
UNIT 28 WORKERS AND PEASANTS

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28.0 OBJECTIVES

Workers and peasants in India have been involved in the collective actions in order to fight for their demands. Their collective actions like those of other social group can be included in the social and political movements. After going through this unit, you will be able to understand:

- Nature of the movements of the workers and peasants;
 - Their demands, problems and leaderships;
 - Patterns of mobilisation in the collective actions;
 - Influence of these movements on the state; and
 - The impact of the liberalisation on the workers and peasants.
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The Second World War divided the trade union leaders. The communists argued that with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 the character of the war had changed from imperialist war to people's war. The communists were following the line of the Russian Communist Party and thought that in the changed circumstances it was the duty of the workers to support British war efforts. But the nationalist leaders wanted to strengthen the national movement to overthrow the British rule from India. The ideological rift led to another split in the trade union movement. The mounting cost of living made the workers to realise the need of an organised effort to secure relief. In spite of the government resorting to Defence of India Rules, which prohibited strikes and lockouts, there was a perceptible increase in number of both unions and organised workers.

28.2.2 The Issues and the Types of Collective Actions

The main issues which caused the workers strikes include: wages, bonus, personnel, leave and hours of work, violence and indiscipline, industrial and labour policies, etc. The workers take recourse to various types of collective actions for getting their problems redressed. These are – strikes, satyagrah, hunger strikes, *bandhs* and *hartals*, *gharaos*, demonstrations, mass casual leaves, work to rule, cutting of supply of electricity, etc. The most common form of workers' collective action is the strike. There are examples of the railway, jute, plantation, mine and textiles workers strikes in the pre-Independence period. The centres of the strikes were Nagpur, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Madras, Howrah and Calcutta. In 1920 Gandhi intervened in the strike the textile workers of Ahmedabad and provided leadership to the workers.

28.2.3 Workers' Movements in the Post-colonial Period

(i) The National Level

The high hopes of workers were shattered after independence. There was hardly any improvement on the fronts of better wages and other service conditions. Three central trade union organisations were borne. The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) started by the Congress party was born in 1947. The Praja Socialist Party started the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) in 1948. The workers had to struggle hard even to retain what they had achieved earlier. A series of strikes stirred the country. There were highest number of strikes in 1947, i.e., 1811 strikes which involved 1840 thousand workers. The number of strikes and man-days lost had surpassed all the previous records. This declined in the 1950s, but number of strikes and lock-outs increased again in the 1960s-1970s. Some

engineering, chemicals, printing and allied industries. Datta Samant started a number of unions like Association of Engineering workers, Mumbai General Kamgar Union, Maharashtra Girni Kamgar Union. Shankar Guha Neyogi and A.K.Roy also came into limelight as leaders of independent unions. Neyogi concentrated on contract workers in the iron-ore mines of Dalli Rajhara near Bhilai in Madhya Pradesh into a formidable union. While AITUC and INTUC were concerned with the problems of permanent and better paid workers of the Bhilai Steel Plant, concentrated on casual workers employed in small and medium-scale industries in the region. Neyogi was murdered in 1990. Another example of this type is A.K.Roy who organised coal mine workers in the Dhanbad -Jhariya belt of Bihar. Roy's support base was also among contract and casual labour in the coalmines. Roy also received support from a large number of local tribal mine workers because the trade unions operating in these areas did not satisfy them. Another important example of this type was the Self- Employed Women's Association (SEWA) formed by Ela Bhat. She founded SEWA because she felt that unions in the organised sectors were not sensitive to the problems encountered by female workers. These are not the only examples of independent unions.

One of the most important examples of the movement launched by the union which was unaffiliated to the political parties was the textile workers' strike of 1982 in Mumbai. Dissatisfied with the Rastriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS), affiliated to the INTUC the workers of the textile industry in Mumbai, rallied behind the MGKU-led by Datta Samant. The workers of the textile workers of Mumbai went on indefinite strike on January 18, 1982. The demands of the workers included higher wages, making the *badli* (temporary) workers permanent, allowances for leave and travel and payment for house rent. The workers of other sectors than the textile also rallied behind Datta Samant. The Industrialists adopted intransigent attitude towards the strike. The strike created hardships for the workers.

The strike had its repercussion on the rural areas to which the workers belonged. The textile workers also were the poor peasants or small farmers having links both in the cities as well the villages. Datta Samant was able to link the rural issues like the wages of agricultural labourer with those of the textile workers. The strike, however, did not succeed in getting the original demands of the workers accepted. But it helped Datta Samant to emerge as the most influential trade union leader in Bombay.

(iv) Limitations of the Trade Union Movement in India

28.3 PEASANT MOVEMENTS

Peasants are those agrarian classes which are related to agriculture as the tenants or owners of land, and participate in the farming activities. They are a differentiated group. In the backward and feudal agriculture they cultivate land as the tenants of the landlords. In the more advanced agriculture, where the tenants have become the landowners following the implementation of the of the land reforms, they are the owners of the land. The peasants whose resources in the land are not enough to meet their basic needs, and who also work as labourers for others apart from working on their fields are poor and small peasants. The peasants who do not work for wages, but have enough resources relating to agriculture are rich and middle peasants or the farmers. They either mainly depend on the family labour to work on the land or they may combine it with the hired labour from outside the family. In this section you will be studying the movements of the small and poor peasants as well those of the rich peasants or the farmers.

28.3.1 Small and Poor Peasant Movements

There were several peasant movements both in the pre-Independence and post-Independence periods. Some examples of the former are – Oudh movement (UP) in 1920, Kheda and Bardoli (Gujarat) and Champaran (Bihar) movements and Moplah rebellions. The main examples of the of the post-Independence period are – Telangana (Andhra pradesh), and Tibhaga and Naxalite (West Bengal) movements.

The peasants during the pre-Independence period were living in the miserable social and economic conditions. They were exploited by a group of classes, e.g., landlords and their agents, moneylenders and the officials of the colonial state. The landlords increased the rents on the peasants continuously, took forced gifts and extracted *begar* from them. The

The formation of Congress Ministries in a majority of the provinces in early 1937 marked the beginning of a new phase in the growth of peasant movements. The Congress had promised radical improvement in the conditions of the peasants on the eve of elections. There was definite increase in civil liberties, which provided better opportunities for the mobilization of peasantry. Different Congress Ministries introduced agrarian legislations for debt relief, restoration of lands lost during depression, for security of tenure etc. But these measures did not affect the conditions of the peasants of lower strata. The dissatisfaction of peasants found expression in a number of protest meetings, conferences and demonstrations. They criticised number of anti-peasant measures taken by the government like arrest of peasant leaders and banning peasant meetings. The outbreak of the World War II brought the resignation of the Congress Ministries and launching of severe repression against Kisan Sabha leaders. In the year 1939 the national convention of the All India Kisan Sabha was presided over by Acharya Narendra Dev. In his Presidential address he emphasised the need of separation of Kisan Sabha from Congress. According to him a separate Kisan Sabha was necessary in order to put pressure on the Congress.

The end of the war, followed by the negotiation for the transfer of power and the anticipation of freedom marked a new stage in the history of peasant movements. Approaching freedom had filled the peasant movements with new spirit to assert their rights. The analysis of some of these movements gives us sufficient insight into the nature, social basis, achievements and limitations of the peasant movements in India.

The Tebhaga Movement of Bengal was one of such movements. The provincial Kisan Sabha of Bengal launched this Movement in 1946. Gradually the influence of the left in general and the communists in particular increased in the Kisan Sabha. In 1947 the leadership of the All India Kisan Sabha went into the hands of the communists. The communists led the provincial Kisan Sabha of Bengal also. This Movement soon took the form of a clash between the bargardars (share-croppers) and the jotedars, the employers. The share-croppers began to assert that they would no longer pay a half share of their crop to their jotedars but only one-third. They also insisted that before division the crop would be stored in their khamars (godowns) and not in that of the jotedars. Poor peasants, middle peasants and also some sons of jotedars led the movement. The middle peasants provided the bulk of the leaders and they supported the movement up to the end. They hoped that it would culminate in total attack on landlordism. The rich peasants slowly detached themselves. When the government resorted to severe repression in 1947 the movement came to an end.

It lasted for fifty-two days only. In July 1967 police and battalions of paramilitary forces sent by Ajoy Mukherjee then the Chief Minister of the state, combed the whole area and the rebellion was suppressed. Naxalbari was a minor event in terms of its durations, intensity of resistance; area controlled or number of casualties suffered or inflicted on the other side. On these indicators Telangna was a much bigger happening. But Naxalbari acquired the symbol of armed peasant uprising. It had its reverberations all over the country. After this the revolutionaries who became active in U.P., Bihar, Punjab, Kashmir, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh came to be known as Naxalites. It emerged as a more powerful force in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. The emergence of Naxalism led to the formation of C.P.I. (Marxist Leninist) the third Communist party. This party believed that the goal of socialism could be achieved through armed struggle, justified use of violence for capturing lands of Zamindars and distributing them among poor peasants. The Naxalite Movement became a reference point for those poor peasants and landless labour that got nothing from the government except promises and whose condition showed no signs of improvement and were suffering oppressions at the hands of rural dominant sections. They found a ray of hope in this militant philosophy. This philosophy continues to inspire that segment of rural population who has lived at the receiving end. At many places they are fighting for security of employment, minimum wages, rights over a share of produce and against sexual abuse of their women. There are instances of violence when they exercise their right to vote. Most of the time they have to resort to violence to protect their rights and dignity which is under threat from the land owning and dominant sections of society. Their faith in violence is strengthened because they find the state and the police always taking sides with the land owning dominant sections of society.

The second phase of land reforms known as the Land Ceiling Act started from 1961 onwards with the stated objective of distributing land among the landless. After the Naxalbari Movement of 1967 and the Land Grab Movements launched in different states of 1970 the need to impose rigorous land ceiling was realized. As early as in 1969 the Home Minister had warned that if steps were not taken to lessen agrarian tension both by the state and central government things would go beyond control. Land Reforms was essential part of the twenty Point Programme of Mrs Indira Gandhi during Emergency period. But in spite of all this by 1977 only 4.04 million acres were declared surplus, out of this 2.10 million were taken over by the government and merely 1.29 million acres were actually distributed. The much acclaimed Green Revolution did not make much of difference in their condition. The percentage of households below poverty line in the rural areas has gone up from 38.11% in 1960-61 to 48% in 1977-78. Agricultural labour continues to be their main

28.3.2 Rich Peasants' and Farmers' Movements

The last quarter of the twentieth century has seen the movements of a very important social group in the rural areas known as rich peasants, farmers, kulaks or the capitalist farmers in several regions of India. They rallied behind the farmers' organisations in their respective regions. These organisations are - two Bharatiya Kisan Unions (the BKUs) of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, Shetkari Sangathan of Maharashtra, Khadyut Samaj of Gujarat, Karnataka Rjya Raitha Sangha of Karnataka and Vivasayigal of Tamil Nadu. The most prominent leaders of these unions are Bhupendra Singh Mann in Punjab, Mahendra Singh Tikait in UP, Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra and Nandunjappa Swami in Karnataka. These farmers are the most influential and resourceful sections of rural society in their respective regions. They largely belong to the intermediate castes. They have benefited most from the state policies especially the land reforms and the green revolution. They cultivate land with the family labour supported by the hired-labour. They control the maximum resources in the rural society – land, water resources, animals, modern technology like tractors, etc.

The movements of rich farmers unlike the movements of poor peasants are not directed against any rural exploiters. In fact, a large group of them belong to the latter. These are directed against the state and unequal terms of trade.

Their main demands have been – remunerative prices, subsidised inputs, writing off loans, lowering of electricity bills, substantial reduction in water canal charges, representation of the farmers in the Agricultural Price Commission. With the exception of the Maharashtra, these movement did not raise the problems of the small producers. Rather, Tikait has demanded scrapping of land ceiling laws and of the Minimum wages Act.

The most common mode of mobilisation in the farmers' or the rich peasants' movements include rallies, *satyagrah*, road blocked, *gaon bandi* (banning the entry of outsiders into the villages) and attack on the public property. Some times these result in violence. Their "apolitical" nature, which means their not being attached to the political parties has been

transport. They are also investing in small industries like sugar and rice mills as well as in food processing.

28.4 THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION ON THE WORKERS AND PEASANT MOVEMENTS

The economic reforms in the country that came to be known as liberalisation can be said to be mainly the - 1990 development. The era of reforms started with the government of P.V. Narsimha Rao. Since then successive governments have continued with liberalisation agenda. The present government of Atal Behari Vajpayee is also committed to this agenda. Among the main planks of this New Economic policy are closure of sick and loss making public enterprises, disinvestments from and privatisation of the public sector enterprises. There has been a marked decline in the growth rate of total employment in the organised sector in the 1990`s as compared to 1980`s. In fact this period is known as a period of jobless growth. Labour laws relating to job security are being changed. Many workers have been pushed out of jobs under the voluntary retirement scheme. A practice of using contract and casual labour in place of regular employees has become widespread. There have been strikes by Trade Unions to protect the interests of workers in State Electricity Boards, ITDC hotels, banks, etc. A National Renewal Fund was created as early as in 1992 to provide a social safety net to the labour force rendered jobless.

In 1994 the government of India signed the Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) at Maracas [Morocco] and became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). This step of the government can be seen as part of the New Economic policy. As per conditions of the GATT, developing countries including India are under obligation to introduce subsidies -discipline. They are being asked to keep subsidies to the farmers up to 10% of their value of output. But cutting down on subsidies is a difficult proposition because no government wants to displease the rich farmers. They continue to get things like irrigation waters and electricity either free or at throwaway prices. Another G.ATT related problem faced by the farmers is introduction of patenting in agriculture. The farmer is not automatically permitted to use farm-saved-seeds of protected varieties to sow the next crop. He has either to pay compensation for the use of seeds saved by him or obtain the approval of the breeder. As most of the Plant Breeders are the Multi National Corporations (MNCs), their primary intention is maximisation of profit. This leaves the farmers no option but to buy the seeds again. Farmers in Karnataka attacked the

farmers are mobilised around the issues related to the developed and commercial farming. The period from the 1970s onwards has seen the rise of workers and peasants' organisations and the movements which are not affiliated to any political party. The farmers and peasants movements affect the political processes in India to a significant extent.

28.6 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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28.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) The main issues in the workers' movements included - wages, bonus, personnel, leave and hours of work, violence and indiscipline, industrial and labour policies, etc.
- 2) The "apolitical" trade union emerged because the workers were dissatisfied with the existing trade unions which were affiliated to the political parties.
- 3) The trade unions have the following limitations: the organised working class is small section of the working population in India; poor finance; dominance of the outside leadership; factionalism, etc.

