

Unit 3

Some of the most important peasant movements in India are as follows: 1. Champaran Satyagraha (1917) 2. Kheda Peasant Struggle 3. The Bardoli Movement in Gujarat 4. Moplah Rebellion in Malabar 5. Peasant Revolt in Telangana 6. Tebhaga Movement in Bengal.

The history of agrarian unrest can be traced back to the first quarter of 1920s. The rural sociologists have used various terms for peasant unrest. For some the unrest is called as a peasant struggle, for some it is called as a peasant uprising and some others call it as a peasant revolution. Few other sociologists call it simply a movement.

The change in the agrarian situation has resulted in a change in the situation of the peasants, which has given rise to many problems. The peasants have more demands. These situations have also changed the relations between peasants and agricultural laborers.

Champaran Satyagraha (1917):

The Champaran peasant movement was a part of the independence movement. After returning from South Africa, Gandhiji made the experiment of non-cooperation by leading the Champaran (Bihar) and Kheda (Gujarat) peasant struggles. The basic idea was to mobilize the peasants and make them attain their demands.

The peasant movement of Champaran was launched in 1917-1918. The main aim was to create awakening among the peasantry against the European planters. These planters exploited the peasants without providing them adequate remuneration for their labor.

The European planters resorted to all sorts of illegal and inhuman methods of indigo cultivation. The peasants were not only exploited by the European planters but also by the local zamindars. It was in such a situation that Gandhiji took up their cause and launched the movement.

Some of the important causes of Champaran peasant struggle are as follows:

- i. The land rent was increased enormously
- ii. The peasants were compelled by the European planters to grow indigo, which restricted their freedom of cultivation.

- iii. The peasants were forced to devote their best part of land to cultivate crops according to the wishes of the landlord.
- iv. The payment of wages was meager to the peasants, which was not sufficient to earn their livelihood.
- v. The peasants of Champaran were living under miserable conditions and were suffering from abject poverty.

The peasantry of Champaran suffered a lot in the hands of European planters, landlords, and government officials. Gandhiji, who returned from South Africa at this time, wanted to practise his non-cooperation and Satyagraha in India. The people of Champaran also accepted his leadership. Unfortunately, in the end, the movement turned violent due to the incident of Chauri Chaura. Gandhiji was very unhappy with this incident. However, the Champaran struggle is considered part of the national movement. The Champaran Satyagraha took place in April 1917.

Thus, the peasants of Champaran had to undergo severe suffering and misery. However, the movement has led to certain important outcomes. The Champaran Agrarian Act was assented by the Governor-General of India on 1 May 1918. 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.

Kheda Peasant Struggle:

The peasantry of Kheda consisted mainly of Patidars who were known for their skills in agriculture. The Patidars were well-educated. Kheda is situated in the central part of Gujarat and was quite fertile for the cultivation of tobacco and cotton crops.

Some of the important causes for the Kheda struggle were:

- i. Reassessment of Kheda land was done by the government based on the cultivation of crops. On the basis of such data, the government increased the tax, which was not acceptable to the peasants.
- ii. There was a severe famine in Kheda, which resulted in the failure of crops. The government did not accept the failure of crops but was insistent on the collection of land tax, not taking the conditions of peasants into consideration. The peasantry made their inquiries and emphasized that the act of demanding the land tax in such famine conditions was not justified on the part of the government.

The Gujarat Sabha, consisting the peasants, submitted petitions to the higher authorities of the province requesting the suspension of the revenue assessment for the year 1919. But the officials rejected, the demands of the peasants regarding the non payment of the taxes. When the government refused to consider the demands of the peasants, Gandhiji encouraged the peasants to resort to Satyagraha. Thus, the Kheda Satyagraha was started in March 1919 under the leadership of Gandhiji, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, N.M. Joshi, and several others. This was a similar kind of experiment to Champaran based on nonviolence. The government officials auctioned the peasants' cattle, confiscated their houses and took away their movable property due to the non-payment of land tax. The peasants were issued notices of fines and penalties by the government.

The movement was terminated owing to the acceptance of some of the prime demands of the peasantry.

The Bardoli Movement in Gujarat:

During the British Raj, in the state of Gujarat, Bardoli Satyagraha of 1925 was a major episode of civil disobedience in the Indian Independence movement. In the year 1925, the taluka of Bardoli suffered from heavy floods and severe famine which affected the crops very badly. This situation led the farmers to face great financial troubles.

At the same time, the Government of Bombay Presidency raised the tax rate by 30 per cent. Without taking into consideration the requests and petitions of the civic groups who explained about the calamities which occurred in the taluka, the Government refused to reduce the tax rate. The farmers were in a very pitiable state whereby they barely had anything enough to pay the tax.

The activists of Gujarat such as Narahari Parikh, Ravi Shankar Vyas, and Mohanlal Pandya had a talk with the village leaders and sought the help of the prominent Gujarati freedom fighter Vallabhbhai Patel. Patel had earlier helped the Gujarati farmers in the Kheda Peasant struggle. He also served as the municipal president of Ahmedabad. He was respected by the common people of the state of Gujarat.

The request made by Patel to reduce the taxes was ignored by the Governor of Bombay. He indeed reciprocated by announcing the dates of collection of the taxes. Patel then instructed the farmers of Bardoli to refuse to pay the taxes.

Patel along with Parikh, Vyas, and Pandya divided the Bardoli into several zones each with a leader and volunteers. Patel also took the help of some activists of Gujarat who were close to the government in order to know the movements of the government officials.

He instructed the farmers to be on non-violent path and not to respond to the aggressive actions of police and officials. He reassured them that the struggle would not come to an end until the cancellation of all the taxes for the whole year and return all the seized property and lands to their owners.

The Government decided to crush the revolt. In order to terrorize and seize the property of the villagers, bands of Pathans from northwest India were gathered. The Pathans and tax inspectors intruded into the houses of the farmers and took away their property which also included cattle. The government started to auction the houses and the lands of the farmers. But no one from Gujarat or from entire India came forward to buy them.

The volunteers who were appointed by Patel in every village used to keep watch on the officials who were coming to auction the property of the villagers. As soon as the officials were about to enter into the village, the volunteer would give a sign to the villagers who would then leave the village and hide in the jungles. When the officials entered the village they would find the entire village empty and would not be able to make out who owned a particular house.

The people and the members of the legislative councils of Bombay were very angry at the terrible treatment of the farmers. The Indian members also resigned from their offices and extended support to the protest of the farmers. Finally, an agreement took place by the initiation of a Parsi member of the Bombay government. According to it, the government agreed to restore the confiscated property and also cancel the revenue payment for the year and also cancelled the raise of 30 per cent until next year.

All the credit for the success of Bardoli movement was given to Patel and he in turn gave credit to the teachings of Gandhiji and to the determination of the farmers. Patel for the first time was given the title of "Sardar" (which means a "leader" or "chief" in Gujarati and in many other Indian languages) by Gandhiji and his fellow satyagrahis. It was only after the Bardoli Satyagraha that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel became one among India's important leaders.

Some of the causes of the Moplah peasant rebellion were as follows:

- i. The Moplah agitation was basically the struggle against the Hindu landlords who were called Jenmis. The relationship between the Moplahs and the Jenmis was quite unfriendly for a long time. The relationship was both economically and religiously antagonistic. The Hindu landlords began to suppress the Moplahs right from 1835.
- ii. There was a lot of insecurity in relation to land tenure. The Moplahs were often expelled from their land without prior notice.
- iii. The Jenmis fixed the renewal fee at an exorbitant rate, which was the immediate cause for Moplah agitation.

- iv. The Jenmis collected very high exactions from the Moplah tenants. Moreover, the Moplah tenants were discriminated against the Hindu tenants.

Another motivating factor, which caused the Moplah agitation, was the Khilafat movement. This movement took roots in Malabar also. The Moplahs actively took part in the Khilafat movement from which they got support for their peasant agitation. The British government was weakened as a result of First World War and it was not in a position to take military action at this moment. Taking advantage of this situation, the Moplahs increased their raids.

The final break to the Moplah rebellion came when a Khilafat leader and a highly reputed priest Ali Musaliar was arrested. The police opened fire on the unarmed crowd and many were killed. This has resulted in a clash in which the government offices were destroyed, records burnt, and the treasury looted. The rebellion soon spread to all the strongholds of the Moplahs. Mostly, the targets of the Moplah attacks were the unpopular Jenmis, police stations, treasuries, offices, and the British planters.

The Moplahs spared those Hindu landlords who maintained lenient relations with them. The Moplah rebels travelled several miles through the territory and attacked only the Hindu landlords. This gave a communal flavor to the peasant movement.

The most important aspect of the Moplah peasant struggle is the communalization of peasant agitation. Due to such communalization the Moplahs lost their sympathy among the Malabar people. Soon the rebellion was crushed by the Britishers and by December 1921 all resistance was stopped.

The main reason for the failure of the Moplah movement was that the movement took a communal flavor. The Moplahs took to violence as a method of agitation, which was another reason for the failure of the movement. The movement also did not motivate the neighborhood peasantry for the usage of arms against the peasantry. The only tragedy in this struggle was that the landlords were Hindus, which resulted in such communal riots.

Peasant Revolt in Telangana:

This movement was started against the Nizam of Hyderabad. The agrarian structure followed the feudal system at this time. During this time, two kinds of land tenure systems were prevalent, namely, Ryotwari and Jagirdari. Under the Ryotwari system the peasants owned patta in their name and were the proprietors and registered occupants of the land.

The actual cultivators were known as shikmidars. The lands of chieftains were known as Khalsa lands. The Deshmukhs and Deshpandes were the hereditary tax collectors for the Khalsa villages. The jagirdars collected the tax in the jagir villages. The jagirdars and Deshmukhs exercised immense power at the local level.

The main commercial crops of the Telangana region were groundnut, tobacco, and castor seed, which were cultivated by the landowning Brahmins. The rise of Reddis and other peasant proprietors strengthened the higher castes. The urban groups especially the Brahmins, Marwaris, Muslims, and Vaisyas showed interest in gaining and acquiring the lands. This resulted in sliding down of the status of the peasant proprietors to that of tenants at will sharecroppers and landless laborers.

Some of the main causes for the rise of the Telangana movement are as follows:

- i. The Jagirdars and the Deshmukhs were the intermediaries and were responsible for collecting taxes from the cultivators. The cultivators were oppressed and exploited by these intermediaries who were appointed by the Nizam. They collected high taxes, manipulated the records which resulted in the discontentment among the poor peasants.
- ii. The Jagirdars and Deshmukhs exploited the small peasants and landless laborers. The Deshmukhs and the Jagirdars were called as “Dora”, which means the master of the village. In course of time, this exploitation was legitimized and was known as vetti system. Under this system, the landlord or a Deshmukh could force a family to cultivate his land, assign domestic or official works which was obligatory on the part of the peasant s family and was carried on from generation to generation.
- iii. A system of slavery known as Bhagela was prevalent in the state of Nizams. Under this system, the tenants who have taken the loans from the landlords had to serve the landlord until the debt is repaid. Generally, the Bhagelas were expected to serve the landlords for generations as the landlords used to maintain records, which always showed that the Bhagelas are still indebted to them.
- iv. The castes (Reddis and Kammas) who traditionally worked as traders and moneylenders wanted to pull down the domination of the Brahmins as agriculturists in the state.
- v. The cultivation of commercial crops largely depended on the irrigation facilities, which were very meager in the Telangana region. Though the Nizam provided the irrigation facilities, most of these facilities were utilized by the big farmers only.
- vi. The frequency of land alienation increased between 1910 and 1940. The land possession among the non cultivating urban people such as the Brahmins, Marwaris, and Muslims has increased which resulted in reducing the small and tribal peasants into mere landless laborers.

The Telangana movement did not just erupt suddenly. There were many factors, which resulted in such insurrection. The condition of the peasants reached its saturation point by 1930. The agricultural economy also underwent many changes; it was transformed more into a market economy than a subsistent one. Such change did not improve the status of the tenants and sharecroppers.

The major sources of discontentment among the peasantry were the modes of production and exchange, which were mostly pro-capitalist and semi feudal. There was severe fall of wholesale prices after the Second World War, which provided an opportunity to the moneylenders to tighten their grip on the indebted small farmers and poor tenants.

The major course of events which led to the Telangana Struggle was as follows:

- i. The Communist Party of India initiated the Telangana Peasant struggle. The Communist Party started working in the Telangana region from 1936. Professor N.G. Ranga laid the regional level peasant organization that was affiliated to the All India Kisan Sabha, which was an organ of the CPI. The Communist activities increased in the districts of Hyderabad between 1944 and 1946. Therefore, a proper framework was all set to launch the peasant movement in Telangana.
- ii. Severe famine struck the Telangana region in the year 1946. All the crops failed and there was shortage of the availability of food and fodder. The prices of food and other commodities increased. The year 1946 proved to be a crisis time for both the tenants and the sharecroppers. This year provided all the opportunities for launching a peasant struggle.
- iii. The main objective of the Communist Party of India was to mobilize the peasantry. In order to achieve this objective, it undertook a campaign to propagate the demands of the poor peasants. The propaganda covered up to 300 to 400 villages. Though the peasants showed resistance to the government orders, the movement was going at a slow pace. However, only the Telangana local peasants participated in the Mobilization of the peasantry.
- iv. After the second conference which was held in March 1948, there was a revolutionary turn to the Telangana peasant struggle, and the peasants turned into an army and on a few occasions also fought guerilla wars.
- v. Apart from the peasant agitation, a parallel para-military voluntary force was organized by Kasim Rizvi. The members of this organization were called Razakars. This organization worked against the peasants.

Some of the consequences and outcomes of the Telangana peasant struggle are as follows:

- i. The Telangana peasant struggle had a participation of mixed class of peasantry. The major achievement of this peasant struggle was that it brought together the tenants, sharecroppers and landless laborers for the first time. The movement secured the strength of the poor peasants especially the tribal peasants who were the victims of bonded labor. However, the Kammas and Reddy castes who were rich class peasants gained a lot from the movement.
- ii. Another beneficiary from this movement was the Communist Party, which exercised its power over the whole state of Hyderabad for a long time. Though the party benefited from this struggle, there were certain losses also. The party got split into two groups due to differences in ideologies. While one group supported the struggle, the other group criticized it as a mere case of terrorism.
Thus, the Telangana Peasant struggle can be said to be a handiwork of the Communist Party and did not come directly from the peasants. Not even one agrarian class took the initiative to start the movement. However, in spite of the failure of the Telangana movement it must be agreed that it served as a great inspiration to the Communists of the entire country.

Tebhaga Movement in Bengal:

The word Tebhaga literally means three shares of harvests. It was a sharecropper's movement, which demanded two-thirds for themselves and one-third for the landlord. Earlier, the sharecroppers used to give fifty-fifty share of the produce on their tenancy. The crop sharing system at that time was known as barga, adhi, bhagi, etc., and the sharecroppers were called as bargadars or adhiars.

These sharecroppers seriously challenged the custom of sharing crops between the bargadar and the landlord in 1946-1947. During the harvest of 1946, the sharecroppers of a few north and northeastern districts of Bengal went to fields and cut down the crops and thrashed them on their own.

There were two reasons why this action led to the insurrection on the part of the sharecroppers. First, they demanded that the sharing of the produce into half was not justified. As the tenants made most of the labor and other investments and since the land owner's participation was very less in the production process the tenants believed that the latter should be getting only one-third of the crop share and not half of it.

Secondly, the tenants were required to store their grains at the granary of the landlord and had to share the straw and other by products of the grains on half-sharing basis. The tenants were not prepared to follow this rule. The tenants took the stand that the stock of the harvests would be stored at the tenants' compound and the landlord would not be getting "any" of the shares from the byproducts of the grains.

The Berigal Provincial Krishak Sabha organized the movement of Tebhaga. The sharecroppers under the leadership of the sabha mobilized themselves against the landlords. However, the leadership also came from among the peasants. The movement spread across the 19 districts of Bengal, but its intensity was more seriously felt in certain districts only. The landlords refused to accept the demands of the tenants and called the police. The police arrested the tenants and many of them were put behind the bars.

This action made the tenants more furious and they started a new slogan to abolish the whole Zamindari system. The slogan also indicated that the rate of the rents which was raised by the peasants of the Tebhaga movement should be reduced.

In few places of the Tebhaga movement the peasants declared their zones as Tebhaga areas and many Tebhaga committees were set up in order to govern the area locally. Under the pressure of Tebhaga activists most of the landlords had come to terms with the Tebhaga peasants and withdrew the cases filed against them.