Module 6  Social Protests and Social Movements

Lecture 33
Social Movements in India – Part II

The Congress, Communist and Peasant Movements in Colonial India

The peasants had been the worst sufferers of the British Raj in colonial India. Even before the Congress decided to mobilise the peasants, the latter had already developed their organisations and were in fact protesting against the local Zamindars who, to them, were the main enemies. Thus there has been much peasant unrest and occasional uprisings in the pre-nationalist era. The two most important uprisings in the pre-nationalist period were the movement of the indigo planters of 1860 and the Moplah uprising of 1921 in Malabar. In the initial years the Congress ignored the urgency of improving the agrarian situation. It was only in the 1920s that Gandhi sought to convert the Congress organisation into a mass organisation and hence thought of bringing the peasants into the fold of the Congress. Two important developments were in fact responsible for the establishment of contact between the peasants and the Congress in the late 1920s. The first was the constant banging of the Congress doors by the peasants on the one hand and second was the need by the Congress to enlist peasant support for the national movement. Despite the fact that the Congress took a late initiative in reaching the peasants in the countryside, it became a strong force to reckon with very soon. Since the Congress wanted to become a political party of all the classes in the Indian society, it attracted even the landed rich to enter the organisation and once the latter entered, it is the latter who in fact dominated the organization and decided the rural strategies of the party and hence the Congress could not pursue any radical peasant agitation. The Congress was more interested in enlisting the support of the bulk of the peasants for the purpose of national agitation but never went for and encouraged class war with the upper strata in rural society. In a nutshell, it can be said that because of Gandhi’s and Congress’ emphasis on class harmony and because of its primary emphasis on sociocultural revival of the rural community that the Congress could never launch serious agitations in the countryside, though it was able to draw the support of a part of the rural community during its anti-imperialist agitations. Apart from the Congress, the Communists were the other major force that mobilised the peasants. Though the CPI was formed in 1920, (to some in 1925), its serious engagement with the peasantry started with the formation of the All India Kisan Congress later renamed as the Kisan Sabha and the primary purpose of the Sabha was to mobilise the peasants. It is after this pursuing broadly a tactics of ‘United Front’ in cooperation with the national movement the CPI increased its membership in the peasant front and set the stage for the most revolutionary struggles in the countryside, though most of the struggles, as we shall see later, were local in their spread. The tactics that the Communists adopted were to work at the grass root level and this tactics paid them rich dividends. In the countryside they worked through the Kisan Sabhas. In the beginning it was not a class based organisation, it represented even the well to do peasants, though, in this period, the Communists ensured that the Kisan Sabha would take up at least some of the issues of the rural poor. The rural rich were well represented in the Sabha because of the Congress Socialists’ emphasis on a multi-class organisation. It was only in the years 1941-43 that the AIKS passed into the hands of
the Communists and it Swami Shajanand who tried to build the Kisan Sabha as an organisation of the rural poor and this alienated the rich and the middle peasants. The control of the CPI over the Kisan Sabha was complete by the year 1944-45. The membership of the Kisan Sabha kept on increasing and by 1944 it increased to 553,427 (Dhanagare, 1980). After completely capturing it the CPI and the Kisan Sabha could in fact make the Sabha an organization of the poor peasants. It is with this base that it could, in the later years, launch and lead agrarian struggles, in the pre-independence period.

**The Telangana Peasant Uprising**

The Telangana peasant movement started in mid-1946 and continued till the October of 1951.

The movement engulfed the whole of the Telangana region of the Hyderabad state and the adjoining districts of the Andhra delta. It has been regarded as the most revolutionary of all the movements in India, in its character and political objectives. The CPI through its peasant wing, the Kisan Sabha, launched the movement. It appears that the CPI could launch the movement after it eschewed the strategy of ‘United Front’ and adopted a strategy of initiating insurrectionary struggles. In the whole of Hyderabad state to which the Telangana region belonged, there were two main types of land tenure. The first was the Khalsa or Diwani tenure, which was similar to the raiyatwari system that is the peasant-proprietary system. Under this system the landowners were not called actual owners but were called pattadars (registered occupants) and under this system lay around 60 percent of the land of Hyderabad. The actual occupants were the shikmidars, who had full rights of occupancy but were not registered. When the pressure on land grew the shikmidars also leased out their land to the tenants but the later were not the real owners, neither had they any protection against eviction. The second kind of tenure, which existed, was under the jagirdari system. Sarf-e-khas was the special land assigned to the Nizam himself. These were the crown lands and the Nizam’s noblemen, who were granted land in return of military services during emergency administered these lands. The peasants, under the jagirdari system, were the most oppressed.

In the whole of Hyderabad state, the peasantry in the Telangana region suffered the most oppressive system of exploitation. The movement led by the Communists began in Nalgonda district in 1946 and then spread to the neighbouring Warangal and Bidar districts and finally engulfed the whole of the Telangana region. The objective of the movement, from the very beginning, was a broad one and was concerned with the whole of the peasantry against illegal and excessive extraction by the rural feudal aristocracy. The most powerful demand was that all peasant debt should be written off.

The second stage of the movement began when in order to counter the oppression let loose by the aristocracy the peasantry launched the armed struggle. Thus, with this, the movement entered its revolutionary phase. It entered the revolutionary phase when over 2,000 villages set up their own ‘Peoples Committees’; these ‘Committees’ took over land, maintained their own army and own administration (Mehta, 1979). This rule of the peasants in a large part of the region and the armed resistance continued until 1950 and was finally crushed by the Indian army. It was ultimately called off in 1951. It was an agrarian struggle in which many peasants were killed by the army of the landed gentry and later by the Indian army after the takeover of the Hyderabad state by the Indian army. The demands raised were broad ones and the nature of
the struggle itself makes this movement one of the most revolutionary agrarian struggles of India unmatched so far in the Indian history.

**The Naxalbari Peasant Uprising**

The Naxalbari peasant uprising that occurred in the northern part of West Bengal is the last of the major uprisings India has witnessed. It took place in post-colonial India and was led by a faction of the CPI (M). The two most prominent leaders of the CPI (M) who disagreed with the official position of the party and led the movement were Kanu Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar. It erupted in the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in West Bengal, in a place called Naxalbari falling within the subdivision of Siliguri in Darjeeling district. It is in Naxalbari, Kharibari and Phansidewa, the three police station areas where the movement took a militant turn. The region is different from that of the whole of West Bengal because within it, there exists numerous tea plantations and a large proportion of tribal population. Tea plantations have developed along the lines of a plantation economy whereas the tribal population in this region include the Santhals, Rajbansis, Oraons, Mundas and a small number of Terrai Gurkhas. It is because of the combination of these two factors that the whole region has a history of land disputes in West Bengal. The landless peasants in this region had since long claimed that their land were being encroached by the tea estates and also by the rich peasants. Thus it is because of this peculiarity, the Naxalbari area had witnessed a number of peasant disputes led mainly by an indigenous peasant leadership and not by the outside middle class leaders. The agrarian revolt arose in the month of April 1967 after the formation of the new government in West Bengal in which the CPI (M) was a major partner. The movement continued till June in full swing in the whole Siliguri subdivision. Kanu Sanyal, the leader of the movement specified ten great tasks, which included *inter alia*, land which was not owned and tilled by peasant themselves was to be redistributed, peasants were to burn all legal deeds and documents, unequal agreements between the moneylenders and the peasants were to be declared null and void, hoarded rice were to be confiscated by the peasants and distributed among the peasants, all jotedars to be tried and sentenced to death etc. He urged the peasants to arm themselves with traditional weapons.

The high point of the movement was reached in the month of May. Forcible occupations by the peasants took place and according to government sources there were around 60 cases of forcible occupations, looting of rice and paddy and intimidation and assaults. The leaders of the movement claimed that around 90 percent of the peasants in the Siliguri subdivision supported the movement. The movement came to a halt, when, under central government pressure, the West Bengal police entered the region and swept the area. Cases of killing of landlords were carried on later as a part of the annihilation strategy. The movement spread to other areas of the state and elsewhere in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh later in the form of the Naxalite movement. Thus, the Naxalbari peasant uprising had far reaching consequences in the Independent India.
The Movements of the Rural Rich: Farmers’ Movements in Contemporary India

In this part of the section, we shall focus on two of the prominent movements of the rural rich, one led by the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in western Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and the Shetkari Sangathan (SS) which represents primarily the interests of the sugarcane, cotton, tobacco, grape and onion growers in south-west Maharashtra though it also has its base in Gujarat. There are other organisations and movements in the country as well like the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha movement led by Nanjundaswamy in Karnataka and Vivasayigal Sangam movement led by Narayanswamy Naidu in Tamil Nadu, the Khedut movement in south of Gujarat; but in recent years, the BKU movement led by Mahendra Singh Tikait and the movement by the SS led by Sharad Joshi has drawn more national attention because of their militancy and spread. We would begin with the BKU and then come to a discussion of the SS and end up with a comparison of the two movements. Before we look at the BKU, let us look at the nature of the rural economy in the west Uttar Pradesh and in the states of Punjab and Haryana that forms the backbone of the movement.

This region is highly prosperous because of the massive capitalist investment in agriculture. Apart from food grains, sugarcane is the principal crop that is produced. A section of the peasantry having land in these states has been transformed into a class of capitalist farmers who produce much more than what their family consumes and hence the surplus is sold in the market. They own capital assets like tractors, thrashers, pump sets etc. and hire agricultural labourers for the purpose of cultivation since their family labour is not sufficient. The BKU was originally formed on August 13, 1978 in Haryana under the guidance of Charan Singh, the undisputed peasant leader of North India. The death of Charan Singh in 1987 created a political vacuum among the peasants in North India and this was filled up by Mahendra Singh Tikait. After the death of Charan Singh, Tikait attempted to convert the organisation into a militant one after the Shamli agitation in April, 1987 in Muzzafarnagar district. In this agitation the BKU raised demands against rise in power tariff and erratic supply of electricity that was so crucial for the farmers of western Uttar Pradesh. The concession which the BKU was able to secure (a reduction in the power tariff by one sixth) increased the prestige of the BKU and its leader, Mahendra Singh Tikait and soon after that a large number of rich peasants from several districts joined the organisation. After the Shamli agitation, two more agitations solidified the support base of the BKU and brought the BKU into national prominence. The two agitations were the Dharna in Meerut and Delhi in 1988. The agitations were long and militant in nature and received widespread support. The Meerut dharna continued for 25 days and was impressive and peaceful. The main demands of the movements were similar to the demands of the other agitations of the prosperous farmers in the country. The demands centred around, electricity, remunerative prices, low import costs and the inclusion of BKU representatives on various committees appointed by the government for fixation of prices. Since then the BKU has successfully spearheaded the farmers’ movement in north India under the leadership of Mahendra Singh Tikait. A few important points regarding the BKU should be noted at this juncture. It began as an organisation of all the rich farmers of western Uttar Pradesh but today it has essentially become the organisations of the well to do Jat peasant. The membership is primarily made up of the Jatis. The Rajputs, the Gujars, the Tyagis and the Muslims (the other farmers) after participating enthusiastically in the BKU led movements in its early years had deserted the organisation. Thus the BKU has lost its multi-caste peasant alliance character. The second
fundamental point regarding the BKU is its apolitical character. The constitution of the BKU states very clearly that it is an apolitical organisation. The leadership of the BKU has zealously guarded the apolitical character of the organisation. Mahendra Singh Tikait detests politics and argues that all parties are parties of India and not of Bharat. Sharad Joshi’s Shetkari Sangathana have its origin in the late 1970s when, in October 1979, it opened an office in Chakan, Maharashtra. It primarily represents the interests of the farmers who cultivate cotton, onions, tobacco, grapes and sugarcane in rural Maharashtra. The SS and Sharad Joshi rose to national prominence with the rasta roko (block roads) agitation in 1980 when tens and thousands of farmers in the state of Maharashtra blocked important roads connecting Bombay and other cities and the most important issue, which the SS raised, was the issue of low prices of sugarcane and cotton and demanded that the prices of these products be raised. The movement was successful because it was able to secure some rise in the prices of the commodities and also because it was able to bring the farmers’ movement in the state to prominence. Sharad Joshi again sought to address the plight of the Farmers with the Nipani agitation in April 1981. The movement’s support, however, started declining till the mid, 1980s due to the fact that though the leadership announced a number of agitations, it did not launch any serious one. In the early 1980s, Sharad Joshi entered the Gujarat scene. Since then the SS is associated with the farmers’ movement in Gujarat. His novel contribution in Gujarat lay in his emphasis that the Farmers’ movement cannot succeed unless and until the agricultural labours and poor peasants are associated with the movement. With this emphasis, he was able to entice the rural poor within the Kheduts’ movement or farmers’ movement. In 1985 the SS took a very pragmatic decision in Maharashtra of supporting opposition political parties and started closely working with the other organisations and people who were associated with the rural sector. This paid some dividends and it is due to this its support base broadened. The next agitation that it organised was of January 1987 over cotton prices. Since then the farmers’ movement in Maharashtra has matured and gained prominence; but in recent years, there has been a considerable decline in the support base of the SS largely due to the fact that it has failed to launch any serious agitation in the 1990s and also because of Joshi’s blatant support to the liberalisation of the economy.

**Caste Movement**

They were subjected to extreme form of exploitation. The colonial power accentuated the disparities in the distribution of economic power. The atrocities united the lower castes people against the higher castes. Dalits are the suppressed people at the last run of the caste-based hierarchy. Their inferior occupations and low levels of ascriptive status make them vulnerable for attacks at the hands of upper caste people. The organization effort made by the Dalit leadership for uplifting their status is known as Dalit Movements. It is a protest against untouchability, casteism and discrimination faced by the dalits. Dalit movements indicate some trends of protest ideologies which entail the following- withdrawal and self-organization, high varna status and extolling of non-Aryan culture’s virtues, abandoning of Hinduism and embracing other religion like Buddhism and Islam. Mahatma Gandhi in 1923 founded the All India Harijan Sewak Sangh to start education and schools for Dalits.
Women’s Movement

The women’s movement, in India, is a rich movement which has taken different forms in different parts of the country. Women participated in the nationalist movement. Sarojini Naidu went into become the first woman president of the India National Congress in 1925. Her presence was a signal for hundreds of other women to join the nationalist movement. But it is important to recognize that for a country’s of India’s magnitude, change in male-female relations and the kinds of issues women activists are focusing will not come easily. For every step, movements take forward, there will be a backlash, a possible regression. And it is this that makes for the contradiction, this that makes it possible for them to be woman who can aspire to, and attain the highest political office in the country, and for women to continue to have to confront patriarchy within the home, in the work place, throughout their lives. Women’s reservation in the legislature is being sought, though it has been made compulsory at the local-government levels. The National Commission for Women (1992) and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) are steps towards the betterment of women in the country but its access is limited to few.

Tribal Movement

The tribal movements in colonial India, it must be understood, were born out of deep dissatisfaction and often discontent against socio-economic policies of the British Government, which adversely affected their lives. Whether it be the question of encroachment of tribal lands by money-lenders backed by the Govt., the acquisition of tribal forest, high taxation or enhancement of rent, everyone of these policies created among the tribes and nomadic communities extreme distrust of the authorities and turned them against the rulers - often against outsiders (Sudslrikus) in general, since that was how the tribal mind perceived the situation to be. The situation was further worsened by the fact that famines in the latter half of the 19th century forced the tribals into destitution. Dr. Verrier Elwin remarks that the chief cause of the decline of tribal communities' '....was the loss of land and forests" which according to him, "had the effect of enervating tribal organism that it had no interior resistance against infection by a score of other evils ...." If we look back over the long series of tribal rebellions against authority in other parts of tribal India, we see that the majority of them arose over this one point. Thus, the Kol insurrection of 1833 was caused by encroachment on tribal land. The Tamar rebellions repeated seven times between 1789 and 1832 were primarily due to the illegal deprivation of their rights in land, which the Hos, Mudas and Oraons suffered. The Santhal Rebellion (1855) was primarily a revolt against oppression of landlords, village money-lenders etc. The Birsa Munda Revolt (1895-1901) too was directed against the 'outsider7-namely landlords, traders and government officers. As evident, the movements were spread over large part of the country. A noteworthy feature of these tribal movements, separated in space and time from one another, was that they occurred not in one or two pockets but were spread out across the country and had at the root, common or similar issues. Significant tribal movements took place in the beginning of the twentieth century. Most important among these was in the present Andhra Pradesh, where the tribals' forest agitation merged with Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and subsequent to its withdrawal was carried further under the leadership of Sitarama Raju. According to Prof. Summit Sarkar the spread of the movement was far beyond Andhra. "On 10 July 1921, Reading reported to the Secretary of State that 2,50,000 out of 4,00,000 acres of forest in
Kumaon Division of U.P. had been burnt down. Cavalry had to be sent to Muzaffarpur in North Bihar in Dec. 1921 to tackle an agitation over grazing rights. From Bengal, too, came reports of Santhals reasserting their lost forest rights in the Jhargram region of Midnapur and widespread looting of woodlands in Banskhali land Cox's Bazar areas of Chittagong." A study of these innumerable tribal movements reveals interesting characteristics which have parallels in similar agrarian movements elsewhere in the world. Most of these have been characterized by what has been called a negative consciousness by Ranajit Guha wherein, more than their own consciousness as a class or social group, a consciousness based on an identification of the enemy has played a vital role. Often enemies of the people have been identified as enemies of the faithful, oppressed and disenfranchised and have been mingled with religious calls for struggle against such enemies. Teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Shia'ite Islam often had, as integral part of their teachings the promise of a paradise on earth for a thousand years through divine intervention. This has been variously described as Messianism, Millenarianism or Mahdism. Such millenarian elements can be seen in the different Mahdist movements in the Babism of mid 19th century Iran or in the vision of a Heavenly Kingdom in the Taiping Rebellion in China or in the many variants of Brazilian Cultic protest movements. Kathleen Gough, on the basis of a study of 77 agrarian revolts has roughly classified them into five types in terms of their goals, ideology and methods of organization: 1) Restorative rebellions to drive out the British and to restore earlier rulers and social relations, 2) religious movements for the liberation of a region or an ethnic group under a new form of govt., 3) what had been referred to as 'Social banditry' by E. J. Hobsbawm, 4) Terrorist vengeance, with ideas of meeting out collective justice and 5) Mass insurrections for the redress of particular grievances. Though Eric Hobsbawm, Norman Cohn and Peter Worsely have suggested that millenarian movements were rare or absent in India, as the widespread opinion is that they stem from Indacocuristian influences, Gough holds a different opinion. According to her, it is probably true in the 'strict sense of a belief in a thousand year period in which the evil one will be chained, in a wider sense it is not true. The belief and expectation that the present evil world will be transformed by divine intervention and bliss shall reign on earth, has permeated many a tribal movement in India. "Birsa Munda received teaching both from Lutheran missionaries and Hindu ascetics but then reverted to his Munda religion, bringing with him beliefs and images from both majdr faiths. He taught the Mundas first that he was divinity - appointed messenger come to deliver them from foreign rule, and later that he was an incarnation of God himself. His mission was to save the faithful from destruction in imminent flood, fire and brimstone, by leading them to the top of a mountain. Beneath them, "all the British, Hindus and Muslims would perish, after which a Munda Kingdom would be ushered in." Some of the movements subsequently got integrated with the national movement. Particularly during the non-cooperation movement the 'forest Satyagrahas' played an important role. Gradually, they also got imbued with anti-imperialist ideology. Sumit Sarkar notes in the case of Sitarama Raju's movement that certain striking new features were visible. Sitarama Raju was not a local village muttadar unlike previous leaders but "a man without family or interest, an outsider coming from a group which claimed Kshatriya status and often some proficiency in Telugu and Sanskrit scholarship". Anti-imperialist ideology was still rudimentary. Raju's anti-imperialist feeling were reflected, for instance in his statement that he was unable to shoot Europeans as they were always surrounded by Indians whom he did not want to kill. This ideology was accompanied by primitive messianic elements. He had been wandering among the tribals since 1915 as a Sanyasi claiming astrological and qnedicinal powers and coming under Non-Cooperation
influence in 1921. "Raju hints he is bullet-proof" reported the Malkangiri Deputy Tehsildar, while a rebel proclamation in April 1924 claimed that "God Sri Jagannadhaswami would incarnate very shortly as kalkiavatar and appear before us." Essentially all these tribal movements were the outcome of deep resentment and discontent against the policies of British imperialists that affected them adversely, as you have seen in the beginning of this unit.

References


Questions

1. Discuss various peasant movements in India.

2. Explain the factors leading to caste movements in India.

3. Elucidate various women’s movements in India.