

Peasant Movements in Modern India: Agrarian Resistance, Colonial Exploitation and Nationalist Politics

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Abstract

The rural resistance to the exploitation of villages by colonial powers, landlord oppression, forced commercial cultivation, burdensome and unfair land revenue systems were all expressions of peasant resistance. This paper explores the historical context, reasons, shape and effect of peasant movements under the British rule. It examines the way in which colonial agrarian policies such as the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems, changed the land relations and raised the economic vulnerability of cultivators. Significant types of resistance, including rent refusal, failure to pay revenue, petitions, boycott, satyagraha and organised peasant mobilisation are also highlighted in the study. The growing transformation of local economic protest to the wider political mobilisation can be seen in such movements as the Indigo Revolt, Deccan Riots, Champaran, Bardoli, Tebhaga and Telangana. The paper suggests that peasant movements did not just question colonial and feudal institutions but also reinforced the social base of Indian nationalism and influenced the tenancy rights and land reforms and agrarian justice debates of the post-independence period.

Keywords: Peasant movements; modern India; agrarian resistance; colonial exploitation; land revenue system; zamindari system; rural indebtedness; Indian nationalism; Kisan Sabhas; land reforms.

Introduction

Peasant movements in modern Indian history refer to the collective resistance of cultivators, tenants, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers against exploitative agrarian conditions. These movements emerged mainly as a response to high land revenue demands, landlord oppression, forced cultivation of commercial crops, indebtedness and the loss of traditional rights over land and resources. In colonial India, the peasantry formed the largest section of society, and therefore their struggles became an important part of social, economic and political history.

British colonial rule deeply transformed Indian agriculture. Land revenue systems such as the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari and Mahalwari arrangements changed traditional land relations and made revenue collection more rigid and profit-oriented. Under the zamindari system, many peasants faced rent enhancement, eviction and exploitation by landlords. At the same time, the commercialisation of agriculture encouraged the cultivation of crops such as indigo, cotton, opium and jute for colonial markets rather than local food security. This shift increased the vulnerability of peasants, especially when crop failure, price fluctuations and famine occurred.

Rural indebtedness also became a major problem during the colonial period. Heavy taxation, uncertain harvests and dependence on moneylenders trapped many peasants in cycles of debt. As a result, agrarian discontent took different forms, including petitions, rent refusal, social boycott, satyagraha and armed resistance. Movements such as the Indigo Revolt, Deccan Riots, Champaran Satyagraha, Kheda Satyagraha, Bardoli Satyagraha, Tebhaga Movement and Telangana struggle reflected the growing political consciousness of rural India.

Peasant movements were not only economic protests; they also contributed to the wider anti-colonial struggle. They exposed the exploitative nature of British rule and connected local agrarian grievances with the national movement. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and several Kisan Sabha activists helped transform local peasant issues into organised political movements. Thus, peasant movements played a significant role in weakening colonial authority, expanding mass participation in nationalism and shaping the debate on land reforms in independent India.

Historical Background

The agrarian structure of colonial India was shaped by British revenue policies, landlordism, commercialisation of agriculture and the growing dependence of peasants on moneylenders. Before colonial rule, land relations varied across regions and were often linked with customary rights, village communities and local authority structures. However, British rule gradually transformed land into a revenue-generating and market-oriented asset. The colonial state's primary concern was the regular extraction of land revenue, which placed heavy pressure on cultivators and weakened traditional agrarian security (Baden-Powell, 1892; Dutt, 1904).

One of the most significant changes was the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal in 1793. Under this system, zamindars were recognised as landholders and made responsible for paying a fixed revenue to the colonial government. Although the system created a class of powerful landlords, it weakened the position of actual cultivators, who became vulnerable to rent enhancement, eviction and exploitation. The zamindari system therefore created sharp inequalities between landlords and peasants and became one of the major causes of agrarian unrest in eastern India (Chandra, 1989; Stokes, 1978).

In other regions, the British introduced different land revenue systems. The Ryotwari system, mainly implemented in Madras and Bombay Presidencies, established a direct revenue relationship between the state and individual cultivators or ryots. Although this system appeared to recognise peasant proprietorship, in practice the revenue demand was often high and inflexible. Similarly, the Mahalwari system, introduced in parts of north-western India, fixed revenue responsibility on village communities or estates. These systems increased the burden on peasants because revenue demands were generally assessed in cash and had to be paid even during crop failure or poor harvests (Baden-Powell, 1892; Chandra, 1989).

Colonial rule also encouraged the commercialisation of agriculture. Peasants were increasingly pushed towards the cultivation of cash crops such as indigo, cotton, jute, opium and sugarcane to serve British industrial and commercial interests. This shift reduced the importance of subsistence farming and linked Indian agriculture with global market fluctuations. When prices fell or harvests failed, peasants suffered severe economic distress. Forced cultivation of crops

such as indigo in Bengal and Bihar created deep resentment and led to movements such as the Indigo Revolt and Champaran Satyagraha (Guha, 1983; Hardiman, 1981).

The growth of moneylender control was another important feature of colonial agrarian society. Since peasants had to pay land revenue in cash, they often borrowed from sahkars and moneylenders at high interest rates. Crop failure, high rent, litigation costs and social expenses pushed them further into debt. Over time, many cultivators lost land or became tenants and labourers. The Deccan Riots of 1875, for example, reflected peasant anger against moneylenders and the legal system that protected creditor interests (Dhanagare, 1983; Sarkar, 1983).

High taxation, forced crop production and indebtedness contributed to rural poverty and famine conditions. Colonial economic policies weakened the resilience of village economies and made peasants more vulnerable to drought, price rise and food shortages. Famines in the nineteenth century exposed the failure of colonial governance to protect rural populations. Thus, the agrarian structure of colonial India was marked by exploitation, insecurity and inequality, which created the social and economic background for major peasant movements in modern Indian history (Dutt, 1904; Bhatia, 1967).

Causes of Peasant Movements

Peasant movements in modern India emerged from the exploitative agrarian structure created under colonial rule. British policies treated land mainly as a source of revenue, while peasants faced high taxation, insecure tenancy, landlord domination, forced commercial cultivation and increasing dependence on moneylenders. These conditions produced widespread rural discontent and encouraged collective resistance in different regions of India.

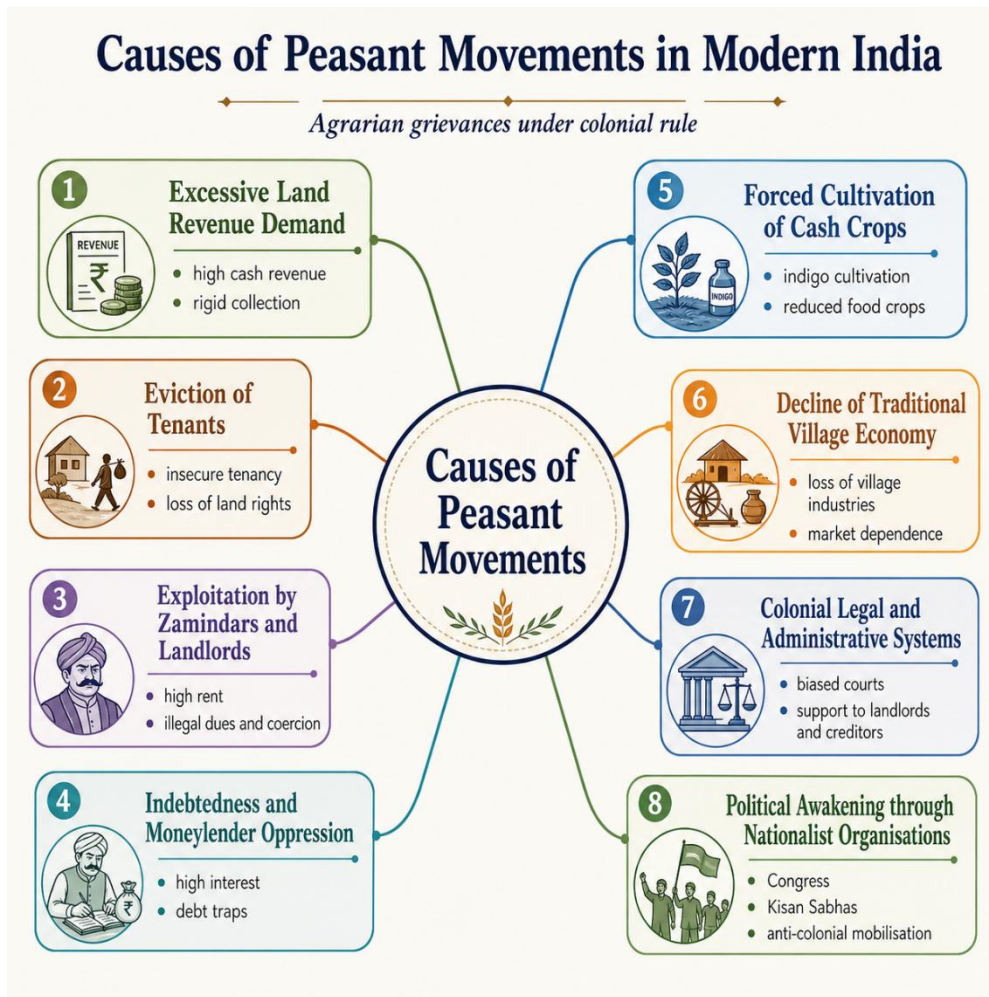
One of the major causes was excessive land revenue demand. The Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems placed a heavy financial burden on cultivators. Revenue was often demanded in cash and was not sufficiently adjusted during drought, crop failure or famine. This forced peasants to borrow money and increased their economic vulnerability (Baden-Powell, 1892).

Eviction of tenants and insecurity of land rights also contributed to peasant unrest. In zamindari areas, cultivators often had weak legal protection and were exposed to rent enhancement, illegal dues and eviction. Landlords and intermediaries used their social and legal authority to extract maximum rent from peasants, which created resentment among tenants and sharecroppers (Stokes, 1978).

Exploitation by zamindars, landlords and planters intensified agrarian distress. Peasants were frequently subjected to excessive rent, forced labour, illegal cesses and coercive practices. In several regions, cultivators suffered under both colonial revenue pressure and local landlord oppression, making agrarian protest a common response to rural exploitation (Dhanagare, 1983).

Indebtedness and moneylender oppression were another important cause. Since peasants needed cash for revenue payments, rent, seeds, tools, marriages and survival during poor harvests, they became dependent on sahkars and moneylenders. High interest rates, mortgage

of land and manipulation of debt records often resulted in the loss of land. The Deccan Riots of 1875 reflected this anger against moneylenders and the legal system that protected creditor interests (Sarkar, 1983).



Forced cultivation of commercial crops, especially indigo, also generated strong resistance. European planters compelled peasants in Bengal and Bihar to grow indigo under unfavourable conditions. This reduced land available for food crops and caused economic losses to cultivators. The Indigo Revolt and Champaran Satyagraha were important examples of resistance against coercive plantation practices (Guha, 1983).

The decline of the traditional village economy further increased rural poverty. Colonial rule linked agriculture with global markets and encouraged cash-crop production for commercial purposes. This weakened subsistence farming and made peasants vulnerable to price fluctuations, crop failure and market instability. The decline of village industries also reduced supplementary income for rural households (Dutt, 1904).

Colonial legal and administrative systems deepened peasant grievances. Courts, police and revenue officials often favoured landlords, planters and moneylenders. Legal procedures were expensive, slow and difficult for poor peasants to access. As a result, many cultivators viewed colonial law not as a source of justice but as an instrument of exploitation (Chandra, 1989).

Political awakening through nationalist organisations gave peasant grievances a wider anti-colonial direction. The Indian National Congress, Kisan Sabhas and other political groups helped connect local agrarian struggles with the larger freedom movement. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati mobilised peasants around issues of rent, revenue and social justice. Therefore, peasant movements gradually shifted from local economic protests to organised political mobilisation.

Peasant Resistance, Political Awakening and Indian Nationalism

Nationalist leadership played an important role in giving organised direction to peasant movements in modern India. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel connected agrarian grievances with anti-colonial politics through movements like Champaran, Kheda and Bardoli, where satyagraha, non-payment of revenue and peaceful resistance became effective methods of struggle. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and the Kisan Sabhas further strengthened peasant mobilisation by raising issues of rent reduction, tenancy rights, landlord exploitation and rural justice. Peasant resistance took different forms, including petitions, legal action, boycott of landlords and moneylenders, social boycott, refusal to pay rent or revenue, peaceful protest and, in some regions, violent outbreaks. These struggles gradually linked local agrarian problems with the wider freedom movement, although peasants were not merely passive followers of nationalist leaders; they also acted independently according to their own economic and social interests.

The Indian National Congress helped expand peasant participation in nationalism, but it often remained cautious toward radical demands such as abolition of landlordism and redistribution of land. Despite these limitations, peasant movements increased political consciousness among rural people, weakened colonial authority in villages, encouraged the growth of Kisan organisations, created pressure for tenancy and land reform laws, and shaped post-independence debates on agrarian justice. A major research gap remains in examining peasant movements beyond elite nationalist leadership, especially the role of ordinary peasants, women, lower castes, tribal cultivators and regional variations in rural resistance.

Research Gap, Objectives and Methodology

Although peasant movements in modern India have been widely studied within the broader framework of nationalist history, there remains a need to examine them as independent rural struggles shaped by class relations, caste structure, regional conditions and local agrarian systems. Existing studies often focus on major political leaders and nationalist organisations, while the experiences of ordinary peasants, women, tribal cultivators, tenants and sharecroppers receive comparatively less attention. This study therefore seeks to analyse peasant movements not only as anti-colonial protests but also as expressions of rural resistance against landlordism, revenue pressure, indebtedness and social inequality.

The main objectives of the study are to examine the causes of peasant movements in colonial India, to analyse major peasant movements from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, to study the relationship between peasant resistance and Indian nationalism, and to assess the impact of these movements on agrarian politics and land reform discourse. The study will adopt a historical and analytical research design based on secondary sources. It will use

colonial records, nationalist writings, books, journal articles, official reports and archival materials. A comparative historical approach will be applied to compare different peasant movements across regions and periods, with special attention to their causes, leadership, methods of resistance, social composition and outcomes.

Literature Review

Peasant movements in modern India have been an important area of historical research because they reveal the relationship between colonial rule, agrarian exploitation and rural resistance. Early nationalist historians often studied peasant struggles as part of the wider freedom movement, emphasising the role of political leadership and anti-colonial mobilisation. Later scholars shifted attention towards the independent agency of peasants and the local causes of agrarian unrest, such as high land revenue, forced cultivation, indebtedness, landlord oppression and tenancy insecurity.

D. N. Dhanagare's work on peasant movements in India provides a major sociological interpretation of agrarian struggles between 1920 and 1950. He argues that peasant movements were shaped by class relations, regional agrarian structures and political organisations rather than by nationalism alone (Dhanagare, 1983). Similarly, A. R. Desai viewed peasant struggles as part of a broader class-based resistance against colonial and feudal exploitation, highlighting the economic roots of rural protest (Desai, 1979).

Ranajit Guha made a significant contribution through the subaltern approach. He argued that peasants were not merely followers of elite nationalist leaders but active historical agents with their own forms of political consciousness and resistance (Guha, 1983). His work helped shift the study of peasant movements from elite politics to popular mobilisation. Sumit Sarkar also noted that peasant participation in nationalist politics was complex, as local agrarian grievances often merged with wider anti-colonial objectives (Sarkar, 1983).

Studies of specific movements further show regional variation in peasant resistance. David Hardiman's study of Gujarat highlights the importance of local leadership, caste networks and Gandhian methods in the Kheda and Bardoli movements (Hardiman, 1981). The Indigo Revolt, Champaran Satyagraha, Tebhaga Movement and Telangana struggle demonstrate that peasant movements varied in nature, ranging from peaceful satyagraha to militant class struggle. Bipan Chandra and his co-authors emphasise that peasant movements strengthened the mass base of Indian nationalism, but they also show that nationalist leadership often avoided radical land redistribution demands (Chandra et al., 1989).

Overall, the existing literature shows that peasant movements were caused by colonial agrarian policies, landlordism, rural indebtedness and social inequality. However, many studies still focus more on leadership, ideology and political organisations. There is comparatively less attention to ordinary peasants, women, tribal cultivators, lower-caste groups and regional micro-histories. Therefore, further research is needed to study peasant movements as independent rural struggles shaped by class, caste, region and local agrarian relations.

Discussion

Peasant movements in modern India shared a common background of agrarian exploitation, but they differed in their nature, leadership, ideology and methods of resistance. Early movements such as the Indigo Revolt and the Deccan Riots were largely spontaneous responses to immediate economic oppression. The Indigo Revolt emerged against the forced cultivation of indigo by European planters, while the Deccan Riots reflected peasant anger against moneylenders and debt exploitation. These movements were mainly localised and were driven by direct grievances such as coercion, high rent, indebtedness and loss of land. In contrast, later movements such as Bardoli, Tebhaga and Telangana showed a higher level of political organisation and ideological clarity. Bardoli was led through disciplined satyagraha under Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, while Tebhaga and Telangana were influenced by organised peasant associations and left-wing mobilisation. The Tebhaga movement raised the demand for a larger share of produce for sharecroppers, whereas the Telangana struggle challenged feudal oppression, forced labour and landlord domination. This shows that peasant movements gradually shifted from scattered local protests to wider political struggles. Over time, peasant resistance became connected with nationalism, class consciousness, tenancy rights and land reform demands. Therefore, the evolution of peasant movements reflects the transformation of rural India from passive suffering under colonial exploitation to active political participation in the struggle against colonial and feudal power.

Conclusion

Peasant movements were central to modern Indian history because they represented the collective resistance of rural society against colonial exploitation, landlord oppression, moneylender control and unjust revenue systems. These movements exposed the exploitative nature of British agrarian policies and showed that the peasantry was not a passive section of society but an active force in shaping political change. From early revolts such as the Indigo Revolt and Deccan Riots to organised struggles like Champaran, Bardoli, Tebhaga and Telangana, peasants raised important issues of rent, revenue, tenancy rights, forced cultivation, debt and social justice. Their struggles gradually moved beyond local economic grievances and became connected with the wider anti-colonial movement. Peasant participation strengthened the social base of India's freedom struggle by bringing rural masses into nationalist politics. At the same time, these movements influenced post-independence debates on land reforms, tenancy protection and agrarian justice. Therefore, peasant movements were not only episodes of rural protest but also significant forces in the making of modern India.

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