



ELEMENTARY ASPECTS OF PEASANT INSURGENCY IN PRE-INDEPENDENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The British rule in India brought about many changes in the agrarian system in the country. The old agrarian system collapsed and under the new system, the ownership of land was conferred on the Zamindars who tried to exhort as much as they could from the cultivators of land. Very little was left to the peasants after paying to the Zamindar. The income of the peasants was so little that they were at the mercy of the moneylenders who charged exorbitant rate of interest on them and exploit them as much as they possibly could. The courts set up by the British government also favoured the moneylenders against the peasants. Therefore, lot of peasants were extremely miserable. The various peasant movements and uprisings during the 19th and 20th centuries were in the nature of a protest against the existing conditions under which their exploitation knew no limits.

Keywords: Peasants, Zamindars, Uprising, Revenue, Movements and Workers

INTRODUCTION

As a result of the Second World War A.D 1939-1945 the decade of 1940's witnessed a vastly different political scenario in India. The relationship, mainly conflictual, between the rulers and the ruled acquired new dimensions, and the range of political activities much wider as the possibility of independence began taking shape. The strike wave of 1940 created

problems not only for the government authorities, but also for capitalists and planters-European as well as Indian. Surpassing all records, it resulted in 1629 stoppages of work, affecting 1,941,948 workers and leading to the loss of 12,717,762 working days. Committed basically to their economic demands, the strikes nevertheless generated a defiant and self-confident mood all around, and created an environment for secular, collective action in most of the cities and towns. If the prospect for a popular liberation movement against colonialism seemed good in the urban centre, its possibility appeared to be even better in the rural sector.

I. Worli Peasant Uprising:

One of the earliest, and most intense, of the post 2nd world war peasant agitations was that of the Worlis in Thana district, Bombay. The worlis- the tribal or adivasi peasants- were in majority in the villages of Umbergaon, Palgar, and JawaharTaluks of Thana. Being poverty stricken, most of their lands had passed into the hands of moneylenders and landlords for their failure to re-pay loans(usually in grains) they had incurred at exorbitant rates (50-200%). It was in 1945 that the Worlis were first organised by Maharashtra KisanSabha, and led subsequently by outside leaders like Godavari Purlekarto refuse to give Veth-Bigar (labour without payment) and demanded a wage increase for work. The landlords retaliated by



terrorising them, The police even opened fire on 10 October 1945 on an assembly of the strikers in Talawada, killing 5 and injuring many. The sufferings, however, bolstered up the spirit of the Worlis rather than breaking up their morale. By the autumn of 1946 they struck forest work for months, and in the face of repressions of the local government they succeeded in forcing the Maharashtra Timber Merchants Association to accept a wage increase. Their success so enraged the local government that it hit vengefully back by externing all their leaders, arresting a large number of their activists and instituting criminal cases against many of them. The worst happened on 07 January 1947 when 05 more peasants died in the police firing in Palghar Taluk. The Worli movement gradually petered out thereafter, though many of the agitators, who fled to the jungles, tried heroically to regroup themselves.

II. Bakasht Peasants Agitation:

Compared to the struggle of the Worlis, the Bakashtpeasant's agitation of 1946-1947 in Bihar was more extensive, and certainly more desperate. The agitation had grown for a decade or so over the Bakasht lands which were managed, directly by the Zamindars. Apart from the Rayati lands which they settled with the occupant tenants, and the Zirati lands which they kept for themselves, and got cultivated by agricultural labourers, the Zamindars rented the Bakasht lands to the tenants-at-will at varying rates. Having no legal standing the Bakasht peasants were exposed to continuous ejections, firstly, because it was profitable to the Zamindars, and second because it was convenient for them to circumvent the tenancy (namely, the Tenancy Act of 1835 which gave the Bakasht tenants some occupancy rights if they had been in that position for 12 years at a stretch on regular

payment of rent). There was a sudden purt in ejections in the latter half of the 1930's when the authorities contemplated conferring some tenancy rights to the helpless Bakasht peasants. The peasants resisted under the banner of the Kisan Sabha, and fought furiously from 1937 to 1939 against the Zamindars' agents, the government and the police. Hostilities, however, were temporarily halted with the onset of the Second World War. The issue again came to the forefront in 1946 when the congress contested the elections in Bihar by promising to abolish the Zamindaris, the Zamindars thought that they should be able to retain at least their personal lands if they clear the Bakasht lands of all the tenants, and in turn, these into the Zirat. Naturally the Bakasht peasants vigorously resisted fresh attempts at evictions, and by the summer of 1946 the agitation was renewed simultaneously in Monghyr, Gaya and Shahabad districts. Armed with court orders (based on fictious records) and Lathials (stickmen) the Zamindars marched to oust tillers from the Bakasht lands. The tillers, under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha, refused to give up, offered Satyagraha and came into violent clashes. Soon the movement was extended to Darbhanga, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur and Bhagalpur districts also. Half-hearted government measures like the Bihar Bakasht Disputes Settlement Act of 1947 had little effect on the ensuing battle, which did not subside till the Congress ministry was forced to pass the Bihar Abolition of Zamindari Act, 1948.

III. Tebhaga Movement:

The Tebhaga movement, one of the most extensive, which swept 19 districts of Bengal and drew about 6 million peasants into it, both Hindus as well as Muslims. The tumult originated in the share cropping system that



prevailed in most parts of Bengal and the exploitative pattern that it sustained. In course of time in the Bengal a relatively new class of rural exploiters emerged between the landlords (Zamindars) and the tenants (rayats), known as the Jotedars. The Jotedars (owners of jotes or considerable chunks of land) accumulated big estates for which they paid rent in cash, and which they in their turn rented out to landless peasants on the basis of sharing the crops in equal halves, or 50% produce rent. In actual practice, the tillers' share of crops used to be much less than one-half as he initially to take advance from the Jotedar for procuring implements, seeds and cattle, and then pay it back at the time of sharing the crops. The sharecropper (Adhiar or Bhagchasi) had also to meet from his share a number of Jotedars' illegal exactions, including nazrana (presentation) and salami (charges of contract) and perform Begar (forced labour) in the Jotedar could, and invariably did, throw out one sharecropper for another on consideration for higher nazrana and salami. The rank of the sharecroppers swelled by the mid-1930s when many poor peasants lost their lands in the depressionally economic conditions, and were forced to take to sharecropping. Within a span of another 5 years, the sharecroppers were struck again by the inflationary war-time situation of the early 1940s, and then devastatingly by the great famine. They, therefore, had no hesitation in responding to the call of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha in September 1946, demanding three-fourth of the produce for the tillers instead of the one-half. The slogan "Tebhaga Chai"(we want three-fourth) rent the sky. The contest over the crops and grains naturally led to innumerable clashes, arrival of armed police on the troubled spots, and arrests, lathi-charges and firings. Entire North- Bengal became the hotbed of

agitation with certain parts of Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and Rangpur playing the lead roles. Mymensingh, Medinipur and 24-Parganas were also not lagging behind. Despite the communal carnage in Calcutta and Noakhali, the Muslim peasants took an active part and threw up militant leaders of the movement. Peasant women also joined in it in large number, and often came to its forefront. The movement, however, wilted in the face of a repressive government, the apathy of the congress and the Muslim League, the hostility of the entire Bengali middle classes, and, above all, the worsened communal situation. The renewed rioting in Calcutta towards the end of March 1947 and its repercussions in other parts, finally led to the suspension of the movement.

IV. Telengana Movement:

The outstanding developments in Telengana grew out of an agrarian situation which was dominated, and abused, by such landed magnates as the Jagirdars and Ijaradars on the one hand, and Deshmukhs and Patel-Patwaris on the other. The Jagirdars and jaradars were intermediaries like the Zamindars in specified lands (sarf-e-khas) , but they behaved in practice as their owners. The past revenue farmers (Deshmukhs) and tax-collectors (Patel-Patwaris), who had lost their jobs in the 1860s when the Nizam's Government started collecting dues from the cultivators directly, and were given substantial amount of land as compensation. By using their influence and knowledge as revenue officials, by manipulating survey records and dictating settlement operations, the Deshmukhs and Patel-Patwaris went on land-grabbing spree. The Deshmukhs and the Patel-Patwaris looting in land was so prolific that by 1940s they monopolised 60-70% land in certain districts,



and individually held at places 100,000 acres or more. It was against ceaseless land-grabbing, extraction of illegal levies and exaction if Vetli and Vettichakiri- which affected all categories of the rural populace alike—that the Telengana peasantry rose in revolt. Their discontent was given concrete expression by the Communists through the organisation of the Andhara MahaSabha, and with the help of a series of demonstrations against Vetli, Vettichakiri and illegal levies in the districts of Nalgonda, Warangaland Karimnagar. By 1945 the opposition to the landed magnates excesses turned into resistance against their expropriations—the evictions and forcible dispossession. When their legal objections and peaceful marches were foiled by the landlords' hired goons and the pro-landlord state police, the peasants of Telengana, particularly of Nalgonda,were forced to resort to arms. Although skirmishes of some sort were already taking place between the peasants and the landlords' men from the beginning of 1946, actual fighting really commenced on 04 July 1946 when the armed retainers of the Visunuri Deshmukh of Janagaon (Nalgonda) fired upon a protesting mob of peasants and killed DoddiKomaryya. Komaryya's martyrdom was a signal for widespread armed peasants' resistance, which the police could not cope with. The Nizam's Government declared the Communist Party and the Andhra Sabha unlawful in Hyderabad state, and undertook full-scale military operation against the rising peasantry. Following some bloodshed, and a lot of torture and destruction, the military seemed at the beginning of 1947 to have gained an upper-hand over the rebels. But the escalation of the rebellion in the middle of 1947,and the full-fledged peasant's guerrilla actions thereafter, wholly belied the impression. The Telengana peasants' armed struggle continued

unabated till 1951, involving at its height about 300 villages, over 16,000 square miles, and covering a population of nearly 03 million—a saga essentially of the post-independence Indian history.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the peasants and farmers' movements in colonial India reveals that although both forms of mobilisation and movements were prevalent, the first was mainly led by the mass organisations of the Left and other political parties and the second was being led by the well to do prosperous peasant organisations though it attract even the marginal and poor peasants in different regions. The movements of the rich, however, have acquired more prominence because of its militancy and prolonged agitations in recent years whereas the first one suffers from the lack of militancy. In fact the Left, that had led agrarian agitations till the late 1960s has not led any serious movement since the last thirty years. This is largely due to the fact that serious class struggle is not in the immediate agenda of the established Left parties. The non-parliamentary Left, however, is exceptional in this regard but it enjoys only a limited rural base. The increase in militancy of the rich farmers has been mainly because of their location in the social structure, which gives them the ability to sustain movements; more than the poor or the small peasants.

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