



Peasant Movements and Agrarian Resistance in Colonial India

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Abstract:

Peasant movements and agrarian resistance formed an important dimension of the socio-economic and political history of colonial India. During the British colonial period, the agrarian structure of India underwent significant transformation due to the introduction of new land revenue systems, commercialization of agriculture, and the increasing influence of landlords, moneylenders, and colonial administrators. These developments created severe economic hardships for peasants, leading to widespread protests and organized resistance. Peasant movements were not merely spontaneous uprisings but reflected deeper structural inequalities within the colonial agrarian system. From early revolts such as the Indigo Rebellion and the Deccan Riots to later organized movements like the Tebhaga and Bardoli movements, peasants across different regions challenged exploitative practices and demanded economic justice. These movements played a crucial role in shaping rural political consciousness and contributed to the broader nationalist struggle against colonial rule. This article examines the causes, forms, and consequences of peasant movements in colonial India. It also explores their impact on agrarian reforms, nationalist politics, and rural social transformation.

Keywords: *Peasant Movements, Agrarian Resistance, Colonial India, Rural Economy, Agrarian Protest, Nationalist Movement.*

Introduction:

Agriculture has historically been the backbone of Indian society and economy. For centuries, the majority of India's population depended on agriculture for their livelihood. During the colonial period, however, the agrarian structure of India underwent profound changes under British rule. The introduction of new land revenue systems, such as the Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems, significantly altered the traditional relationship between peasants, landlords, and the state.

Colonial policies aimed primarily at maximizing revenue collection and integrating Indian agriculture into the global capitalist economy. As a result, peasants were subjected to high taxation, indebtedness, forced cultivation of cash crops, and exploitation by landlords and moneylenders. These oppressive conditions created widespread agrarian distress and led to numerous peasant uprisings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Peasant movements in colonial India represented the collective resistance of rural communities against economic exploitation and social injustice. These movements varied in form, intensity, and objectives, but they shared a common goal of challenging oppressive agrarian relations. Some movements were spontaneous and localized, while others became organized political struggles supported by nationalist leaders and peasant organizations.

Significance of the Study (Short):

The study of Peasant Movements and Agrarian Resistance in Colonial India is significant for understanding the socio-economic and political transformations that took place during the colonial period. It highlights how oppressive land revenue systems, economic exploitation, and social inequalities created widespread agrarian distress and led peasants to organize collective resistance against colonial authority. These movements played an important role in exposing the exploitative nature of British agrarian policies and contributed to the demand for agrarian reforms.

The study is also important because peasant movements helped expand the social base of the Indian nationalist movement by mobilizing rural populations in the struggle against colonial rule. They contributed to the development of political consciousness among peasants and encouraged collective action for social justice and economic rights. Furthermore, the legacy of these movements influenced post-independence agrarian reforms such as the abolition of the zamindari system and the implementation of land redistribution policies.

Objectives:

This article examines the causes, forms, and consequences of peasant movements in colonial India. It also explores their impact on agrarian reforms, nationalist politics, and rural social transformation.

Colonial Agrarian Structure”

The agrarian structure of colonial India was largely shaped by British land revenue policies that emphasized revenue extraction rather than agricultural development. The colonial administration introduced several land revenue systems in different regions of India, each of which had significant consequences for the rural economy and the lives of peasants (Bipan Chandra, 2009; Habib, 2010). These systems altered traditional land relations and created new forms of economic exploitation that contributed to widespread agrarian distress.

The Permanent Settlement of 1793, introduced by Lord Cornwallis in Bengal, established the Zamindari system. Under this system, zamindars were recognized as the legal landowners and were responsible for collecting land revenue from peasants. While the system ensured a fixed and predictable revenue for the colonial government, it placed immense pressure on peasants who were forced to pay high rents to landlords. Failure to meet these demands often resulted in eviction, land dispossession, and growing rural poverty (Bipan Chandra, 2009; Sarkar, 1983).

The Ryotwari system, implemented in the Madras and Bombay Presidencies by administrators such as Thomas Munro, attempted to establish a direct relationship between the colonial state and individual cultivators (ryots). Under this arrangement, peasants were recognized as proprietors of their land and were required to pay revenue directly to the government. Although the system removed the intermediary role of zamindars, peasants still faced heavy taxation, frequent revenue revisions, and administrative pressures that often led to indebtedness and land loss (Stein, 2010).

Another important land revenue arrangement was the Mahalwari system, introduced in parts of North India. Under this system, the responsibility for paying revenue rested collectively on villages or estates known as “mahals.” In theory, the system recognized the communal ownership of land; however, in practice it frequently resulted in the dominance of local elites who controlled land distribution and revenue payments, thereby intensifying rural inequality (Habib, 2010).

These land revenue systems also encouraged the commercialization of agriculture, which transformed traditional subsistence farming into market-oriented production. Peasants were often compelled to cultivate cash crops such as indigo, cotton, and opium for export to international markets. While this increased colonial profits, it made peasants highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global prices, crop failures, and economic instability (Bose & Jalal, 2017).

As a result, the colonial agrarian structure created a cycle of poverty, indebtedness, and exploitation that severely affected the rural population. The growing economic hardships faced by peasants eventually led to widespread resentment and became a major factor behind the emergence of agrarian protests and peasant movements across colonial India (Sarkar, 1983).

Causes of Peasant Movements:

Peasant movements in colonial India emerged as a response to a complex combination of economic, social, and political factors. These movements reflected the growing dissatisfaction of rural communities with colonial agrarian policies and the exploitative practices of landlords, moneylenders, and colonial authorities (Bipan Chandra, 2009).

Economic Exploitation: One of the primary causes of agrarian unrest was the heavy land revenue demands imposed by the colonial state. The British administration often collected revenue irrespective of agricultural productivity or environmental conditions. During periods of drought, famine, or crop failure, peasants still had to pay the required taxes. Those who failed to meet these obligations frequently faced eviction from their land or confiscation of their property, leading to severe economic distress (Stein, 2010; Sarkar, 1983).

Indebtedness: Another significant factor contributing to peasant unrest was the widespread problem of rural indebtedness. Due to high taxation and unstable agricultural income, peasants often borrowed money from local moneylenders and traders. These loans were usually provided at extremely high interest rates, making repayment difficult. Over time, many peasants became trapped in cycles of debt and eventually lost their land to creditors, further intensifying agrarian inequality (Habib, 2010).

Forced Cultivation: In several regions of colonial India, peasants were compelled to cultivate specific cash crops demanded by European planters or colonial authorities. Crops such as indigo, cotton, and opium were cultivated primarily for export rather than local consumption. Since these crops often yielded lower returns for peasants and reduced the availability of food crops, forced cultivation contributed to worsening living conditions and food insecurity in rural areas (Bose & Jalal, 2017).

Social Inequality: Social hierarchies based on caste and class also played a significant role in shaping agrarian conflicts. Land ownership and economic power were often concentrated in the hands of landlords and upper-caste elites, while small peasants and landless laborers faced multiple forms of exploitation. These social inequalities intensified rural tensions and contributed to the emergence of collective resistance movements (Sarkar, 1983).

Political Awakening: The spread of education, communication networks, and nationalist ideas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gradually increased political awareness among rural

populations. Peasants began to understand the broader economic and political forces affecting their lives and started organizing themselves to demand justice, rights, and reforms. The influence of nationalist leaders and political organizations further encouraged peasants to participate in organized movements against colonial rule (Bipan Chandra, 2009; Bose & Jalal, 2017).

Early Peasant Revolts in Colonial India:

Several early revolts in colonial India reflected the growing resistance of peasants against oppressive agrarian policies and exploitative practices introduced by the colonial administration. These revolts were often localized but highlighted the deep agrarian discontent prevailing in rural society (Bipan Chandra, 2009; Sarkar, 1983).

The Indigo Revolt (1859–1860): One of the earliest organized peasant movements in colonial India was the **Indigo Revolt** in Bengal. European planters forced peasants to cultivate indigo under extremely oppressive contractual arrangements. Peasants were compelled to grow indigo instead of food crops and were paid very low prices for their produce. The coercive methods used by planters, including intimidation and violence, created widespread resentment among the peasantry (Sarkar, 1983; Bose & Jalal, 2017).

In response, peasants organized collective resistance by refusing to cultivate indigo and staging protests against the European planters. The movement also received significant support from intellectuals, journalists, and sections of the urban middle class who publicized the plight of the peasants. As the protests intensified, the colonial government was forced to appoint an Indigo Commission in 1860 to investigate the grievances of the peasants. The commission acknowledged the exploitation faced by cultivators and recommended reforms that effectively weakened the indigo plantation system in Bengal (Bipan Chandra, 2009).

The Deccan Riots (1875): Another significant instance of early peasant resistance was the **Deccan Riots of 1875** in the Bombay Presidency. These riots were primarily caused by widespread indebtedness among peasants. Due to heavy land revenue demands and unstable agricultural conditions, many peasants had borrowed money from local moneylenders at extremely high interest rates. Over time, moneylenders acquired large amounts of land through debt settlements and legal manipulation (Stein, 2010; Habib, 2010).

Frustrated by increasing debt and land loss, peasants in the Deccan region attacked moneylenders' houses and destroyed debt records as a symbolic rejection of their financial obligations. Although the riots were eventually suppressed by colonial authorities, they drew attention to the severe problems of rural indebtedness. As a result, the British government enacted the **Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act of 1879**, which aimed to provide some protection to peasants against exploitation by moneylenders (Bipan Chandra, 2009).

Peasant Movements in the Twentieth Century:

During the twentieth century, peasant movements became more organized and began to align with the broader nationalist struggle against colonial rule. Nationalist leaders increasingly recognized the importance of mobilizing peasants to strengthen the freedom movement and address agrarian grievances (Sarkar, 1983; Bose & Jalal, 2017).

Champaran Movement (1917): The **Champaran Movement** in Bihar marked a significant turning point in the history of agrarian protests in India. The movement was led by Mahatma Gandhi and was directed against the oppressive **Tinkathia system**, which forced peasants to cultivate indigo on a portion of their land for European planters.

Gandhi conducted detailed investigations into the grievances of peasants and organized peaceful protests based on the principles of non-violent resistance. The movement attracted widespread public support and compelled the colonial government to appoint a committee of inquiry. Eventually, the exploitative indigo cultivation system was abolished, marking a major victory for the peasants and establishing Gandhi's method of satyagraha as an effective tool of mass mobilization (Bipan Chandra, 2009; Brown, 1994).

Kheda Satyagraha (1918): The **Kheda Satyagraha** took place in Gujarat during 1918 when peasants suffered severe crop failure due to famine and adverse climatic conditions. Despite these hardships, the colonial government insisted on collecting full land revenue. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, peasants launched a campaign of non-payment of taxes.

Through organized resistance and non-cooperation, peasants demanded the suspension of revenue collection. Eventually, the government agreed to suspend the collection of taxes for the affected peasants, demonstrating the effectiveness of collective action and non-violent protest (Sarkar, 1983; Bipan Chandra, 2009).

Bardoli Satyagraha (1928): The **Bardoli Satyagraha** was another significant agrarian movement in Gujarat. The colonial government had announced a substantial increase in land revenue, which placed an unbearable burden on peasants. Under the leadership of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, peasants organized a disciplined campaign of tax refusal.

The movement was marked by strong organization, unity, and non-violent resistance. Eventually, the government appointed an inquiry committee and reduced the revenue increase. The success of the movement earned Patel the popular title "Sardar," reflecting his leadership and commitment to the cause of peasants (Bose & Jalal, 2017).

Radical Peasant Movements:

While many peasant movements during the nationalist period were based on non-violent resistance, some movements in the 1940s adopted more radical approaches due to growing economic hardship and political unrest (Habib, 2010).

Tebhaga Movement (1946): The **Tebhaga Movement** emerged in Bengal among sharecroppers who demanded a larger share of the agricultural produce. Traditionally, sharecroppers were required to give half of their produce to landlords. However, peasants demanded that landlords receive only one-third of the produce, allowing cultivators to retain two-thirds.

The movement was supported by peasant organizations and political activists who mobilized rural communities against exploitative agrarian arrangements. Although the movement faced repression from authorities and landlords, it succeeded in highlighting the plight of sharecroppers and influenced later land reform policies (Bipan Chandra, 2009; Sarkar, 1983).

Telangana Movement (1946–1951): The **Telangana Movement** was one of the largest and most radical peasant uprisings in modern Indian history. It occurred in the princely state of Hyderabad, where peasants revolted against the oppressive rule of feudal landlords and the autocratic administration of the Nizam.

The movement involved armed resistance and mass mobilization of peasants who demanded land redistribution, abolition of feudal practices, and social justice. The uprising continued even after India gained independence and played a significant role in shaping debates on agrarian reform and rural equality in post-colonial India (Stein, 2010; Bose & Jalal, 2017).

Role of Peasant Organizations:

The formation of peasant organizations played a crucial role in mobilizing rural communities and articulating the collective grievances of the agrarian population during the colonial period. These organizations helped peasants move beyond isolated protests and develop coordinated movements aimed at challenging exploitative agrarian structures (Bipan Chandra, 2009; Sarkar, 1983).

One of the most significant organizations established to represent peasant interests was the All India Kisan Sabha. Founded in 1936, the organization sought to unite peasants from different regions of India and provide them with a common platform to express their demands. It advocated important reforms such as reduction of land revenue, abolition of zamindari, protection of tenant rights, and improvement in the economic conditions of agricultural workers (Habib, 2010).

The organization was closely associated with the broader nationalist movement and played an important role in raising political awareness among rural communities. Through conferences, protests, and campaigns, the Kisan Sabha mobilized peasants against oppressive landlords and colonial policies. Its activities also contributed to strengthening the connection between agrarian struggles and national politics (Bose & Jalal, 2017).

Peasant organizations thus helped transform localized and spontaneous revolts into more organized and sustained political movements. By fostering unity among peasants and promoting collective action, these organizations became important instruments of rural resistance and social change (Stein, 2010).

Impact of Peasant Movements:

Peasant movements had significant and far-reaching consequences for Indian society, economy, and politics during the colonial period. These movements not only challenged the exploitative agrarian policies of the British colonial administration but also played an important role in shaping the broader struggle for social justice and political rights (Sarkar, 1983; Bipan Chandra, 2009).

One of the most important impacts of these movements was that they exposed the oppressive nature of colonial land revenue systems and agrarian policies. Continuous peasant resistance forced the colonial government to introduce certain reforms aimed at addressing rural grievances. Although these reforms were often limited in scope, they represented an acknowledgment of the deep agrarian crisis prevailing in colonial India (Habib, 2010).

Another major consequence of peasant movements was their contribution to strengthening the nationalist movement. By mobilizing large sections of the rural population, these movements expanded the social base of the freedom struggle. The participation of peasants in protests, satyagrahas, and mass campaigns significantly increased the scale and intensity of anti-colonial resistance (Bose & Jalal, 2017).

Peasant movements also played an important role in the development of political consciousness among rural communities. Through participation in collective struggles, peasants became increasingly aware of their rights and began to challenge traditional hierarchies and structures of exploitation. This growing awareness laid the foundation for later democratic participation in independent India (Stein, 2010).

Furthermore, these movements influenced several post-independence agrarian reforms. Policies such as the abolition of the zamindari system, tenancy reforms, and land redistribution were partly shaped by the demands and experiences of earlier peasant struggles (Bipan Chandra, 2009).

Peasant Movements and the Nationalist Struggle:

Peasant movements gradually became integrated with the broader struggle for Indian independence. As the nationalist movement expanded during the early twentieth century, leaders recognized that the participation of peasants was essential for transforming the freedom struggle into a mass movement (Sarkar, 1983).

Nationalist leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the importance of addressing rural grievances and mobilizing peasants through non-violent resistance. Movements like Champaran, Kheda, and Bardoli demonstrated how organized peasant participation could challenge colonial authority while maintaining disciplined and peaceful protest (Bipan Chandra, 2009).

At the same time, several radical agrarian movements reflected the growing frustration of peasants with colonial exploitation and feudal oppression. These movements highlighted the urgent need for structural reforms in land ownership and rural economic relations (Habib, 2010).

The integration of peasant struggles with nationalist politics significantly broadened the scope of the independence movement. By involving millions of rural inhabitants, the anti-colonial struggle evolved from an elite political movement into a powerful mass uprising against colonial rule (Bose & Jalal, 2017).

In this way, peasant movements played a decisive role in shaping the character of India's freedom struggle. They not only challenged colonial agrarian policies but also contributed to the emergence of democratic aspirations and social transformation in modern India.

Conclusion:

Peasant movements and agrarian resistance formed a vital component of the social and political history of colonial India. These movements emerged as a response to oppressive land revenue policies, economic exploitation, and social inequalities created by colonial rule.

From early revolts such as the Indigo Rebellion and Deccan Riots to organized movements like Champaran, Bardoli, Tebhaga, and Telangana, peasants across India challenged the structures of colonial power. Their struggles not only improved agrarian conditions but also strengthened the nationalist movement.

The legacy of these movements continued to influence independent India's policies on land reforms, rural development, and social justice. Understanding peasant movements therefore provides important insights into the broader history of resistance, political mobilization, and social transformation in India.

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