

THE ESCALATION OF MOVEMENTS AND TURMOIL: PEASANT UPRISINGS IN INDIA 1910-1947 INFLUENCED BY THE KISAN SABHA

Preet Dhaliwal

University of Victoria, Canada. pkd@uvic.ca

Abstract

Whenever a protest or uprising occurred, it could be said to be due to the limit of tolerance having been exceeded. Whether it was in Vietnam, as outlined by James Scott in *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, not just focusing on the oppression of land, but also the constant shortage of money for the peasants. Not only were they in need of more land and modern agricultural practices, but they also required more money in general, to pay the state sanctioned fees for celebrations and payments to church; Or if it was in Mexico and Bolivia, as presented to us by Gerrit Huizer and Rodolfo Stavenhagen, "*Peasant Movements and Land Reform in Latin America: Mexico and Bolivia*"; here the people were in need of their own rule, and new land reform policies to be introduced. These situations have all been brought on by constant oppression by the officials of the land, or by the Colonial Officials. In the same matter, Colonial India began to slowly come to its senses in the late 19th and early 20th century, when the first uprising began to occur in Bihar in the 1890's, Punjab in the 1920's, and Bengal in the 1930's. Although there have been many uprisings in various parts of the country, I will be focusing on three distinct geographical areas. For this argument, these three areas were the pinnacle of importance. The Province of Punjab¹ was at first, able to live with the terms set out by the Colonial rule, there were rebellions and revolts, but nothing significant, until the end, when major uprisings occurred against British Colonial rule, and the introduction of the India- Pakistan partition Plan, the Mountbatten Plan².

Keywords: Peasants Protests, Colonial uprisings, Ideological movements.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India and Pakistan occurred on August 14th/15th 1947, the actual date that they were separated into countries. Bengal was modernized by the Colonialists, new roads, schools, and infrastructure. Then why would such turbulent uprisings occur in here in the east? Louis Mountbatten, 1st Earl of Burma, pushed this transfer of power to occur earlier than expected. One of the main points at the press conference held June 3rd, 1947, was that Bengal would not be granted separate independence, but would in-turn be divided into west Bengal in India, and East Bengal for Pakistan, which would later become Bangladesh. Bihar and Assam made-up one province, before the uprisings and were separated to suppress any further movements; but once they became two separate provinces, the uprising occurred on Bihar.

2. PEASANT MOVEMENTS

2.1 Bihar

One of the major peasant movements of Colonial India, the peasant movement that helped spread the will and word to rise up against the colonial officials, began in Bihar under the Provincial Kisan Sabha Movement³. This

¹ I should clarify that at the Punjab that is spoken of in this essay is the Punjab as a whole, not the one that is now partitioned in Pakistan and India.

² Moraes, F.R. *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*. New York: Macmillan, 1956. Pg181. & Chaudari, Nirad. *Thy hand, Great Anarch!: India 1921-1952*. London: Chatto&Windus(1987)pg. 819

³ For the remainder of the essay I will use the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha movement's acronym BPKS.

movement is the well documented uprising of the Kisan Sabha movement which started under Swami Sahajanand Saraswati in 1929. The Kisan Sabha movement, as it has been known since its formation⁴ known, began as the National Cooperation Movement in the early 1920s under Swami Sahajanand Saraswati⁵. The Kisan Sabha movement gradually presumed itself the leadership of the peasantry, not just in Bihar as in the early 1920s, but also in the other states. This movement was seeing an increase in support from other territories of Colonial India as well. Seeing that this movement was weakening the struggle for freedom, Saraswati⁶ disbanded the movement, to prevent any backlash from the colonial officials.⁷ The Congress Socialist Party, founded in 1934, was, as the name suggests, a communist party that gave support to the peasant movements in colonial India.

Near the end of 1927, Saraswati formed a new Kisan Movement in Bihar, known as the BPKS, due to his natural leadership and role as an authoritarian.⁸ This new Congress gave the movement the support it needed to overthrow the dictatorship rulings of the *zamindars* in the rural areas of Bihar.⁹ The BPKS, wanted to eliminate the class of *zamindars*, have all the peasants rule themselves, and not be held under anyone's control any longer. In 1936¹⁰, after some initial hesitation, Saraswati was convinced to preside over the first session of the newly formed all Indian Kisan congress. This was designed to include all of the Kisan Sabha movement groups in Colonial India, be a completely national movement led by the congress. Formed as an umbrella Congress, it was supported by The Kisan Sabha in Bihar "with all its force and demand"¹¹. Support from the Sabha led the Congress to defeat some "notorious landlords"¹² and events such as these led many to believe that the Congress was going to be worthwhile, as it had in the early months of 1937, been successful, and non-violent, as Mahatma Gandhi had invited India to be. But as the years went on, this congress that was meant to help peasants be relieved of the *zamindars*, were in all essence the ones who would come to suppress the peasants.

The Congress was taken over through Communist manipulation, and began to frame a Marxist society.¹³ The Congress did not fail to understand the implications of the attacks. They accused the Kisan Sabha as being prone to violence, and Gandhi went so far as to say that the violent nature of this group was leading them on the path towards fascism.¹⁴ In a swift motion, the Congress who had previously acted willingly, to change the dominance of the Ministry towards peasants, changed their nature to an unwilling party that did not want to give the peasants any chance to better themselves. This newly acquired power that was supported by the Kisan Sabha in Bihar, would Implement the "Restoration of *Bakasht* Land Act" in 1938. This act was land of the *zamindars khas* land enclosed by them due to the arrears of rent by the tenants.¹⁵ Tenants, who also fell behind on their payments, could have been brought to court, and here either their tenancy rights would have been revoked or they would have been forced to auction off their belongings to pay their *zamindars* the rent for the

⁴ New meaning in 1929, when the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha was formed, and also now, as in our day and time.

⁵ Sharma, Kaushal Kishore, Prasad Prabhakar Singh and Ranjan Kumar. *Peasant Struggles in Bihar, 1831-1992*. Patna: Centre for Peasant Studies in association with Janaki Prakashan, 1994. Pg. 109

⁶ He is referred to as Swami Sahajanand in *Peasant struggles in Bihar*, but I will refer to him as Saraswati, to account for his full name being used in other articles and books.

⁷ Ibid. pg. 111

⁸ Sharma, Kaushal Kishore, Prasad Prabhakar Singh and Ranjan Kumar. *Peasant Struggles in Bihar, 1831-1992*. Patna: Centre for Peasant Studies in association with Janaki Prakashan, 1994. Pg. 111

⁹ Bandyopādhyāya, Śekhara. *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman (2004). pg. 523

¹⁰ Sharma, Kaushal Kishore, Prasad Prabhakar Singh and Ranjan Kumar. *Peasant Struggles in Bihar, 1831-1992*. Patna: Centre for Peasant Studies in association with Janaki Prakashan, 1994. Pg 116

¹¹ Ibid pg. 117

¹² Ibid pg. 117

¹³ Ibid pg. 119

¹⁴ Ibid pg. 119

¹⁵ However they again lent it to the tenants as *bataidars*(Share Croppers) in the condition that they would pay a certain portion of produce as rent to them¹⁵ Ibid pg. 117

land¹⁶. This *Bakasht* land was the new cause of trouble in peasant struggles that led the *zamindars* to falsely acquire land that was theirs, but had been paid for by the tenant.

The *Bataidars* in the Dhamdaha region of Bihar wanted to establish themselves as full-fledged tenants on the lands they cultivated after the Restoration movement; this struggle began in 1938, and continued with complete force and support until 1942, when the Quit India movement began on August 7th¹⁷. The All India Congress Committee met in Bombay and sanctioned the 'Quit India' resolution. Mahatma Gandhi called an ultimatum decision. The next day, on August 9th, Gandhi, members of the Congress Working Committee and other Congress leaders were arrested by the British Government under the Defense of India rules. The Working Committee, the All India Congress Committee and the four Provincial Congress Committees were declared unlawful associations under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908. The assembly of public meetings was prohibited under rule 56 of the Defense of India Rules. The arrest of Gandhi and the Congress leaders led to mass demonstrations throughout India. Thousands were killed and injured in the wake of the 'Quit India' movement; peasant uprisings were called in many places. The British swiftly suppressed many of these demonstrations by mass detentions; more than 100,000 people were imprisoned.

If any hope was left, it was taken away by the Congress because they said that the *Bakasht* land would not be given away because there were no proper documents stating whether or not the land had been restored by any previous tenants, or new tenants. After convincing Saraswati to join their communist cause and new reforms, the Congress now led towards the decline of the Kisan Sabha in Bihar. So how did the Congress decline in influence for the Peasantry? The Congress's acquisition of Saraswati, the restoration of the *Bakasht* land act, and the unprecedented violence in the Congress led the peasants to fight for themselves in Bihar, fighting for freedom, land and reduction of rent from the *zamindars*.

2.2 Bengal

The peasants would sporadically rise up against people who were in the upper caste, by suppressing their own people. In Bengal, the caste system was present in all walks of life; the lower castes that I will focus on are the Namasudras and the Brahmin, who lived in the constraints of their castes beliefs. The Namasudras peasants¹⁸ were attempting to bring an end to the poverty, illiteracy, and social disabilities that had been brought upon them by the colonial officials. The term Namasudras did not exist in Bengal before pre-colonial years. It is thought to be a contraction of the Sanskrit word, Namas; below or beneath, and Sudras, the upper caste. The Namasudras movement began in 1872. With the first organised social protest¹⁹ their degraded social status hereby signified the possible stimulation of suppression in the lower castes. The Brahmins doctrine instructed spiritual life of their disciples which their preceptors, Harichand and Guruchand had discarded. The followers believed that they needed both the gospels of *bhakti*²⁰ and *karma* to assert one selves completely into the social norm. A prolonged struggle began in 1937, to win their rights to put on shoes in the presence of caste Hindus. Twelve months of protests, with eruptions of violence at different periods over this time frame. The peasants in the village of Simulghar wanted to be able to be of equal status to the rest of the Hindus living in the same village.

In 1938 the Hindu Mission was actively trying to mobilise the untouchables and the lower castes, to increase the use of their muscle power²¹. Caste identity for the Namasudras peasants coexisted with the broader national, class, and religious identities.²² However, their positive response to the organizational drive of the Kisan Sabha and participation in the Tebhaga movement, indicated that they could potentially integrate into society and

¹⁶ Henningham, Stephan. *Peasant movements in Colonial India: North Bihar 1917-1942*. Canberra: ANU. 1982 (pg. 142)

¹⁷ (Information from: 1. My grandfather, Bharpur Singh Grewal, Rt. English Professor, Moga College, Punjab, India 2. Chaudari, Nirad. *Thy hand, Great Anarch!: India 1921-1952*. London: Chatto & Windus 1987(pg. 434-437)

¹⁸ Bandyopādhyāya, Śekhara. *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*. Richmond: Curzon 1997. Pg. 95

¹⁹ Ibid pg. 9

²⁰ *Bhakti*; active involvement of a devotee in worship of the divine.

²¹ Since the early 1930's they had been showing clear awareness that in order to thwart what is conceived to be the Muslim threat it was essential to mobilise the Namasudras and other lower castes. Ibid pg. 214

²² Ibid pg. 236

diminish the peasant boundaries that had previously denied them of being exposed to various socio-political realities, being influenced by ideologies, and different organization methods.

The Tebhaga movement was the sharecropper movement, two thirds of the produce for the sharecroppers, and one third for the landlords. Pre-dominantly organized by the Kisan Sabha in 1946, the Tebhaga movement was put together by the communist comrades of the party, before the partition of Bengal into East and West. This movement was one of the few that was deemed a success, in the sense that it the sharecropping peasants got this right granted willingly by the landlords, and had influenced the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950²³. In *Thy Hand Great Anarch!* Nirad Chaudari quotes himself as he gives his opinions on the movement;

“In order to feel the full impact of the malevolence of the backward, you have to live among them. You have to see how you are hated by these for a little extra efficiency, extra power of thinking, extra ability to make life worth living; in short, for a little extra quality on life. [...] the same ‘rancour of the futureless’ with its destructive fury has appeared among the British people.”²⁴

The violent outbursts, fleeing of landlords, and portions of the land being detained by Kisan Sabha, meant that the Hindus in Bengal developed an even more intense unwillingness to accept a Muslim-majority under a united Bengal. A section of the Congress in Bengal along with a majority of prominent Hindus demanded the partition of Bengal into a Hindu and Muslim state, regardless of the partition of India²⁵. Riots in 1946, led people to assume that the partition of Bengal was going to happen sooner rather than later. Where the mornings only had minor confrontations noted, as the day went on, the escalation of confrontations, despite Muslims being instructed “to conduct themselves peacefully and in a disciplined matter.”²⁶ With everyone uniting as Hindu’s in Bengal, and not as members as different castes, the situation reinforced the “growing sense of Hindu identity which the communally charged general political atmosphere of the province during the time definitely contributed to.”²⁷

2.3 Punjab

The case of Punjab is full of blood and violence. In Punjab, the moneylender, or *bania*²⁸ was the most important person in society. Land in India was always ancestral; it would be passed down from father to son, and grandson, if there was no direct male succession, but it would almost always remain in family. Gold jewellery was also predominantly given to a bride on her wedding day and would be loaned, or sold at auction if the need for money arose. The *bania* would allow the families to stop the process of selling jewellery or land when the need for money arose. The moneylenders were either Hindu or Sikh, and the peasantry in Punjab was predominantly

²³ A law relating to tenancies to be held under the state and other matters connected therewith. Prior to its enactment, agrarian law of Bengal mainly consisted of the Bengal permanent settlement regulations of 1793 and the Bengal tenancy act 1885. The Permanent Settlement regulations made *zamindars* owners of their land subject to payment of a fixed amount of their land revenue to the government and they were entitled to collect rent from their subordinate tenants, who were again entitled to create subordinate interests. Chakrabarty, Bidyut. *The partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947*. London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon2004 pg. 224-232

²⁴ Chaudari, Nirad. *Thy hand, Great Anarch! : India 1921-1952*. London: Chatto&Windus(1987)pg. 780

²⁵ Gordon, Leonard. *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940*. New York; London: Columbia University Press. (1974) Pg. 291

²⁶ Chakrabarty, Bidyut. *The partition of Bengal and Assam,, 1932-1947*. London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon2004 pg. 98

²⁷ Ibid pg. 113

²⁸ Ahmed, Ishtiaq. *The Punjab bloodied, partitioned and cleansed*. New Delhi: Rupa Co. 2011 pg. 34

Sikh or Muslim, other than in a concentrated area in eastern Punjab.²⁹ This would disenchant the Muslims, because they would be forced to borrow, (or loan to) their money from a Hindu or a Sikh. Nonetheless, in 1901 British colonial figures introduced the Punjabi Alienation of Land Act. This would entail that no moneylender could acquire the land of a peasant if the peasant was unable to pay back the money in time. Unlike in Bihar, where the tenants could be brought to court under the Tenancy Land act, and be forced to give up their tenant rights, in Punjab, the politicians attempted this, but moneylenders would still get their foremen to acquire control over land.³⁰

The acts of 1919 in Amritsar left a bitter taste against the British Colonial Officials. General Dyer's accounts are given³¹. George MacMunn states that Dyer arrived during the night of the 11th of April, 1919 in Amritsar around 3:00pm. Between noon and 3:00pm the following day, the demonstrations were made by marching troops through the city, to emphasize the size and importance of the military in Amritsar at that time. Dyer got news there was going to be a meeting held at *Jallianwallah Bagh*; surrounded by 3 brick walls, the only way to enter was a narrow road. The walls are high, but there is one well which has a direct water passage to the waters of the Golden Temple. Outside the Golden Temple in Amritsar, at approximately 4:30 pm, he ordered 150 rifles to be carried into the *Bagh*. After 1650 rounds were fired, an estimate of 200-300 people were killed, and countless others injured. This single event, led to the downfall of British support in India and the up rise of Ghadr³². These men thought it was right to destroy the homes of the British and to leave the women and children injured, to lie on the streets. This was the only area where the riots and peasant movements were continuously, and strictly against the British Colonial officials. Governors were warned of how bloody the area was, and those who could evade this region after partition, under any and every circumstance would.³³ In mid-August 1947, Mountbatten set up the Punjab Boundary force, to help the locals comply with the new demands of the partition plan³⁴. Movements of Hindus east and Muslims west led to much unrest and attacks on both sides; for the first weeks though, it seemed as if the partition would be able to happen in peace. The bulk of the population stayed where they were, but the British officials still tried to make everyone move to their new homelands³⁵.

The accounts given above of the Kisan Sabha movement group are outlined in two different regions. Different aspects of movements occurred in their own regions, within their limits and boundaries, with ethnicities fighting for their right to live freely, caste systems to be diminished, and to be able to wear shoes in front of other people as the same caste as yourself. The movements in Bihar, Bengal and Assam, and Punjab, has outlined the main theme in *Moral Economy of the Peasant*; every person that lives has a tipping point, a point of where you either drown in your situation or do something to take a stand against what is happening. In these cases, what occurred here in these 3 regions, has also occurred throughout colonial India in the years approaching partition. Once the limit of tolerance has been exceeded, there is no stopping as individual from fighting for his rights, his freedom, his rights, and a stop to oppression.

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²⁹ This area would later become Pakistan, hence the violence that ensued after partition in 1947.

³⁰ Ibid pg. 74

³¹ MacMunn, George. *Turmoil and Tragedy in India 1914 and after*. London: Jarrolds. 1935. Pg. 171-174

³² Ibid pg. 174. Means a will to fight for ones rights against oppression and suppression. In Urdu it means to revolt or rebel against.

³³ Ibid pg. 250

³⁴ Ibid pg. 250

³⁵ My grandmother went through the partition. She grew up in Lahore, and I remember hearing her stories of how she made it across to India. Her family was told to hide underneath the floor boards in her neighbor's home. After hiding for weeks, they were given the opportunity to travel to Amritsar by train in 1948. But the travel to the train station would cost my Great aunt and uncle's lives, while they were running through the city. Once at the train station, the troubles did not stop; Muslim revolutionaries would only allow 4 of the boxes to leave Lahore for Amritsar. The other 10 were to be slaughtered.

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