

HISTORY OF PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Shalini Yadav

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology

Juhari Devi Girls P.G. College, Kanpur (U.P.)

Email: yadavshalini2011@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the history and nature of peasant movements in India. Peasants are a prominent part of the nation. Historically, the emergence and the development of the peasant movement can be seen in the History of the Indian National Movement. Most of the peasants mobilized in the freedom movement in India. Some sociologists also argue that agrarian agitation has been started during the freedom movement in India. Peasant's participation can be seen in several peasant struggles such as Santhal Insurrection, the Punjab peasant movement, the Champaran movement, the Kheda movement, Bardoli Satyagraha, Moplah Rebellion in Malabar, Telangana, and Tebhaga uprisings, etc. This research paper is based on secondary data. This paper highlights the History of peasant mobilization in various agrarian struggles. It also distinguishes between the pre-independence peasant movement and the post-independence farmer movement. The attempt is also directed to understand the nature, types, issues, Ideology and leadership of different peasant movements in India.

Keywords

Peasant, Movement, Leadership, Mobilization, Farmers, Unrest, Struggle.

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Shalini Yadav,

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Introduction

Agriculture with its allied sectors is the largest source of livelihood in India. 70 percent of its rural population still depends predominantly on agricultural-based work for their income; among them, 82 percent of farmers are small and marginal cultivators (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)).

The term Peasant has been defined in the *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* in these words:- “A person who owns or rents a small piece of land and grows crops, keeps animals, etc. on it, especially one who has a less income, very little education, and a low social position. This is usually used of someone who lived in the past or of someone in a poor country” (*Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/peasant>).

According to Britannica Encyclopedia (2020), “Peasants are any member of a class of persons who till the soil as small landowners or as agricultural laborers. The word *peasant* was initially used for small-scale agrarians in Europe in historic times, but many other societies, both past and present, have had a peasant class” (Britannica, 2020).

The meaning of peasant also has been described in the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, third edition revised (2009). “There have been attempts to define peasant economies, particularly in Marxist theory, in such a way as to link social groups as diverse as feudal tenants, independent farmers, and rural day-laborers. These have variously stressed the importance of the peasant family as a unit of both production and consumption, the relationship of capitalist to non-capitalist agriculture, the use of family labor in a rural setting, and the exploitation of poor, or relatively poor, agricultural producers. There have been attempts to define a peasant mode of production, through the notion of the family labor farm, as well as assertions that the peasantry is a class. The latter is related to debates about the revolutionary potential of the peasantry again particularly among Marxist theorists. Among social anthropologists, peasants have been defined by their cultural habits and norms, by the narrowness of vision, and clinging to tradition” (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, third edition revised, 2009).

On the basis of the above-mentioned concepts of peasant, it can be argued that the term peasant is typically used for those people who have small pieces of land, and their earning source basically depends on agriculture and its associated works. And the basic unit of production is the family or household.

The typology of peasants has been described by the sociologists. Daniel Thorner categorized peasants on the basis of land ownership and he classified peasants into three categories: *Malik, Kisan and Mazdoor*. K.L. Sharma (1997), talks

about five types of peasant groups, which are: - 1- owner- cultivator, 2- largely owner-cultivator, 3- largely tenant-cultivator, tenant-cultivator and 5- total poor peasant (Doshi and Jain, 2010 (1999)).

The History of the Various Peasant and Farmer Movements in India

The peasant movement in India has been started during the colonial period. There are many sociologists who have described and classified the agrarian structure and land problem of small cultivators, landless laborers, and sharecroppers in rural areas (Beteille, 1979 and Sharma, 1986). The unrest and struggle of peasants are directly and indirectly related to the problem of land issues and uneven agrarian social structure in rural areas. Peasant movements have a prolonged history that can be traced to the numerous peasant rebellions. A peasant movement is a social movement that occurred for the various rights of the peasants, related to the agricultural plans and policies, against British economic policies and against the atrocity of zamindars and against the exploitations of upper caste rich farmers.

Some intellectuals used the term Peasant movement in different ways, such as Kathleen Gough, (1974) calls it a peasant uprising, A.R. Desai (1979) says it is a peasant struggle while Hamza Alavi accepts that it is a Peasant revolution. These terms can be diverse but the reason behind this peasants struggle, uprisings, revolution and movement are similar which are for fighting against every type of exploitation done by Britishers, upper caste rich farmers, and zamindars.

There are many sociologists and thinkers who have done a study on the peasant movement in India. According to D. N. Dhanagare (1983), A. R. Desai (1979), and Kathleen Gough (1974), the peasant movements have been neglected by the historians (Shah, 2009). According to A. R. Desai and D. N. Dhanagare, the development of peasant unrest started during the struggle of the freedom movement in India.

A. R. Desai differentiates between the peasant movement and the farmers' movement. He says that the colonial period's movement can be called the peasant movement. On the other hand, those movements started after the independence of India they can be considered as farmers' movement, because before independence the issues of peasant agitation was different which were mainly focused on the uneven land distribution, economic policies and exploitation of small and landless farmers. However after the independence of India, many land reform programs and green revolution and other policies have been provided by the government to the farmers therefore, the financial conditions of the cultivators have been improved therefore, the issues of the farmers have been changed as well. Now farmers are mobilized for fixed price rates, lights, Fertilizers, hybrid seeds and irrigation sources, etc.

Gail Omvedt has divided movements into two parts- Old Movements and New Movements. She says that peasant movements are old movements while farmer's movements are New Movements (Shah, 2009).

D. N. Dhanagare (1983) has focused on mobilization through his book *Peasant Movements in India*. He argues in his study that in India peasant class structure is not similar, although it is diverse. In his study, he emphasizes that different kinds of farmers participate in different kinds of peasant movements. According to him, marginal farmers are mobilized together for movement, which is related to social and economic issues and on the other side some marginal peasants are mobilized against some rich farmers (Dhanagare, 1983).

The Peasant Movement in Pre- Independent India

In the colonial period of the peasant movement, many small cultivators and tribes had participated in the struggle of peasants. Poor farmers and cultivators have the capability of organizing the revolutionary movement in India (Gough, 1968). In his study, D.N. Dhanagare (1983), says that small and poor peasants are the largest part of the rural areas. They have shown their capability of transforming the structure of society. Bipan Chandra (1988) also mentioned that peasants and small farmers have played a vital role in the movement of Indian Nationalism. Therefore, here it can be argued that in spite of their deprivations and limitations when peasants mobilize themselves against their atrocity then they tend to become a group of people that are associated with the class consciousness and then their collaboration and mobilization are seen in the form of social movement. Here we discuss some peasant movements which are organized and mobilized by small poor deprived peasants, landless laborers and sharecroppers.

Peasant Movement in Pre- Independent India

1. Santhal Insurrection (1855-56)
2. Champaran satyagrah (1917-18)
3. Peasant revolt in Punjab (1930)
4. Kheda Movement (1918)
5. Bardoli Satyagraha (1928)
6. Moplah Movement (1921)

Santhal Rebellion (1855-56)

The Santhal revolt was started by the Santhal tribal community in present-day Jharkhand and West Bengal. This revolt had started on 30, June, 1855. Sindu and Kanhu were the prominent leaders of this revolt. Other leaders were Chand and Bhairav. In this rebellion, Santhals were mobilized against the rule of the British

East India Company and Zamindari System. This revolt was not only supported by tribal communities but it was reinforced by non-tribal groups as well such as Gowalas and Lohars.

Champanan Satyagrah (1917-18)

Another peasant movement is Champanan Satyagraha. It was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1917. This peasant movement has a very significant role in the history of the freedom movement in India. Champanan Satyagrah was started in the Champanan district of Bihar. This movement had been mainly organized by Mahatma Gandhi, Rajendra Prasad, Brajkishore Prasad, and Anugrah Narayan Sinha. Other leaders were Ramnavmi Prasad, J.B. Kripalani and Babu Gaya Prasad Singh. It was established against the cultivation of indigo crops. In this movement, many Farmers and youth participated in a large number. They were inspired by the ideology of Gandhiji. Thereafter youth also participated in the India s freedom Movement.

Peasant Revolt in Punjab (1930)

This movement was started by the peasants of Punjab. Punjab's peasant revolt was also against the British rules as well as the exploitation of moneylenders and zamindars. It was located in the active and famous districts of Punjab. These districts are Jullundur, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Lyallpur, and Sheikhpora. In the initial stage of this movement, Muslims and Hindus did not participate but later on, they made the decision to participate in the movement.

Kheda Movement (1918)

The Kheda movement was launched in March 1918 in the Kheda district of Gujarat in India. This satyagraha was mainly led by Mahatma Gandhi. And other prominent leaders were Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Shankarlal Banker, Mahadev Desai, and Ravi Shankar Vyas. The issue of the Kheda Movement was the increased tax rate and peasants were incapable of paying the revenue due to the pandemic of plague. Therefore, Gandhiji mobilized the peasants of Kheda. Here it can be said that this movement is a successful peasant movement because after this movement the tax rate had decreased.

Bardoli Satyagraha (1928)

Bardoli Satyagraha or movement was launched in Gujarat, India on June, 12, 1928 during the struggle for Indian independence. It was a chief peasant movement, which was led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The main issue of the Bardoli Satyagraha was the high revenue tax rate. In 1925, the taluka of Bardoli in Gujarat suffered from financial troubles. However, the government of the Bombay Presidency had raised the tax rate by 30% that year. Therefore, the peasants of this region mobilized themselves against the British government under the leadership of Sardar

Vallabhbhai Patel. This movement was a successful movement; at the end of the movement, the British government decreased the revenue tax. The movement has played an important role in the Indian national movement of India as well (Wikipedia_ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bardoli_Satyagraha, 2022).

Moplah Movement (1921)

The Moplah movement was started in 1921 by the unrest of the Moplah peasants' community in the Malabar district of Kerala. Moplah was the Muslim peasant community they were agitated against Hindu rich farmers and landlords. Moplah tenants were poor and small farmers who were working on the land of Hindu landowners. These Hindu landlords were called *Jenmis*. Historically, the relationship between the Moplahs and the Jenmis was unfriendly. Moplah was exploited by Hindu landlords. Therefore, it can be argued that in the Moplah movement two types of exploitation can be analyzed. The first base of exploitation was the poor and rich status of Moplah and Jenmis. Another exploitation is based on the religious difference. Moplah were Muslims and Jenmis landlords were Hindu. Therefore, the Moplah peasants were facing double exploitation by Hindu landlords. They raised their voice against this exploitation which is called the Moplah movement or Malabar movement. In this rebellion, Many Hindus were killed and mostly converted to Islam (Doshi and Jain, 2010 (1999)).

Farmer Movement after the Independence of India

Some peasant movements are found after the independence of India. In this series, four movements are very important. After independence, many changes have come in the agriculture. Many government reformations can be seen in independent India such as the green revolution, land reforms, Community Development Program, Integrated Rural Development Program etc. These reforms have played an important role in the changing the conditions of some farmers. Therefore these movements are called farmers movements. And therefore the issues, nature, ideology, organization, and movement strategies of these movements can be seen differently.

Farmer Movement after the Independence of India

1. Telangana Peasant Movement (1947-51)
2. Tebhaga Peasant Movement (1946-1947)
3. Naxalbari Peasant Movement (1967)
4. Indian Agriculture Acts of 2020 (Farm Bills)

Telangana Peasant Movement (1947-51)

Telangana Peasant Movement was launched in the state of Andhra Pradesh in 1947. Tenants, sharecroppers and landless laborers protested against the oppression

of the former Nizam of Hyderabad. The main thing of this rebellion was the tenants, sharecroppers and landless laborers mobilized together against the feudal system of Nizam. The movement was led by the Communist Party of India and the All-India Kisan Sabha. This movement lasted for five years. Tenants were forced to do *Vetti Pratha* (bonded labor). Big farmers and landlords are called jagirdars and Deshmukh. And they exploited the small and poor tenants.

Tebhaga Peasant Movement (1946-1947)

The Tebhaga movement was the peasant agitation in Bengal. It was started in Bengal by the peasant organization- All India Kisan Sabha. All India Kisan Sabha is associated with the Communist Party of India. This movement was led by the various prominent leaders. These leaders were Charu Majumdar, Kansari Halder, Ila Mitra, Moni Singh, Bishnu Chattopadhyay, Sushil Sen and others. This was the movement of sharecropper rights. Earlier Sharecroppers had to give half part of their harvest to the landowners. But in the Tebhaga movement sharecroppers raised a demand to reduce the landowners share to one-third of their harvest. Therefore this movement is called the Tebhaga movement. In this movement, violence can be found in many areas of Bengal. The Tebhaga movement continued till 1950 when the Bargadar Act was passed.

Naxalbari Movement (1967)

Naxalbari Movement was inspired by the Tebhaga Movement (1946). It was launched in 1967 in Siliguri, Darjeeling district, West Bengal. The chief objective of this movement was to transform the entire society, not the circumstances of farmers only. This movement was highly associated with violence. This movement talked about totally changing the structure of Society. This movement emerged for the eradication of big farmers, landholders and zamindars. The Naxalbari rebellion worked with the ideology of Marxian socialism. The movement was led by the local communist leaders and tribes. Later on, it was associated with the communist party of India (Marxist- Leninist)

Indian Agriculture Acts of 2020 (Farm Bills)

Another very important movement organized by the farmers all over India. The three laws, introduced in September 2020, by Indian Government, these three laws are:-

1. Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020
2. Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020

3. Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020

This movement considers a new Social Movement, because the issue of this movement is related to the rights of the farmers. Therefore farmers were mobilized against these three laws and this movement was a successful movement. The government decided to withdraw these rules. The success of this movement is based on the successful organization and unity of the farmers (Source: - Wikipedia-https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Indian_agriculture_acts).

In spite of these above-mentioned peasant movements, there are some other peasant movements that are led by the separated peasant organizations and left-wing political parties. For instance, under the leadership of Mahendra Singh Tikait, The All India Kisan Sabha works for the peasants' rights. Some other peasant unions are formed like- Sharad Joshi in Pune, Sharad Pawar in Bombay and Narayan Swami in Tamil Nadu have established their peasant unions, and they all are claimed that they are not associated with any political party (Doshi and Jain, 2010 (1999)).

Conclusion

Many sociologists and intellectuals examined various peasant movements in India. They want to understand the nature of these movements. Therefore they have analyzed different types of movements A.R. Desai (1979) says that the British colonial period was a period of unrest, agitations and struggle of peasants in rural areas. Dhanagre (1983) and other intellectuals have studied about the peasant movement during the colonial period of India. For instance – Kerala, s Malabar movement has been analyzed by Nagar C. Gopalan (1921). Tebhaga movement in Bengal and Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh have been examined by D.N. Dhanagare, 1976; 1974. The Naxalbari movement in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Bihar was studied by Biplab Dasgupta, 1974; Sankar Gosh, 1974 and Sumanta Banerjee, 1980.

Pre-independence peasant movement raised the issue of exploitation of small tenants, landless laborers, and poor cultivators. After independence, the conditions of the peasants slightly changed. Here it is observed the Pre-independence movements are the peasant movements which are basically focused on land-related problems, high revenue rates, Uneven land distribution, and exploitation of the poor small cultivators, tenants, landless laborers and agricultural workers. After independence, the natural, issues of these peasant agitations have been changed. Now the issues and problems of the peasant's unrest are not related to the exploitation and land distribution, but they are mainly associated with economic policies, because after independence many land reform programs and the green revolution started by the government. Therefore, the nature of peasant movements is also transformed and

now peasants are mobilized for the new issues accompanying economic policy, land reform, electricity, new hybrid seeds, irrigation, fertilizers, and subsidies. And therefore these movements are called the Farmers movement.

If we talk about the leadership of the pre-independence and Post-Independence peasant movements, then it is found that the pre-independence movements such as the Santhals movement, Champaran Movement, Kheda Movement, Bardoli Movement, Moplah movement were led by the local leaders and freedom fighters. They were not organized under any organizations or political parties; however post-independence peasant movements were organized under the proper leadership of political parties and farmers unions. Therefore now the scenario has been changed and the nature of issues, ideology and the organization of peasant movements also have been changed. Here it can be argued that the issues of pre-independent peasant movements and after-independence farmer movements have been found different due to the economic situations of the peasants.

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