

PEASANT INSURGENCIES IN COLONIAL INDIA: A BRIEF SUMMARY

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ABSTRACT: The British rule in India brought about many changes in the agrarian system in the country. The old agrarian system collapsed and under the new system, the ownership of land was conferred on the Zamindars who tried to exhort as much as they could from the cultivators of land. Very little was left to the peasants after paying to the Zamindar. The income of the peasants was so little that they were at the mercy of the moneylenders who charged exorbitant rate of interest on them and exploit them as much as they possibly could. The courts set up by the British government also favoured the moneylenders against the peasants. Therefore, the lot of peasants was extremely miserable. The various peasant movements and uprisings during the 19th and 20th centuries were in the nature of a protest against the existing conditions under which their exploitation knew no limits.

Introduction: As a result of the Second World War A.D 1939-1945 the decade of 1940's witnessed a vastly different political scenario in India. The relationship, mainly conflictual, between the rulers and the ruled acquired new dimensions, and the range of political activities much wider as the possibility of independence began taking shape. The strike wave of 1940 created problems not only for the government authorities, but also for capitalists and planters-European as well as Indian. Surpassing all records, it resulted in 1629 stoppages of work, affecting 1,941,948 workers and leading to the loss of 12,717,762 working days. Committed

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basically to their economic demands, the strikes nevertheless generated a defiant and self-confident mood all around, and created an environment for secular, collective action in most of the cities and towns. If the prospect for a popular liberation movement against colonialism seemed good in the urban centre, its possibility appeared to be even better in the rural sector.⁽¹⁾

I. Worli Peasant Uprising:

One of the earliest, and most intense, of the post 2nd world war peasant agitations was that of the *Worlis* in *Thana district, Bombay*. The *worlis*- the tribal or *adivasi* peasants- were in majority in the villages of *Umbergaon, Palgar, and JawaharTaluks* of Thana. Being poverty stricken, most of their lands had passed into the hands of moneylenders and landlords for their failure to re-pay loans (usually in grains) they had incurred at exorbitant rates (50-200%). Some of them were eventually reduced to the status of tenants-at-will who were settled in their previously held lands on paying half the produce as rent. Others had to become landless agricultural labourers, working either on fallow lands or as workers for the contractors on the forest lands on partly payments. In times of difficulty, they had to continue to take *khawari* or grain loans from the money lenders and landlords, and on their failure to pay back, they were forced to give *Veth-Bigar* or forced labour for the landlords, without payment. Consequently, many of the *Worlis* had to turn life-long serfs for all practical purposes.⁽²⁾

It was in 1945 that the *Worlis* were first organised by *Maharashtra Kisan Sabha*, and led subsequently by outside leaders like *Godavari Purlekarto* refuse to give *Veth-Bigar*. In the autumn of 1945 the *Worli* labourers demanded a wage increase for cutting grass, and struck work. The landlords retaliated by terrorising them with the help of hirelings and the police. The police even opened fire on 10 October 1945 on an assembly of the strikers in *Talawada*, killing 5 and injuring many. The sufferings, however, bolstered up the spirit of the *Worlis* rather than breaking up their morale, and in course of time the landlords had to agree to pay them at the enhanced rates.⁽³⁾

The *Worli* agitation continued in 1946 for an increase in the wages for forest work, cutting trees and landing logs for the forest contractors. By the autumn of 1946 they struck forest work for months, and in the face of repressions of the local government they succeeded in forcing the

Maharashtra Timber Merchants Association to accept a wage increase. Their success so enraged the local government that it hit vengefully back by externing all their leaders, arresting a large number of their activists and instituting criminal cases against many of them. The worst happened on 07 January 1947 when 05 more peasants died in the police firing in *Palghar Taluk*. The *Worl* movement gradually petered out thereafter, though many of the agitators, who fled to the jungles, tried heroically to regroup themselves.⁽⁴⁾

II. Bakasht Peasants Agitation:

Compared to the struggle of the *Worlis*, the *Bakasht* peasant's agitation of 1946-1947 in *Bihar* was more extensive, and certainly more desperate. The agitation had grown for a decade or so over the *Bakasht* lands which were managed, directly by the *Zamindars*. Apart from the *Rayat* lands which they settled with the occupant tenants, and the *Zirat* lands which they kept for themselves, and got cultivated by agricultural labourers, the *Zamindars* rented the *Bakasht* lands to the tenants-at-will at varying rates. Having no legal standing the *Bakasht* peasants were exposed to continuous ejections, firstly, because it was profitable to the *Zamindars*, and second because it was convenient for them to circumvent the tenancy (namely, the *Tenancy Act of 1835* which gave the *Bakasht* tenants some occupancy rights if they had been in that position for 12 years at a stretch on regular payment of rent).⁽⁵⁾

There was a sudden purt in ejections in the latter half of the 1930's when the authorities contemplated conferring some tenancy rights to the helpless *Bakasht* peasants. Although the contemplation of the government was proved hardly to be very serious, the *Zamindars* decided against running any risk, and took to large scale evictions. The peasants resisted under the banner of the *Kisan Sabha*, and fought furiously from 1937 to 1939 against the *Zamindars'* agents, the government and the police. Hostilities, however, were temporarily halted with the onset of the Second World War, and an easy peace had somehow been maintained between the battle lines through unreliable arbitrators and unstable agreements. The issue again came to the forefront in 1946 when the congress contested the elections in Bihar by promising to abolish the *Zamindaris*, the *Zamindars* thought that they should be able to retain at least their personal lands if they clear the *Bakasht* lands of all the tenants, and in turn, these into the *Zirat*. Naturally the *Bakasht*

peasants vigorously resisted fresh attempts at evictions, and by the summer of 1946 the agitation was renewed simultaneously in *Monghyr, Gaya* and *Shahabad* districts.⁽⁶⁾

Armed with court orders (based on fictitious records) and *Lathials (stickmen)* the *Zamindars* marched to oust tillers from the *Bakasht lands*. The tillers, under the leadership of the *Kisan Sabha*, refused to give up, offered *Satyagraha* and came into violent clashes. There were cases of arson and loot, deaths and injuries, and also arrests and imprisonments. Soon the movement was extended to *Darbhanga, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur* and *Bhagalpur* districts also.⁽⁷⁾ The conflict became bitterest during the harvesting season when the peasants had to defend the crops already raised. Women and children also joined in the fray and peasants' volunteer corps were organised to oppose the invading *Zamindars' men*. Half-hearted government measures like the *Bihar Bakasht Disputes Settlement Act Of 1947* had little effect on the ensuing battle, which did not subside till the Congress ministry was forced to pass the *Bihar Abolition of Zamindari Act, 1948*.⁽⁸⁾

III. Tebhaga Movement:

The most extensive of all the post-war agrarian agitations, however was the *Tebhaga* movement, which swept 19 districts of Bengal and drew about 6 million peasants into it, both Hindus as well as Muslims. The tumult originated in the sharecropping system that prevailed in most parts of Bengal and the exploitative pattern that it sustained. In course of time in the Bengal countryside, especially in those areas where large hilly, marshy and forest tracts were brought under cultivation, a relatively new class of rural exploiters emerged between the landlords (*Zamindars*) and the tenants (*rayats*), known as the *Jotedars*. The *Jotedars* (owners of *jotes* or considerable chunks of land) accumulated big estates for which they paid rent in cash, and which they in their turn- rented out to landless peasants on the basis of sharing the crops in equal halves, or 50% produce rent. In actual practice, the tillers' share of crops used to be much less than one-half as he initially to take advance from the *Jotedar* for procuring implements, seeds and cattle, and then pay it back at the time of sharing the crops. The sharecropper (*Adhiar or Bhagchasi*) had also to meet from his share a number of *Jotedars'* illegal exactions, including *nazrana (presentation) and salami (charges of contract)* and perform *Begar (forced labour)* in the *Jotedar* could, and invariably did, throw out one sharecropper for another on consideration for higher *nazrana* and

salami. Sharecropping was found in-course of time to be practised not only by the *Jotedars*, but also by those absentee landlords who lived in towns as professionals and white collar employees. The rank of the sharecroppers swelled by the mid-1930s when many poor peasants lost their lands in the depressionally economic conditions, and were forced to take to sharecropping. Within a span of another 5 years, the sharecroppers were struck again by the inflationary war-time situation of the early 1940s, and then devastatingly by the great famine.⁽⁹⁾

Visibly tense by the end of the War, the sharecroppers started viewing the customary division of crop to be wholly disadvantageous to their well-being. They, therefore, had no hesitation in responding to the call of the *Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha* in September 1946, demanding three-fourth of the produce for the tillers instead of the one-half. The slogan “*Tebhaga Chai*” (we want three-fourth) rent the sky, while the sharecroppers started taking the harvested crops to their own yards in place of depositing these with the *Jotedars*’ as per the common practice. They offered one-third share to the *Jotedars*, retaining two-third for themselves, the sharecroppers forcibly broke open the yards to claim their two-third. The contest over the crops and grains naturally led to innumerable clashes, arrival of armed police on the troubled spots, and arrests, *lathi-charges* and firings. Entire North- Bengal became the hotbed of agitation with certain parts of *Jalpaiguri*, *Dinajpur* and *Rangpur* playing the lead roles. *Mymensingh*, *Medinipur* and *24-Parganas* were also not lagging behind. Despite the communal carnage in Calcutta and Noakhali, the Muslim peasants took an active part and threw up militant leaders of the movement. Peasant women also joined in it in large number, and often came to its forefront.⁽¹⁰⁾

The movement, however, wilted in the face of a repressive government, the apathy of the congress and the Muslim League, the hostility of the entire Bengali middle classes, and, above all, the worsened communal situation. The renewed rioting in Calcutta towards the end of March 1947 and its repercussions in other parts, finally led to the suspension of the movement.⁽¹¹⁾

IV. Telengana Movement:

Although not as extensive as the *Tebhaga* movement, the outburst in the Telugu-speaking *Telengana* region of Hyderabad state was the most enduring, as well as the most militant of all similar agitations. The outstanding developments in *Telengana* grew out of an agrarian situation

which was dominated, and abused, by such landed magnates as the *Jagirdars* and *Ijaradars* on the one hand and *Deshmukhs* and *Patel-Patwaris* on the other. The *Jagirdars* and *Ijaradars* were intermediaries like the *Zamindars* in specified lands (*sarf-e-khas*), but they behaved in practice as their owners.⁽¹²⁾

The condition was intrinsically no better in the state-controlled lands (*Diwani*) where new kind of landed magnates emerged from among the *Pattadars* or the so called peasant proprietors. They were the past revenue farmers (*Deshmukhs*) and tax-collectors (*Patel-Patwaris*), who had lost their jobs in the 1860s when the *Nizam's Government* started collecting dues from the cultivators directly, and were given substantial amount of land as compensation. By using their influence and knowledge as revenue officials, by manipulating survey records and dictating settlement operations, the *Deshmukhs* and *Patel-Patwaris* went on land-grabbing spree. Once they possessed large amount of lands, and started letting these out on exorbitant rent, they grew in power and position, and became the arbiters of rural society. As arbiters, they began imposing a number of illegal levies on the villagers, and exacted *Vetli* and *Vettichakri* without discrimination. Simultaneously, they retained their insatiable lust for land, which, if it could no longer be satisfied by fraud, would be fulfilled by all kinds of pressure and the use of sheer force. The *Deshmukhs* and the *Patel-Patwaris* looting in land was so prolific that by 1940s they monopolised 60-70% land in certain districts, and individually held at places 100,000 acres or more.⁽¹³⁾

It was against ceaseless land-grabbing, extraction of illegal levies and exaction of *Vetli* and *Vettichakiri*—which affected all categories of the rural populace alike—that the *Telengana* peasantry rose in revolt. Their discontent was given concrete expression by the Communists through the organisation of the *Andhara Maha Sabha*, and with the help of a series of demonstrations against *Vetli*, *Vettichakiri* and illegal levies in the districts of *Nalgonda*, *Warangal* and *Karimnagar*. By 1945 the opposition to the landed magnates excesses turned into resistance against their expropriations—the evictions and forcible dispossession. When their legal objections and peaceful marches were foiled by the landlords' hired goons and the pro-landlord state police, the peasants of *Telengana*, particularly of *Nalgonda*, were forced to resort to arms. Although skirmishes of some sort were already taking place between the peasants and the

landlords' men from the beginning of 1946, actual fighting really commenced on 04 July 1946 when the armed retainers of the *Visunuri Deshmukh of Janagaon (Nalgonda)* fired upon a protesting mob of peasants and killed *Doddi Komaryya*. Komaryya's martyrdom was a signal for widespread armed peasants' resistance, which the police could not cope with.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Nizam's Government declared the *Communist Party* and the *Andhra Sabha* unlawful in Hyderabad state, and undertook full-scale military operation against the rising peasantry. Following some bloodshed, and a lot of torture and destruction, the military seemed at the beginning of 1947 to have gained an upper-hand over the rebels. But the escalation of the rebellion in the middle of 1947, and the full-fledged peasant's guerrilla actions thereafter, wholly belied the impression. The *Telengana* peasants' armed struggle continued unabated till 1951, involving at its height about 300 villages, over 16,000 square miles, and covering a population of nearly 03 million—a saga essentially of the post-independence Indian history.⁽¹⁵⁾

Conclusion:

An analysis of the peasants and farmers' movements in colonial India reveals that although both forms of mobilisation and movements were prevalent, the first was mainly led by the mass organisations of the Left and other political parties and the second was being led by the well-to-do prosperous peasant organisations though it attracted even the marginal and poor peasants in different regions. The movements of the rich, however, have acquired more prominence because of its militancy and prolonged agitations in recent years whereas the first one suffers from the lack of militancy. In fact the Left, that had led agrarian agitations till the late 1960s has not led any serious movement since the last thirty years. This is largely due to the fact that serious class struggle is not in the immediate agenda of the established Left parties. The non-parliamentary Left, however, is exceptional in this regard but it enjoys only a limited rural base. The increase in militancy of the rich farmers has been mainly because of their location in the social structure, which gives them the ability to sustain movements; more than the poor or the small peasants.

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