15]

New peasant groups advocating farmers' rights against rising commercialisation and state-led promotion of capitalist agriculture also emerged in the 1970s and beyond. Leaders like Charan Singh in northern India expressed middle-class and affluent peasant worries and promoted a synthesis of Nehruvian developmentalism with Gandhian rural idealism. Likewise, significant voices defending farmers against the invasions of market forces and neoliberal policies came from Sharad Joshi's Maharashtra Shektari Sanghatana and M.D. Nanjundaswamy's Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha. These groups started major campaigns in the 1980s and beyond, therefore diversifying the scene of peasant movements in post-independence India.[16]

An important and dynamic component of the larger story of agricultural struggle against feudal exploitation, colonial oppression, and postcolonial marginalisation in India are radical peasant groups. Of them, one of the first and most important upheavals is the Santhal Rebellion of 1855. Though often labelled as a tribal movement, the uprising developed as a group reaction to British colonial power and zamindar exploitative policies. Santhals suffered systematic displacement in areas now part of Jharkhand and West Bengal when colonial policies gave zamindars land ownership and imposed strong rents on historically farmed areas.[17] On their ancestral grounds, the Santhals were progressively turned to tenants or even enslaved labourers in tandem with repressive moneylenders and apathetic British authorities. Under the charismatic leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu, who called for divine inspiration to unite their society against the "zhulum" (oppression) of landowners and moneylenders, the revolt broke out in July 1855. By early 1856, the East India Company's superior firepower clearly overwhelmed the Santhals, equipped with traditional weaponry, notwithstanding their brave struggle.[18]

A distinct kind of agricultural unrest, the Maratha rebellion of 1875 sprang from the Ryotwari areas of Poona and Ahmednagar. Here, harsh tax laws let predatory moneylenders—who profite on state-owned judicial systems to grab territory when loans remained unpaid—target peasants. Originally a nonviolent social boycott of moneylenders, the movement swiftly turned into violent riots as peasants destroyed debt bonds and damaged creditor houses and businesses. The rebellion attracted enough attention to force legislative action, resulting in the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act of 1879—a conciliatory measure that nonetheless fell short of fundamentally changing agrarian power structures, even if the government's quick and merciless repression quelled the rebellion inside weeks.[19] As Gandhian nonviolent protest entered the field of farmer conflicts, the Champaran Satyagraha in 1917–18 signalled a turning point. Long victims of exploitative methods by British planters under the Teen Kathia system, the situation of indigo growers in Bihar represented the fundamental unfairness of colonial agriculture. By means of nonviolent civil disobedience, Gandhiji's action attracted national attention to the repressive system, therefore motivating the colonial authority to initiate communication and eliminate the Teen Kathia system. Though the movement succeeded in resolving certain urgent issues, it fell short of destroying ingrained systems of exploitation, especially with relation to outrageous rents and the position of indigenous landlords.[20]

Another complicated event that combines religious and anti-colonial ideas with agricultural discontent is the Moplah Rebellion of 1921 in Malabar. Mostly Muslim, the Moplah tenants opposed

the repressive tenancy rules enforced by Hindu landowners, aggravated by colonial policies favouring the later. Originally backed by Congress and Khilafat leaders, the campaign rapidly descended into violent revolt targeting landowners and British symbols of power after police persecution. Because of its community connotations, the insurrection turned off much of the larger populace, and British soldiers firmly put it down. Still, it exposed the explosive force of agricultural complaints when combined with more general political and religious currents.[21]

By contrast, the Bengal Tebhaga movement of 1946–47 was clearly class-oriented and headed by coordinated left-wing groups, especially the Kisan Sabha. Rising in reaction to the oppressive sharecropping systems wherein bargadars were obliged to turn half their output to middlemen, the movement sought a cut to one-third—hence the name "Tebhaga." Driven against the established authority of jotedars, the movement was radical in both tactics and goal, gathering underprivileged peasants including Dalits and tribal communities There were violent confrontations, most famously in Khanpur where police brutality claimed 22 demonstrators dead. Though severely crushed by 1947, the Tebhaga movement had some success; over forty percent of sharecroppers finally obtained better tenancy rights via local talks.[22]

Among these uprisings, the Telangana rebellion of 1946–52 was maybe the most radical. Driven by Communist leadership via the Kisan Sabha, the movement was sparked by the repressive feudal system under the Nizam's control in Hyderabad state and rallied peasants against both jagirdars and deshmukhs. Operating concurrently as village administrators, moneylenders, and exploiters, these landowners drove peasants to work and committed ongoing debt bondage. The movement quickly radicalised as armed peasant militias and "People's Committees" that successfully controlled large rural areas developed. Notwithstanding strong repression by the Nizam's Razakar militia and subsequently the Indian Army, the Telangana struggle left a lasting legacy highlighting the revolutionary possibilities of peasant mobilisation and setting the foundation for next agricultural revolutions in independent India.[23]

The radicalisation of postcolonial peasant movements was embodied in the West Bengal (1967–1971) Naxalite movement. Rising in the Naxalbari area, the uprising was sparked by official statutory safeguards failing to apply to land reform programs and ongoing sharecropper eviction. Under extreme left leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, the movement had a clearly revolutionary character, rejecting parliamentary politics and pushing military conflict to distribute land and destroy feudal systems. Widespread forced occupations, grain stock seizure, and deliberate violence directed at landowners were part of the rebellion. Though it was quickly put down by state troops, the Naxalite insurrection signified a paradigm change and inspired similar upheavals all throughout India as a symbol of militant peasant opposition, thereby ingressing India's political awareness.[24] From the Santhal Hul to the Naxalite revolt, radical peasant groups in India mirror the continuing and changing dynamics of agricultural discontent. Though in different terms, leadership, philosophy, and strategy, every movement sprung from the fundamental foundations of exploitation and subjection unique to rural India. Together, they expose the ongoing conflicts between state, landlord, and peasant as well as the often violent campaigns over land, labour, and dignity that have moulded India's agricultural past.[25]

The history of peasant uprisings in India is closely entwined with the disruptive economic policies implemented during British colonial control, which fundamentally changed the conventional agricultural system. The Indian peasants, whose subsistence livelihoods were progressively threatened, felt the most keenly the economic repercussions of British colonial expansion. Changes in agricultural productivity under colonial control upset long-standing agricultural ties and created circumstances fit for peasant discontent. Late nineteenth-century commercialised agriculture and the conversion of land into a marketable commodity fundamentally undermined the customarily strong ties between growers and landowners. Landlords who had previously taken rent in cash started demanding payments in grain with the advent of commercialisation, especially between 1860 and 1920, therefore aggravating the financial load on peasants resulting from increasing prices (Shah, 2004). As conventional social and economic systems strained, these shifts not only worsened rural suffering but also opened fresh opportunities for revolt.[26]

Post-independence agricultural reforms were greatly shaped by the peasant upheavals born by these changes. Direct political motivation for the dissolution of the zamindari system came from movements opposing exploitative agricultural systems, therefore undermining the established dominance of the landed nobility. In this way, peasant challenges were not just reactive but also active in triggering more general changes in the postcolonial India's agricultural scene. Still, the course of rural mobilisation did not stay fixed. Indian agriculture has been progressively market-oriented since the 1960s, and the growth of non-farm economic activity has drastically changed rural life. Driven by industrialisation and diversified livelihoods, blurring of the rural-urban barrier has resulted in reconfiguration of peasant society in terms of class makeup and awareness. Characteristic of pre-capitalist agricultural economies, the previously strongly ingrained extra-economic relationships between landowners and workers have progressively disappeared. Having gone through a phase of proletarianisation, agricultural labourers now depend more on pay work and have less regard for conventional social responsibilities to landowners.[27]

For peasant politics, the post-Green Revolution era brought new dynamics. The nature of agricultural challenges changed as market forces gained traction and globalisation got underway. Emerging as important players in India's agricultural scene are new farmers' organisations include the Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra, the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in Uttar Pradesh, and the Khedut Samaj in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab. Representing mostly the interests of middle-class and rich peasants, these organisations have banded together to seek subsidies for inputs, fair pricing for agricultural output, and relief from irrigation and energy bills. By thus expressing a vision of development that gives the agricultural economy first priority above industrial growth (Omvedt, 1993; Brass, 1994a; Gupta, 1997; Lindberg, 1997; Shah, 2004), they have had tremendous political influence. These movements mirror a change in peasant politics from older battles focused on land redistribution and tenancy rights to modern demands for governmental assistance within a more liberalised and competitive agricultural industry.

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, new forms of peasant mobilization have emerged in response to the post-liberalization state's push for industrialization and urban expansion, often at the expense of fertile agricultural land. The post-1990s period has witnessed the proliferation of protests against the acquisition of cultivable land for industrial projects and infrastructure development. Notable examples include the Singur and Nandigram agitations in West Bengal (2006), the Mann protests in Maharashtra (2005), and the Sompeta movement in Andhra Pradesh (2010). These movements, while rooted in local agrarian concerns, have attracted broader support from civil society actors, including NGOs, and have gained national visibility through the growth of information and communication technologies. They reflect not only the persistence of agrarian discontent but also the increasing integration of peasant struggles into wider debates about development, environmental sustainability, and the rights of rural communities in the face of rapid industrialization and globalization.

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