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THE ROLE OF THE PEASANTRY IN NATIONAL INTEGRATION OF INDIA

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Abstract

Peasant movements and nationalism have historically played a major role in forming socio-political contexts worldwide. This essay explores the intersection of peasant movements and nationalist ideas, highlighting the ways in which agrarian cultures have influenced political transformation, fought against oppressive state structures and colonialism, rural dissatisfaction and contributed to nation building processes. The study also examines the complex relationship between popular agrarian movements and elite-centred nationalism, citing instances in which peasant movements either aligned with or diverged from the goals of mainstream nationalism. Targeting contemporary agrarian issues, the article also explores the development of peasant action in postcolonial India. This study highlights the ongoing importance of peasant movements in shaping India's national identity and policy-making frameworks by employing historical and analytical perspectives.

Keywords: Peasant Movements, Nationalism, Colonialism, Resistance, Freedom Struggle, Exploitation.

Introduction

Nationalism and peasant movements have played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of many nations, particularly in the context of anti-colonial struggles and agrarian reforms. The rise of nationalism often found strong support among the peasantry, who formed the backbone of many revolutionary and resistance movements. These movements emerged as a response to economic exploitation, feudal oppression, colonial policies, and socio-political injustices. In many countries, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, peasants were among the most affected by colonial land policies, high taxation, forced labour and economic hardship. Their grievances often led to organized resistance, which, over time, merged with nationalist struggles. Leaders and intellectuals recognized the power of the peasantry in mass mobilization, integrating their struggles into broader national liberation movements.¹ In India, for example, the nationalist movement against British rule saw significant participation from peasants in movements such as the Indigo Revolt, and similarly, in China, the Communist Revolution was deeply rooted in peasant mobilization, and in Latin America, agrarian movements led to major land reforms.

Nationalism is a political movement and philosophy that supports the interests, culture, and identity of a single nation or group of people who share traits such as language, history, customs, and geography. Nationalism is the idea that a country should have autonomy and sovereignty so that its citizens will be loyal to and proud of their national identity. Nationalism has dominated the creation of our modern world throughout its history. Because it opposed kings and foreign colonisation, it gained prominence in the 18th and 19th centuries and peaked during the French and American Revolutions. The idea that the kindred should rule themselves rather than foreign powers or colonial powers became a powerful force behind independence movements all across the world.

Definition and concept of nationalism Definition

The post-1947 period marked a major change in so far as the country won political independence and state power was no longer exercised by alien rulers who were interested in accentuating the forces of national disintegration. But the process of peasantry's integration into the nation had not been completed and therefore continued. The forces of national disintegration have made repeated appearance sometimes involving sections of the peasantry. Objectively too agriculture has been becoming more and more national. The dominant political leadership has been making efforts to mobilize the peasantry for national capitalist development which now performs the unifying role played earlier by anti-imperialism. The all-India



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parties, the electoral process, spread of education, the modern mass media, and to a lesser extent the all-India peasant organizations and the national army have been major instruments of national integration.²

Peasant Movements in India- Phases

(A) The task of national integration still had a few positive and unfinished aspects and has been, therefore, supported by most of the political parties and politically conscious Indians:

(i) India had to struggle constantly for economic independence and against the constant threat of neo-colonialism. National unity is a basic aspect of the defence and growth of political and economic independence.

(ii) National and economic reconstruction could occur only on a national plane. The notion of the development of Indian society still exercised, and exercises, a great pull over the minds of the people.

(iii) In view of the political, economic, administrative, and constitutional unification of India, political power could be used, as well as captured, in the end, only on a national plane.

(iv) More specifically, the interests of the rural masses in land reforms, higher wages, agricultural prices vis-a-vis industrial prices, allocation of state funds, and even social and cultural development-law of inheritance, social position of women, education, radio, films, etc.-could be best and successfully fought for only on a national scale.

(v) Socially divisive forces such as caste, communalism and linguism which affected national integration also impinged upon and disrupted the economic and political struggles, that is, the class struggles, of the different sections of the rural masses. These forces have retained a strong hold over the Indian people, including the rural masses. They still had to be overcome. For example, caste was and is still used by the dominant rural strata, earlier headed by the landlords and now mostly by the rich peasants, to keep the lower classes down and to unite around themselves the middle and small peasants of the same caste. These divisive forces have remained quite strong partially because of the fact that little was done before 1947 or after to spread modern ideas among the peasantry and to actively uproot the old obscurantist ideas and culture.³

(B) While the goal of national unity and national development was certainly positive in the historical situation, it could not be achieved in the old way. Gradually, after 1947, the negative aspects of the traditional pattern of peasantry's integration into the nation have been acquiring greater weight. The further unification of the nation could be carried out not under the slogans of a nation and a peasantry without classes, for there no longer existed a common, alien enemy, but only by identifying the new national but internal enemy of enemies within both the nation and the village. National integration had now to proceed through democracy, class struggle, far-reaching socio-economic transformation, and socialism.

(i) It is now widely recognized that benefits of agricultural development since 1951 have in the main gone to the rich and middle peasants. Apart from the class configuration, a major factor in this has been the notion of the peasantry forming a homogenous class, "an integrated rural society," and a single village of rural community. Thus the Indian planning process was initiated under the slogan of "community development" for the "rural sector."

Rural cooperatives and the Panchayati Raj have also been built on the same assumption of "class fusion." Moreover, the concept of village community was consciously put forward and advanced as an alternative to the notions of class cleavage and class struggle in the countryside. The Community Development Programme, Panchayati Raj, and rural cooperatives were to become instruments, of aggrandizement in the hands of the rich peasant and landlord-turned-farmer who emerged politically extremely powerful partly as a result of the adult franchise.

(ii) Above all the ideology of a single peasantry or kisans has prevented the fuller emergence of class struggle in the countryside.⁴



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This ideology increasingly became after 1947-as even before 1947an instrument of the rich peasant-small landlord domination over by the now distinctly emerging social strata or even classes of the small, impoverished peasants-the dwarf holders and the land-less agricultural labourers. The notion of the peasantry has hidden the fact, brought out in section II above, that the emerging and even dominating tendency in the Indian country side is the division of the peasantry into the rural bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, semi-proletarians, and proletarians. Of course, often and simultaneously the rural upper strata use the divisive ideologies of caste and communalism for the same purpose.

An important point of difference with the pre-independence period needs to be noted in this respect. During that period, the entire peasantry was objectively anti-imperialist, even though different peasant strata had different interests. But after 1947 the different agrarian classes and strata have hardly anything in common. The powerful position of the rich peasant in the country side, in the state legislatures and governments and even at the Centre, aided by the notion of peasantry, explains both the slow pace of agrarian reform and the failure of the left-wing parties to organize the agricultural labourers and dwarf holders except in Kerala and a few other small pockets.

This ideology of their being a peasantry-even if formally divided into rich, middle, and poor peasantry-formed the basis of much of left-wing peasant activity, including that of the CPI, CPM, and CP (ML) groups. This was the basis of their view, held in common whatever their other differences, that the chief political task in rural India (or even in India as a whole) was the making and completion of the anti-feudal revolution. Consequently, in an effort to organize peasants on an all-class basis (barring the semi-mythical feudal lord) the organization of the rural proletarians and semi-proletarians was neglected if not completely ignored.

One political and social consequence was the continuing hold of conservative political forces on the agricultural labourers. In contrast to the left, the peasant radicals have instinctively responded to the changes in rural class structure and advanced the slogan of equality in place of class struggle, change of social system, etc. The ruling political leadership has also increasingly adopted this objective of equality thus confining agrarian radicalism within the ambit of peasant outlook. The slogan of course makes a powerful appeal to the small and middle peasant, the low caste agricultural labourer, and even the rich peasant who sees it in the context of the marked difference between his style of life and that of the urban bourgeoisie or even middle classes.⁵

(iii) The notion of the peasantry as a class has also led the left to ignore the historically specific problems of the lower caste rural poor, whose caste has been and is being used to keep them down. "Today this aspect cannot be seen as a "feudal" survival. This is a specific historical form through which the rich peasants and small landlords keep down the agricultural workers and the dwarf-holding share-croppers and tenants-at-will. This neglect has enabled the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeois elements belonging to these lower castes to mobilize the rural poor behind their own politics and interests. Of course, as pointed out earlier, the higher castes also use caste to keep the small and middle peasants behind them. Struggle against the caste system is needed to break up both these artificial unities."⁷

(iv)The notions of the peasantry as part of a single nation and as a single class have also prevented the unity of the exploited rural poor with the exploited of the urban areas and the radical intelligentsia. Consequently, as before 1947, certain parties such as the Bhartiya Lok Dal (or BLD) in its various incarnations and the Akalis have been trying to raise the false urban-rural dichotomy.

Conclusion

In India, peasant movements have significantly influenced the socio-economic and political climate of the nation. ⁸These movements, which have their roots in the agricultural community's struggles, have made a substantial contribution to improvements in rural labour conditions, debt relief, tenancy rights, and land ownership. Peasant uprisings have shaped government policy, bolstered rural self-assertion, and advanced Indian agriculture generally from the colonial era to the post-independence age. Peasant movements arose during the colonial era in reaction to exploitative regimes like the British-imposed Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari land revenue settlements. Peasants' intense hatred of repressive landowners



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and colonial authorities was reflected in the Deccan Riots (1875), the Indigo Rebellion (1859–60), and other tribal uprisings.⁹ These campaigns brought attention to how exploitative British rule was and were essential in inspiring rural communities to resist as a group. Peasant battles were even more intense with the rise of the nationalist movement in the early 20th century. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and others, the Champaran Satyagraha (1917), Kheda Satyagraha (1918), and Bardoli Satyagraha (1928) illustrated the effectiveness of peaceful resistance in resolving the complaints of peasants. Indian farmers' voices were amplified by the establishment of groups like the Kisan Sabha, which called for improved land rights, equitable compensation, and defence against exploitation.¹⁰

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