



Peasant Movements in India

Introduction

▪ Peasant Struggles:

- In these struggles, the peasants emerged as the main force, fighting directly for their own demands.
- The movements in the period between 1858 and 1914 tended to remain localised, disjointed and confined to particular grievances, contrary to the movements after 1914.

▪ Causes of the Movements:

- **Peasant Atrocities:** The peasants suffered from **high rents, illegal levies, arbitrary evictions and unpaid labour** in Zamindari areas. The Government levied heavy land revenue.
- **Massive Losses for Indian Industries:** The movements arose when **British economic policies resulted in the ruin of traditional handicrafts and other small industries** leading to change of ownership and overburdening of agrarian land, and massive debt and impoverishment of peasantry.
- **Unfavourable Policies:** The economic policies of British government used to **protect the landlords and moneylenders and exploited the peasants**. The peasants rose in revolt against this injustice on many occasions.

▪ Rise of Peasant Organisations:

- Between 1920 and 1940 peasant organisations arose.
- The first organisation to be founded was the **Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha** (1929) and in 1936 the **All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS)**.
- In 1936, at the [Lucknow session of the Congress](#), **All India Kisan Sabha** was formed with **Sahajanand** as its first president.
 - It later issued a **Kisan manifesto** which demanded abolition of zamindari and occupancy rights for all tenants.

19th Peasant Movements (Pre-Gandhian Phase)

▪ Indigo Rebellion (1859-62):

- In order to increase their profits, the European planters persuaded the peasants to plant Indigo instead of food crops.
- The farmers were discontent growing indigo because:
 - Low prices were offered for growing indigo.
 - Indigo was not lucrative.
 - Indigo planting decreased the fertility of the soil.
- The peasants suffered at the hands of the traders and the middleman. Consequently, they launched a movement for non cultivation of indigo in Bengal.
- They were **supported by the press and the missionaries**.

- **Harish Chandra Mukherjee**, a Bengali Journalist, described the plight of peasants of Bengal in his newspaper '**The Hindu Patriot**'.
- **Dinabandhu Mitra**, Bengali writer and dramatist, in his play '**Nil Darpan**' depicted the treatment of the Indian peasantry by the indigo planters. It was first published in 1860.

- His play created a huge controversy which was later banned by the East India Company to control the agitation among the Indians.

- The government appointed an **Indigo Commission** and issued an order in November 1860, notifying that it was illegal to force the ryots to cultivate indigo. **This marked the victory for the peasants.**

▪ **Pabna Movement (1870s-80s):**

- In larger parts of Eastern **Bengal**, landlords forcefully collected rents and land taxes, often enhanced for the poor peasants.
- The peasants were also prevented from acquiring **Occupancy Right under Act X of 1859**.
- In May 1873 an **Agrarian League was formed in the Yusufshahi Pargana** of Pabna district, Patna (East Bengal).

- Rent strikes were organised, funds were raised and the struggle spread throughout Patna and to other districts of East Bengal.

- The struggle was **mainly legal resistance and little violence**.

- The discontent continued till 1885 when the Government by the **Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885** enhanced the occupancy rights.
- The struggle was supported by [Bankim Chandra Chatterjee](#), **R.C. Dutt** and the **Indian Association** under **Surendranath Banerjea**.

▪ **Deccan Riots (1875):**

- The Deccan peasants uprising was directed mainly against the excesses of the **Marwari and Gujarati money lenders**.
- The ryots suffered heavy taxation under the **Ryotwari system**. The land revenue was also raised by 50% in 1867.
- **Social Boycott:** In 1874, the ryots organised a **social boycott movement** against the moneylenders.

- They refused to buy from the moneylenders' shops and cultivate their fields.

- The barbers, washermen, and shoemakers refused to serve them.

- This social boycott spread rapidly to the villages of Poona, Ahmednagar, Solapur and Satara and was transformed into agrarian riots with systematic attacks on the moneylenders' houses and shops.
- The Government succeeded in repressing the movement. As a conciliatory measure, the **Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act** was passed in 1879.

20th Century Peasant Movements (Gandhian Phase)

▪ **Champaran Satyagraha (1917):**

- The peasantry on the indigo plantations in the **Champaran** district of Bihar was excessively oppressed by the European planters and compelled to grow indigo on at least 3/20th of their land and sell it at prices fixed by the planters.
- In 1917, **Mahatma Gandhi** reached Champaran and began to conduct a detailed inquiry into the condition of the peasantry.
- He defied the orders of district officials for leaving Champaran.
- In June 1917, the Government appointed an enquiry committee with Gandhiji as one of the members.

- The enactment of the **Champaran Agrarian Act, 1918** freed the tenants from the special imposts levied by the indigo planters.

▪ **Kheda Satyagraha (1918):**

- It was chiefly **directed against the Government.**
- In 1918, the crops failed in the **Kheda district of Gujarat** but the government refused to remit land revenue and insisted on its full collection.
- Gandhiji along with [Sardar Vallabhai Patel](#) supported the peasants and advised them to withhold payment of revenues till their demand for its remission was met.
- The satyagraha lasted till June 1918. The Government conceded the demands of the peasants.

▪ **Moplah Rebellion (1921):**

- The [Moplahs](#) were the **Muslim tenants** inhabiting the Malabar region where most of the landlords were Hindus.
- Their grievances centred around **lack of security of tenure, high rents, renewal fees** and other oppressive exactions.
- The Moplah movement merged with the ongoing [Khilafat agitation.](#)
 - Mahatma Gandhi, **Shaukat Ali** and [Maulana Abul Kalam Azad](#) addressed Moplah meetings.
- Many Hindus were seen by the Moplahs to be helping the British authorities. The anti-government and anti-landlord movement **acquired communal overtones.**
 - Communalisation isolated the Moplah from the Khilafat & [Non-Cooperation Movement.](#)
- The movement was called off by December 1921.

▪ **Bardoli Satyagraha (1928):**

- Enhancement of land revenue by 30% in the Bardoli district of Gujarat by the British government led to the organisation of a **'No-Revenue Campaign'** by the Bardoli peasants under the **leadership of Vallabhai Patel.**
- A woman in Bardoli **gave Vallabhai Patel the title of 'Sardar'.**
- Unsuccessful attempts of the British to suppress the movement by large scale attachment of cattle and land resulted in the appointment of an enquiry committee.
- The enquiry came to the conclusion that the increase had been unjustified and reduced the enhancement to 6.03%.

| Difference between 19th and 20th Century Peasant Movements | | |
|---|---|--|
| Characteristics | 19th Century Peasant Movements | 20th Century Peasant Movements |
| Objective of Movements: | The objective of these movements were centered almost wholly on economic issues rather than ending the exploitation of the peasants. | The peasants were brought into the broader struggle against colonialism beginning with Champaran, Kheda and later Bardoli movement. |
| Leadership: | The leadership of these revolts were from the peasantry itself. | The movements were led by Congress and communist leaders. |
| Extent of Movements: | Territorial reach was limited to a particular local region. | All India movements. The chief form of mobilisation was through holding kisan conferences and meetings. |
| Understanding of Colonialism: | Directed towards specific and limited objectives and redressal of particular grievances. Colonialism was not the target of these movements. | There was an emergence of anti-colonialism consciousness among peasants. |
| Formal Organization: | No formal organization. These caused movements to be a | Emergence of independent class organisations of kisans in rural India. |

Significance of the Movements

- **Awareness among the Indians:** Though these revolts were not aimed at uprooting the British rule from India, they created awareness among the Indians.
 - The peasants **developed a strong awareness of their legal rights** and asserted them in and outside the courts.
- **Inspired other Revolts:** They felt a **need to organise and fight against exploitation and oppression**.
 - These rebellions prepared the ground for various other uprisings such as **Sikh Wars in Punjab** and finally the [Revolt of 1857](#).
- **Unity Among the Peasantry:** Because of the non-differentiation in the peasantry, and the all-embracing nature of the anti imperialist struggle, the Peasant Movement was able to **unite all sections of the peasantry including the landless labourers** and its anti-feudal and anti-imperialist crusade.
- **Peasants' Voices were Heard:** Due to the peasants fighting directly for their own demands, their voices were heard.
 - In the Indigo rebellion, Bardoli Satyagraha, Pabna movement and Deccan riots, the demands of peasants were responded to.
 - Formation of various Kisan Sabhas to hear the peasants' demands during the Non Cooperation Movement.
- **Growth of Nationalism:** The ideology of non-violence had given much strength to the peasants who participated in the movement.
 - The movement also contributed to the growth of nationalism.
- **Encouraged Post-Independence Reforms:** These movements created an atmosphere for post-independence agrarian reforms, for instance, '**abolition of Zamindari**.
 - They eroded the power of the landed class, thus adding to the transformation of the agrarian structure.