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Peasant movements in modern period.

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PEASANT MOVEMENT

The term 'peasant' is an ambiguous term that is differently used by different authors or variously by same authors in different studies. In India, peasant movement may be studied in three phases,

1. **The initial phase (1857-1921):** This phase was characterized by the sporadic growth of peasant movements in the absence of proper leadership.
2. **The second phase (1923-1946):** This phase was marked by the emergence of the class conscious peasant organizations; its distinct feature was that during this period peasant movements were led by people who gave priority to kisan problems in the struggle for national liberation.
3. **Post Independence phase:** This era witnessed the uninterrupted continuity of the agrarian movements due to the failure of the ruling party to resolve any of the basic problems of the working masses of rural India. The peasant struggles in this period were led predominantly by left political parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI), Praja Sociologist Party (PSP), and Socialist Party (SP), through their Kisan organizations. This phase of present movement was further sub classified as,
 - i. Pre Naxalbari Period or Pre Green Revolution
 - ii. Post Naxalbari Period or Post Green Revolution

A. R. Desai calls the struggles in colonial era as 'peasant's movements' and the terms the struggles of post independence as 'agrarian struggles'.

PEASANTS MOVEMENTS IN PRE- INDEPENDENCE ERA

There were many agitations in the 19th century- the famous Santhal and Indigo revolts in Bengal and Punjab and Maharashtra- but none of these survived in the form of organized groups that could continue to exert influence on administration or legislators. Gandhi and his supporters organized peasants at Champaran (Bihar), against the exactions of indigo planters in 1917; in Gujarat, Gandhi led the famous Khera Satyagraha against the realization of land revenue in 1918. In 1928, the Bardoli Satyagraha against the enactment of land revenue was organized by Sardar Patel.

The economic policy instituted by the British Government created discontentment among the peasants of India. Further, the Indian zamindars and moneylenders exploited illiterate peasant mass. After the permanent settlement of 1793, the absentee landlords, the intermediaries and the village money-lenders and the oppression of the Europeans reduced the Indian peasants into beggary. The growing oppression was not simply swallowed by the peasants but they raised voice against it.

The Santhal rebellion, 1855-56

The Santals of Hazaribagh, Midnapur, Bankura, Birbhum, Manbhum etc. were the worst sufferers due to the permanent settlement. The police and other government officials did not protect their interest; rather exploited them. The Santhals under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu raised in 1856 with a view to put an end to colonial rule in India. They disrupted the railway and postal communications between Bhagalpur and Rajmahal.

The British troops became alert and a force under Major Burrough suffered a defeat at the lands of the Santhals. The British took repressive measures, arrested the Santhal leaders and quelled the rebellion. The Rebellion was pacified with the creation of a separate district consisting of the Santhal Parganas. However, in the great Revolt of 1857, peasants of Oudh and western U.P. participated and fought against the British authority.

Strike of Bengal indigo cultivators 1860

Bengal projected the first strike in the history of the peasant movement in India. The European planters in Bengal forced the local peasants to resort to indigo cultivation and earned a good deal of profit. The peasants suffered a lot in 1860. The peasants of the districts of Pabna and Nadia and Barasat sub-division went on strike and refused to cultivate indigo. Soon, the news spread and peasants of Dacca, Malda, Jessore, Khulna, Rajsahi and several other places followed their path. The British Government was alarmed and issued order to different police stations to take due caution in protecting the peasants from the clutches of indigo planters. In an Act of 1862, it was decided that the planters can go to the court of law. This law freed the peasants from the clutches of the planters who left Bengal and ultimately went to Bihar and U. P.

Peasant uprising in Deccan , 1875

The payment of Government revenue, fall of the price of cotton and manipulation of bond by the money-lenders in Deccan added plights to the life of the peasants. In December 1874, a money-lender named Kālu ram obtained decree from the court for evicting Baba Saheb Deshinukh, who failed to pay Rs 150 which he had borrowed from the former. When the money-lender evicted the

former, the villagers were infuriated. The fire of discontent spread in Poona district. The peasants forcibly entered into the house of the money-lenders, burnt their houses and shops and the bond of loans. The government was alarmed and sent police who arrested hundreds of peasants. The government could not take any action against the peasants because there was no evidence to prove it. A Deccan Riots Commission was appointed to investigate the course of such uprising. The Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 was passed which facilitated the peasants in the payment of their loan but under no circumstance. They could be arrested and sent to jail for non-payment of loans. Before riots could spread to other parts of the country, the British Government passed Punjab Land Alienation Act, and pacified the discontent of the peasants of Punjab.

Champan Movement of 1917

The peasants of Champan in Bihar started a movement against their planters who had forced them for indigo cultivation. The intervention of Mahatma Gandhi solved the problems.

Kheda Satyagraha, 1918

The peasant's Kheda in Gujarat in 1917 denied paying revenue to the government in 1918. Gandhi and other leaders guided them and the government had to bend before them.

The Moplah uprising, 1921-22

In 1921 the Muslim peasants of the Malabar districts of Kerala known as the Moplahs rose against their landlords, the Namboodris and Nairs. These upper classes exploited the peasants. The Moplahs had no security of their tenure. The renewal of fees, high rents and other extractions by the zamindars broke the backbone of the Moplahs. They became united and made armed attacks on the Namboodris, Nair's and other higher castes. The British Government became active and suppressed them.

The Kisan Sabhas

Formation of the Kisan Sabhas during 1922-1928 at different places inside the country protected the interests of the peasants. The Kisan Sabhas at Andhra, Bihar, U.P. Gujarat, Karnataka etc. were organized by the national leaders who came forward to champion the causes of the peasants. The peasants came to the great help at different points of India's struggle for independence. The popular ministries in provinces looked after the problems of the peasants. The Restoration of Bengal Land Act and Bihar Tenancy Act in 1938 were passed in 1938.

Other Peasant Movements Before Independence

Before independence, several peasant movements took place in India. The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal, the Telengana Outbreak in Hyderabad, the revolt of the Varlis, mostly guided by the communist party, were other popular peasant movements in India on the eve of independence. The peasants out and out were the supporters of the Indian National Congress. The All-India Kisan Congress carried on massive educative propaganda work to bring peasants of the country closer to each other. However, the British Government did not give much importance to the peasants. The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) contributed to the emerging peasant movement in another important way. But eventually with the decline of Civil Disobedience Movement, the people began to search for an outlet for their political energies and many of them found the answer in organizing the peasants. Besides this, the formation of Congress Socialist Party (1934) the process of consolidation of the left forces receives a significant push forward. This subsequently led to the formation of an all India body for coordinating the Kisan Movement. The culmination was the establishment of All India Kisan Congress ⁷ at Lucknow in April 1936. In 1937 the Kisan Congress dropped the word 'Congress' and renamed itself the All India Kisan Sabha and adopted red flag, then the symbol of all leftist group in India. ⁸

The peasant struggle definitely forms a subtle study of Indian history. No doubt, their uprising put pressure on the British Government which devoted at least some time and machinery to solve some of the problems of the peasants and to quell the peasant uprisings wherever it was necessary.

PEASANTS MOVEMENTS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA ⁹

Peasant Movement In Bihar

Peasant Movements in Bihar after the Champaran Satyagraha in 1917, Bihar became an important centre for peasant movements. These activities had addressed the problems of share croppers such as abolition of customary non-rent payments, regulation of eviction, and fixation of fair rent. The main centre of the movements was north Bihar. The Bihar Kisan Sabha, started in 1927, developed as an extensive organization under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. It was the strongest section of the All-India Kisan Sabha. With passage of Zamindari Abolition Act, 1949, the movements disappeared. In 1978, the peasants in Bihar, under the leadership of the Yuva Chhatra Sangharsh Samity, organized a long drawn out struggle in Bodhgaya to secure land rights from the

Shankar Math. The mahants (religious heads) of the Buddhist monasteries in the area had amassed huge tracts of land under the exemption given to religious and charitable institutions in the ceiling laws of the state. The situation erupted in violence. After the Supreme Court's directive to the effect that the land is handed over to the tillers, the struggle was considered to be successful.

Kisan Sabha and Khet Mazdoor Sabha in Uttar Pradesh

Kisan sabhas were started in U.P. in 1926-27. Their main demands centered on problems of tenants, such as giving tenants occupancy rights, abolishing non-rent extraction and forced labour, cancelling all rent arrears, reducing rent and water rates. These movements did not show much interest in problems of agricultural laborers. This led to the establishment of the Khet Mazdoor Sabha in 1959.

Tebhaga Movement in Bengal

Despite repeated famines in the Bengal region, the tenants were forced to surrender half of their produce to the landlords. The famine was worsened when the jotedar (landlord) class was indulged in hoarding and black marketing of food grains. In 1946, the All India Kisan Sabha started the Tebhaga movement, demanding that tenants be allowed to keep two-thirds of the produce. The movement received the massive support from agricultural laborers. The movement declined in 1947 due to crackdowns by the police, and the divisions that developed within the movement along religious lines.

Telangana Movement

One of the most politically effective peasant movements was seen in the erstwhile State of Hyderabad. In Telangana region, the land ownership was in the hands of very few ruling class people. The actual cultivators of the land were subjected to high rent, increasing indebtedness and a system of free labour (also known as the vetti system). The Communist Party of India took up these issues as the basis for a peasant's struggle against feudalism in the period 1946-48. The objectives of this armed struggle were land grabbing and redistribution, abolition of compulsory levy to the government, and stopping eviction of tenants under any pretext. The struggle turned in to violent with police retaliation against the Gram Raj Committees that were set up by the peasant groups to work as defense squads and institutions for self-governance. Later the A.P. (Telangana Area) Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, 1950, was passed when the Indian Government took over from the Nizam's rule.

Naxalbari Movement in West Bengal

In 1967, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) had started a liberation movement by imitating Chinese Model, in the village of Naxalbari, Darjeeling district in north Bengal. The main issue of the movement was to secure rights for the marginalized sections of the agricultural community. In the course of the movement, several peasant committees were set up and land was redistributed. Several landlords were put on trial and executed. Village defense squads were established with agricultural laborers as its leaders. Later the revolution was quickly liquidated. The agrarian society of independent India experienced a new epoch in the history of peasant movements with the peasant uprising of May 1967 under the Naxalbari *thana* of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Immediately after the country's independence, the Govt. of West Bengal enacted the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act (1953) to abolish the *zamindari* and other intermediary systems and the West Bengal Land Reform Act (1955) to put a ceiling on landholdings, to reserve for the sharecroppers 60 per cent of the produced share, and to put a restriction on the eviction of sharecroppers. However due to the lack of the political will the progressive provisions of these acts remained in the statute book only. Moreover eviction of the tenants and the sharecroppers, sharp downward mobility of the peasants, their economic insecurity and unemployment emerged to be the integral part of the agrarian society of that period. The sharecroppers who constituted 16 per cent of the rural households in 1952-53 came down to 2.9 per cent in 1961. Though because of malafide land transfer proportion of the marginal and the small cultivators increased among the rural population, in real term poor peasantry was undergoing a desperate situation caused by their livelihood insecurity. This was clearly visible from the phenomenal increase of the agricultural laborers from 15.3% in 1961 to 26.2 in 1971 and the decline of the category of cultivators 38.5% to 32 % during the same period. Significantly the All India Credit Committee in its report of 1968 pointed out to the 'emergence of sharp polarization between classes in the rural areas'. In this backdrop while the economic condition of the poor peasantry was deteriorating, the political happenings in West Bengal took a new turn. In February 1967 the United Front (dominated by the communal parties viz. CPI, CPI (M) RSP etc.) came to with the promise like 'land to the tiller', 'proletarian rule', etc. The United Front pledged to implement the land reforms, promising land to all landless households and invited more militant initiatives from the peasantry as an organized force. The Left political parties had initiated rigorous mobilization of the peasantry in the Naxalbari areas since the early 1960s when the landowners of the Naxalbari region started large-scale eviction of sharecroppers. The CPI-M Darjeeling district committee started to organize the peasants on a militant footing after the United Front Government was formed. The Naxalite movement spread

rapidly in many parts of the country, protracted arm resistance, declaration of liberated area, killing and arrest became regular phenomena in the agrarian society of West Bengal. By the end of June 1967 the CPI-M leadership came out against the Naxalbari leaders, calling them 'an organized anti-party group advocates an adventurist line of action'. Nineteen members were then expelled from the party. The rift was complete. Moving through the stages of the Naxalbari Peasant's Struggle Aid Committee and a Coordination Committee, the CPI-ML was finally formed in May 1969 by the organized militant groups. The Naxalbari movement is one of the most widespread movements of the present times. Now, it no longer confines its issues to land reforms, but also on larger issues of corruption, exploitation, maladministration. ¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Historically peasants have had paradoxical social identities. In social science literature they have been depicted on the one hand as reactionary, conservative, awkward, homologous, incomplete-part society and dependent, on the other as revolutionary, progressive, self-conscious, heterogeneous and self-sufficient social category with the potential for autonomous collective action. However, notwithstanding such paradoxes, social scientists have broadly underlined the subordinated, marginalized and underdog position of the peasantry in human society. In the sociological and the anthropological literature peasants have widely been described as *culturally* 'unsystematic, concrete tradition of many, unreflective, unsophisticated and the non-literati constituting the mosaic of the "little tradition", 'incomplete' and a 'part society with part cultures'. *Politically* they are found to occupy an 'underdog position and are subjected to the domination by outsiders, unorganized and deprived of the knowledge required for organized collective action. In the *economic term*, they are identified to be the small producers for their own consumption, subsistence cultivators who produce predominantly for the need of the family rather than to make a profit. *Historically*, peasants have always borne the brunt of the extreme forms of subordination and oppression in societies. However the specific socio-economic conditions of their existence have largely shaped the roles of the peasantry in social change and transformation.