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UNDERSTANDING PEASANTS' MOVEMENTS: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This chapter deals with analysing various historiographical and conceptual frame works to understand different aspects of peasant movements in India. It is also necessary here to address questions and issues such as: who is a peasant? What are the different criteria for classifying and locating Peasants and how is the category of peasant or farmer are problematized by different scholars belonging to different social disciplines? It critically evaluates the nature forms strategy and ideological orientation of the peasant movements as explored in the regional as well as pan Indian studies.

Keywords: Peasants, Landlord, Movements, Revolution.

Introduction

Overview

A large number of studies on peasant struggles in the colonial and post-colonial periods are now available. Historians and political activities, rather than sociologists and political scientists, have contributed a great deal in enriching our understanding. The findings of the studies clearly bring out that the peasants in the Indian sub-continent were and are not docile. The initiative for the struggles has not always come from outside and the peasants have not merely reflected and responded to outside forces. A number of studies point out that poor peasants and landless heroic struggles against the state, the zamindars and the rich peasants. After five decades of independence nearly 63 percent of the population still depends on agriculture for its livelihood, through industrial growth in significant. At present more than 60 percent of Indian populations are dependent on agriculture. Those who depend on agriculture are differentiated in terms of their relationship absentee landlords, supervisors, share-croppers, tenants and landless labors in local perance they are known as kisans or kheduts. Several, scholars have discussed the question of the caste system as well as the Hindu religion class struggle of the peasants against their exploiters.

Typology of peasant movements

Scholars are classified peasant movements differently on the basis of period of their occurrence and the various issue involved in India are generally classified on the basis of periods into colonial, colonial and post-colonial. The post-colonial period is classified by some scholars into pre-Naxalbari and post-naxalbari periods. The classification is based on a time spam, because it is believed that the agrarian structure has undergone changes during different periods and that the nature of peasant movements varies under different periods. The phase" agrarian struggles" is meant to convey that they involve not only peasants but others as well. A.R. Desai divides post- 1947 agrarian struggles into two catagories. The movements launched by the new newly emerged proprietary class comprised rich farmers, viable sections of the middle peasant proprietors and the streamlined landlords and the movements launched by various sections of the agrarian poor in which the agrarian proletariat have been acquiring control importance.

However, it must be noted that there was no unified agrarian structure throughout the country. Gujurat, Maharastra and Punjab have developed more intensive and widespread capitalist agriculture than Bihar, Orissa and Uttarpradesh. The classification also varies according to one's theoretical frame work, kathleen Gough (1974) classifies peasant revolts on the basis of their goals, ideology and methods of organisation. There were five types of peasant revolts.

- a) Restorative rebellions to drive out the British and restore ealier rullers and social relations.
- b) Religious movements for the liberation of a region or an ethnic group under a new form of government.
- c) Social banditry.
- d) Terrorist vengeance with the idea of meeting our collective justice.
- e) Mass insurrections for the redress of particular grievances.

Ranjit Guha examines peasant isurgency from the perspective of peasant consciousness for revolt. He delineates the underlying structural features of tribal consciousness of the peasants, namely negation, solidarity, transmission, territotiality etc to understand why and how the peasants' rebel.



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Characterization of peasant movements on the basis of issues: communal identity and peasant resistance

It is interesting to note the way some of the British officers and historians to characterize some of the revolts as communal riots on mere banditry. The Moplah rebellions of the 19th century and early 1920s in Kerala and the Wahabi and Faraidi uprisings of the 1930s in Bengal were interpreted primarily as Hindu Muslims communal conflicts, rather than as conflicts of economic interest between tenants and landlords, because the two groups happened to belong different religions.

According to Stephen dale the main motivation of the Mappilas was not economic grievances but the desire to secure paradise by dying in defense of the faith (wood 1992). Canard wood though, does not agree with dale and explains how religious networks and bonds contributed to the revolts in Malabar. The studies on Moplah uprisings by dhanagare (1983), Arnold (1979), panikkan (1979) and Namboodiripad (1943) Argued that the uprisings were mainly related and agrarian conflicts between tenants and landlords, though the formen happened to be Muslims and the latter Hindus. Parth chattergee looking at the peasants in Bengal says that they were united by religion. There was a consciousness of communal rights and communal solidarity among members. In such a community proprietor or possession.

For Partha, David Hardiman clarifies, community does not mean social group it is a form of social consciousness. It exists in a relationship of opposition to those, who are not of the community.

Many scholars argued by many that the peasants revolted against exploitation and oppression when their economic condition deteriorated. These changes may be classified under three heads

- a) Deterioration of their economic condition due to price rise, famine etc.
- b) Structural changes, which causes an increase in the exploitation of peasants consequently deteriorating their condition.
- c) Rising aspirations of peasants to improve their condition.

Agrarian unrest and price rise

According to Majid hayat siddiqi the rise in price of inferior food grains consumed by the tenants and agricultural labors, ways one of the factors underlying agrarian unrest in north india during 1918-22. The peasants of kheda, in gujurat, joined the satyagahain 1918 because of their deteriorating condition during world war-1. A series of revolts by agricultural labors and tenants by agricultural labors and tenants in the late 1960s and 1970s were also partly due to the rise in the prices of essential commodities.

Paul Greenough in his book on 1943 Bengal famine argues that because of reciprocity to help the later in times of distress and hardship. Through this relationship breaks down during a famine, the starving peasants do not revolt because of their docile character.

Issue of forced labor

Forced labor variously called as began, vethor vethi was a critical aspect of social relationship in rural India which was widely prevalent till independence. The agricultural labors and members of the lower castes were compelled to do all kinds of jobs including supplying water to the ruler's family, constructing builsings, roads, dams, carrying dead and wounded soldiers to their destination during and after war etc.

Occupancy rights

Another important factor often cited as reasons for peasant protest is the occupancy right of the tenants. The occupancy rights were conferred on the tenants by the Bengal rent act XI of 1859 was the central issue in the peasant uprising in pabna in 1873. Similarly, the rent act known as imperial act XIX of 1868 in Oudh, gave an inheritable right of occupancy to those tenants who had been able to show that they had formerly been proprietors, with 30 years preceding the annexation.

Issue of land distribution

Issue of land distribution became central theme in the peasant movement all over country after country's independence. Tenants' sharecroppers and agricultural labourers asserted their right over the land that they had cultivated or a long period. Distribution of equal land o all cultivators was one of the central issues in the Telengana movement in Andhrapradesh in the late 1940s. some struggles led by non-party people's organization demanded 'community' rights over land, forest and water. Their slogan in Madhyapradesh was jal, jungle, zameen. In Rajasthan the mazdoor kissan shakti sangathan formed in 1990 lawnched struggles of the rural poor fo minimum wages, land rights, employment and development progammes. It raises the issue of corruption in the implemt action of development programmes.



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Green Revolution and Capitalist Agriculture

However, since the Green Revolution accompanied with capitalist agriculture, penetration of market economy and globalization and the peasant struggles have undergone change. Farmers organizations have raised the slogan ‘Bharat against India’.

In the 1990s a number of struggles led by political parties and non-party organisations have continued to demand for the implementation of various land reforms such as land to the tillers, implementation of land ceiling acts and distribution of land to poor cultivators and land less labors. In the 1980s and thereafter the rich peasants in Gujarat have argued that the advices affected by the Narmada dam should sacrifice their land for national interests. This belief was reflected in the Telengana and Tebhaga movements launched by the communist party of India. In both those movements rich as well as poor peasants were mobilized to capture state power, though one class was more active than the other.

Another typology is given by Daniel thornier who divides the peasants of past colonial India into three classes on the basis of the kind of rights and kind of services, they receive or often, Malik, Kisan and mazdoor. The Maliks are sub-divided into two categories (a) big landlords, (b) rich land owners. The kisans are divided into two categories: (a) small landowners having holdings sufficient to support a family (b) substantial tenant the size of whose holding is usually above the sufficiency level. Another eminent scholar Gail Omvedt treats the contemporary farmers movements as new and non-class movements. According to her these movements are based in the middle-range areas of commodity production.

The middle peasant thesis: a critique

On the basis of his analysis regarding the role of various classes of the peasantry in the Chinese and Russian revolutions and the Tebhaga and Telengana movements in India led by the middle peasants, who are economically somewhat more independent, have greater potential than other peasant classes to play revolutionary role. He says that the poor peasants are initially the least militant class because of their dependence on landlords or rich peasants. Alavi says that the poor peasant is obliged to his master. The backwardness of the poor peasant, rooted as it is in an objective dependence, is only a relative and not an absolute condition.

Arvind Das argues that there was no significant difference between the middle peasant and the rich peasant in India. He asserts: to speak of the middle peasantry as revolutionary vanguards when one really means, the rich peasantry is to euphemistically give “respectability” otherwise incomplete and even exploitative traditional phase of agrarian struggle-Hamza Alavi examine the Tebhaga Movement was initially a movement of middle peasants. Dhanagane agrees with Alavi the most of the leaders of the kisan sabha in Bengal belonged to middle peasants. But they did not participate actively in the Tebhaga movement.

Kathleen Gough identifies the poor peasants and agricultural labors as having the potential for organizing revolutionary movements in India. Kapil kumar (1984) in his study on Oudh, shows that the poor peasants played a significant role in the movement against the zamindars. He observes that the poor peasantry of Oudh emerged as a potential revolutionary class. The studies on the Telengana and naxalite movements also inform us about the attempts at forming alliances between the industrial workers and agricultural labors.

The pattern of leadership

The leaders are responsible for translating objective causes into subjective consciousness and mobilizing peasants. Shanin (1972) argues that traditional peasant struggles can never assume a genuinely political character unless they are taken over by leaders belonging to social layers politically more advanced than the peasants themselves. Kapil kumar concludes from his study on the peasant revolt in Uttar Pradesh that, the peasant leadership on its own part, failed to articulate convincingly the demand for the abolition of feudalism. Partha Chatterjee also points out that the middle-class intelligentsia which had lost its ties of material interest with the land, provided the organized cadres of the new parties of mass mobilization.

Their intervention provided a radical edge to the anti-landlord demands of the mass of the tenancy, but it has continued to display an ambivalent attitude toward the “progressive” historical potentiality of the new contradiction.

Most of the studies on peasant struggles do not examine the nature, caste and class background, socialisation etc. of the peasant leaders. Though a few studies such as those of Pouchepadass (1974), Kapil kumar (1984), Hardiman (1981) and Shah (1974), give us some information about the leaders, they do not enable us to glean an idea of the pattern of leadership involved in these studies.



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Organizational structure, political parties and programme

By and large studies on the peasant upsurge ignore the organizational aspects of the movements, the organization high formulates programmes and takes decisions, brings about effective condition between the units etc.

From the early part of the twentieth century different political partiesw have been mobilizing the peasants and launching their struggles. In order to build a mass-based party, the congress started involving peasants in nationalist movements from the early 1920s. the congress mobilized the peasants and linked some localised peasant movements, such as Bandoli satagraha in 1928, the no-rent campaign with the boarder national movement for freedom.

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