



ROLE AND IMPACT OF PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Abstract

The Peasant Movements brought to the tenants and laborers significant gains, both moral and material. Compared to both the tenants gained material gains, such as increased share in the production by getting the share on the day of harvest itself. They have got right to use threshing floors of their choice and protection from arbitrary evictions. The gains achieved by the laborers were fewer in number, but for greater in achievements. The peasant movements were encountered by an organized action and were suppressed by the Mirasdars continuously. The most militant and widespread of the peasant movement was the indigo revolt of 1859-60. The revolt was directed against British planters, who behaved like feudal lords in their estates. This paper attempts to explain the role and impact of the peasant movements in the freedom struggle.

Key Words: *Arbitrary, Encountered, Suppressed, Widespread, Movements.*

Introduction

Movements are organized efforts to change or resist the change in the social structure. It may be a mere protest, a movement for reform or a prelude to revolution. It reveals the collective support that it commands on the one hand and on the other an organizational effort involved. Peasant movements is a social movements associated with the agricultural policy. i The history of peasant movements can be traced to the economic policies of the British which have brought about many changes in the Indian agrarian system. The consequences of the British colonial expansion affected the Indian Peasantry to a great extent and it rose in revolt from time to time. India is basically an agrarian economy with the bulk of rural population. Following the occupation of agriculture Peasants formed the backbone of the civil rebellions, which were often led by zamindars and petty chieftains.ii As R.P. Misra suggests, peasant movements include the activities of groups of peasants, reacting to conditions or changes in conditions, felt oppressive or detrimental. If such activities are more or less systematically organized, one can speak of it as a peasant movement.iii

The term 'Peasant', however, still eludes a clear cut definition. Eric Wolf considers peasants as a differentiated lot but retains the term and speaks of peasants as rich, middle and poor. Andre Beteille's definition of peasant as ' a member of a more or less homogeneous and differentiated community of families characterized by small holdings, operated mainly by family labour is taken as the basis of studying the 'peasant' in this work. Peasant is thus an owner of a small extent of land in which he employs his own and his family's labour. Occasionally, during peak seasons of cultivation he gets the assistance of his co-peasants or tenants and that would normally be on a reciprocal basis and not for wages. He seldom engages labourers on daily wage, and never would he possess a slave or bonded labourer or pannaiyal. The problem with the study of the peasantry is that its size in the agrarian society cannot always be satisfactorily quantified.

Attempts have been made to quantify the peasantry as far as possible, though quantities mean nothing unless they can be related to the structure of groups and categories in a society. The peasants were awakened from their slumber and attracted towards the national movement especially after Gandhi's entry into it. His direct involvement in the peasant struggle against the British plantation owners in Champaran and Kheda in 1918 gave an impetus to the peasants to organize. In this paper I would like to discuss role and impact of the peasant movements in the freedom straggle.

Peasant Participation in the Revolt of 1857

No uniform pattern of peasant participation in the disturbed areas can be discerned. However, in most of Oudh and Western U.P., the peasant forgot the oppressive hands of the local zamindars and joined the local feudal leadership in a bid to uproot foreign imperialism. Canning's announcement of confiscation of proprietary right in the soil was meant to punish those who had taken active part against the Government. However, after the revolt, for tactical considerations the British Indian government decided to maintain the landed classes as the social buttress of the British raj. The post 1857 settlement was made with the taluqdars of Oudh, restoring most of the land to them; rather the position of the taluqdars was strength end by conferring on them some magisterial and revenue powers. The interests of the occupancy peasants were ignored and the Chief Commissioner even refused to extend the provisions of the Bengal Rent Act of 1859 to Oudh. Rather, the peasants of some areas like the Meerut division were made to pay some additional cesses as a punitive impost for participation in the revolt.



Bengal Indigo Cultivator's Revolt, 1860

The revolt was directed against British planters who behaved like feudal lords in their estates. The revolt enjoyed the support of all categories of the rural population including the zamindars, money lenders, rich peasants and even karamcharis of indigo concerns.

The Indian National Congress and the Peasants

The Indian national Congress, to begin with at least, worked as a joint venture of British imperialists and the Indian bourgeoisie and could not be expected to champion the cause of the oppressed peasants. The Congress year after year passed resolutions on the existence of Indian poverty but the methods it suggested smacked of class interest; it asked for extension of Permanent Settlement to different parts of India and restrictions on over assessment where Permanent Settlement could not be introduced, Indianisation of public services, State help for industrialization, abolition of salt tax etc. but never officially demanded tenancy reforms in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Madras, the U.P., the C.P. or the Panjab. R.C. Dutt's Open's Letters to Curzon on famines and land assessments in India were, consciously or unconsciously, more calculated to espouse the interests of the Indian landlords than the Indian peasants. Curzon's sarcastic dig at R.C. Dutta that the Government had done more to protect the tenants from the rapacity of the zamindars than the Indian National Congress remained unanswered.iv

Recurring Famines and Peasants

The most prominent fact of Indian history during the second half of the 19th century was the recurrence of famines and large-scale starvation deaths of workers and peasants. During this period 24 famines, big and small, affected various parts of the country and took an estimated toll of 28.5 million person. The great famines of 1876-78, 1896-97 and 1899-1900 and the large-scale mortality revealed the cumulative effect of oppressive land policies. Scarcity and famine conditions created law and order problem in the countryside, striking terror into the hearts of not only the rural rich but the townsmen and even the local officials. The Famine Commissions of 1880, 1898 and 1901 made recommendations which revealed that by the large the famine relief system was "devised not so much with any laudable philanthropic sentiments as by the anxiety of the government to protect the institution of property and stave off the growing threat to the established order.v

Gandhiji and Peasant Struggle

Gandhiji's entry into Indian politics marked a change into the politico-economic life of India. In his anxiety to broaden the social base of the Congress he carried his message to the villages and sought to involve the peasants in the nationalist struggle.vi

Peasant Struggles on the Eve Indian Independence

In the decade preceding the advent of independence three significant peasant struggles, namely, Tebhaga Movement in Bengal, the Telengana outbreak in Hyderabad state and the Varlis revolt in Western India deserve mention. The Tebhaga movement was a protracted peasant struggle involving lower stratum of tenants such as bargardars (share-croppers), adhiars and poor peasants etc. against not only the zamindars but a section of the rich peasants (jotedars), against money lenders, traders and the British bureaucracy. The Baragardari Bill introduced by Suhrawardy's government afforded some relief to rent-paying tenants. The insurrection in Telengana during 1946-51 was launched in the territory of the Nizam's state of Hyderabad against intense exploitation and oppression of landlords, moneylenders, traders and the Nizam's officials. It may be mentioned that the Nizam's crown lands and those of his aristocracy accounted for nearly one-third of his vast dominions on which more than 20 lakh poverty-stricken peasants worked for their living. vii

Conclusion

The movement was linked with the States people movement under the leadership of the Praja Mandal and had the sympathy of the Congress, the Arya Samaj and the linguistic demand for a Vishal Andhra state. The role of the Communist party in organizing the peasants was very significant.viii The entry of Indian troops in Hyderabad and the state's accession to the Indian Union did not end the struggle.ix The vestiges of feudalism continued intact. The peasants of Telengana and the adjoining areas of Madras state continued their struggle under Communist leadership and many an official and landlords either fled away or were murdered. The movement was withdrawn in October 1951 with the change in tactics by the Communists in India. The revolt of the Varlis, tribal people in Western India, not far away from Bombay, was struggle against exploitation of forest contractors, moneylenders, rich farmers and landlords on the tacit support of the British bureaucracy. The Kisan Sabha took up their cause and launched a struggle in May 1945. The police oppression failed to terrorize the Varlis. The Varlis increasingly came under the influence of the Communist Party. The Peasants were the sons of soil; they were subjected to feudal exploitation and colonial imposition. The old agricultural system was replaced by the new agrarian structure.



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