



Agrarian movements in Bihar during the British colonial rule: A case study of Champaran movement

Roma Rupam

Department of History, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

Abstract

British colonial rule in India brought about transformation in every area of Indian social, political and economic life. The impact of British colonial rule on agrarian society was decisive. The policy of colonial rule had changed the agrarian structure in India. The colonial rule had also developed new mechanisms to interact with peasants. Both new agrarian structure and new mechanisms to interact with peasants divided the agrarian society into the proprietors, working peasants and labourers. The roots of exploitation and misery of majority of people in agrarian society can be traced in the land tenure systems. The land relations were feudal in the permanent settlement areas. In the areas of Mahalwari and Ryotwari areas, the land had passed to absentee moneylenders, Sahukars and businessman due to large scale peasants' indebtedness. This paper will give an overview of some of the major agrarian movements and their impact on the agrarian society. The peasants had been the worst sufferers of British Raj in colonial India. Because of the nature of land revenue system and its impact on agrarian society, the agrarian movements emerged in many parts of India. But North India was the epicentre of agrarian movements during British colonial rule. In the initial years of the British colonial rule the agrarian movements were directed against the extraction of the zamindars and absentee moneylenders. The peasants had developed their organizations and protesting against local zamindars and other intermediaries. The most famous uprisings in the colonial period were Santhal Revolt, Indigo planters, Pabana revolt, Deccan Uprisings, Moplah Uprisings and Champaran movement. The Champaran Satyagraha was a crucial starting point to the national movement. This paper analyses importance of Champaran Satyagraha and its impact.

Keywords: British colonial rule, agrarian society, zamindars, moneylenders, land tenure system, agrarian movement, Champaran Satyagraha, Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

After the battle of Plassey in 1757, the political control of the East India Company was increased. As the company established the political control, it had introduced and implemented new policies in the fields of land revenue system. Implementation of new land revenue system had affected existing agrarian structure. The subsequent change in agrarian structure created turmoil in the agrarian society and led to outbreak of rebellion in different parts of Bihar. The 19th century saw the emergence of a large peasant movement in India. In the nineteenth century Bihar was the epicentre of peasant movements such as the Santhal Insurrection of 1855-56 and the Munda Uprising of 1899-1900.

The Santhal rebellion of 1855-56 was a major tribal rebellion who started an uprising against the oppressive policies of the colonial government. Their rights as original settlers were threatened due to the leasing of agricultural lands to zamindars and absentee money-lenders by the British rule. The rebellion spread rapidly to the region between Rajmahal and Bhagalpur. In the second half of the eighteenth century the tribal agrarian order broke down due to influx of traders, money-lenders and merchants. Tribals reacted to these developments in the forms of series of uprisings such as Munda uprising in a bid to throw out the intruders. In this peasant movement leadership being provided by the local peasant leaders themselves without any national idea. In the the 20th century, the nature, method and scope of the peasant movements had changed. The

Champaran Satyagraha is considered to be a vital event in the history of India's freedom struggle. It was first India's Civil Disobedience movement which was launched by Mahatma Gandhi against the injustice meted out to tenant farmers of tinkathia system in the Champaran district of Bihar. Champaran district was the part of permanent settlement area which consists of the local influential zaminadrai estates and influential European indigo planters. Most of the villages were leased out by the zamindars to local rich man. The European planters were temporary tenure holders but they also exercised civil and criminal jurisdiction. Before Champaran Satyagraha, the farmer of Champaran used to follow the 'panchkathia system', whereby five kathas of land in a bigha to be planted with indigo (Das 2008, p. 44). The local peasants and leaders agitated against the 'panchkathia system' and managed to extract some concession. The system was converted in the 'tinkathia' system in which three katthas of land was to be planted with indigo. But the conversion from 'panchkathia to tinkathia was not good for peasants. Some local peasant leaders like Raj Kumar Shula, Ganesh Vidyarthi, Brajkishore Prasad, Rajendra Prasad were not happy with concession and wanted to change the tinkathia system of agriculture. In 1919 and 1920 the local peasant leader Swami Vidyananda led a protest movement against Darbhanga Raj for high land revenue tax which attracted extensive support among the people of North India. The protest led by Swami Vidyananda was developed due to Post-World War pressure of economic and high land tax

demand from Bihar’s largest estates Darbhanga Raj (Henningham 1979, p. 20). Tenants with marginal holdings were unable to pay high land revenue tax. One of the earliest leaders to have raised the issue of peasant representation within the Congress, as early as 1912, was Swami Vidyanand from Bihar who led a peasant agitation against the atrocities on peasants in the Darbhanga Raj, in north Bihar (Sharma 2015, p. 2) [9]. During 1930s Swami Sahajanand Saraswati emerged as prominent peasant leader in Bihar and later become national leader of peasant movements. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati was the first president of All India Kisan Sabha. Despite being a Congressman and a staunch follower of Gandhi, he saw the zamindars as much his opponents as the British, and on the ground did not even spare the Congress leadership and repeatedly tried expose the duality of the official Congress approach to peasants (Sharma 2015, p. 19) [9]. He established Bihar Kisan Sabha in 1929. In the 1930s the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha launched a number of movements. It Organized many Satyagraha struggles, demonstrations and meetings and the Bihar Kisan Sabha was largely responsible for building a rural base for the Congress in Bihar (Singh 1992, pp. 23) [11].

Agrarian Structure in the Colonial Period

The British colonial had changed the agrarian structure and introduced new relations with peasants. The colonial agrarian structure had the hierarchical structure in which zamindars were on the top, intermediaries on middle centre and the small local land revenue collectors. Many of zamindras and moneylenders were absentee who in turn appointed the others to collect the revenue. This led the formation of sub-feudation and increase in the number of intermediaries leading to rack renting. Big traders, Moneylenders, landlords and the other absentee zamindars took advantage of the situation leading to increase land alienation. In Permanent Settlement the interest of ryots was ignored and zamindars were given a free hand to extract as much as they wanted (Jha 1980, pp. 55) [5].



Fig 1: Hierarchical Structure of Agrarian Landlords

Till Champaran Satyagraha 70 percent of the total cultivated land was owned by the zamindars in the permanent settlement areas and 50 percent in the ryotwari areas (Sengupta 1982, p. 19). The situation was not good for the agrarian class. The stagnant economy resulted in the misery of peasants. The agrarian society was divided into

Three major categories non-cultivating landlords, cultivators and agricultural labourers. In British India, the number of non-cultivating landowners increased from 3.7 million to 4.1 million and the number of agricultural labourers increased from 21.7 million to 33.5 millions, while the cultivating owners/ tenants declined from 74.4 million to 65.5 million (Chandra 1991, p. 4). The absentee landlords were not interested in land development and cultivation. But zamindars always collected surplus revenue from peasants. On the one side, this resulted in low productivity of agricultural sector. On the other side, the wealth of the landlords was built on the misery of the peasant class.

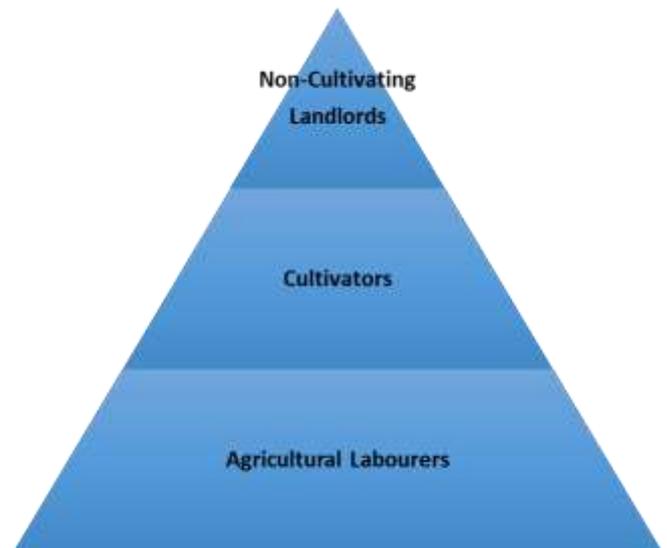


Fig 2: The Division of Agrarian System into three Categories due to British Colonial Rule

Due to the misery of cultivators, the number of agricultural labourers were increasing. Overall, British colonial government’s agricultural policies resulted in the impoverishing of the majority of the Indian peasants. The nature of the peasant movement in the colonial period can only be understood in the context of the then existing mode and relations of production and the unlimited support extended by the highly oppressive colonial government to the vested landed interests (Bhalla 1983, pp. 41) [1].

The Nature of Exploitation of Peasants in the Colonial Period

The British colonial rule introduced three land revenue and tenure systems-the Zamindari system, the Ryotwari system and Mahalwari system. There were three major reasons to introduce these systems. First, the British rule found the exiting land revenue system very complicated in nature. It was difficult to collect land revenue from different systems. Under the zamindari system the collection of land revenue had given to the zamindars. While the zamindars were busy in collection of land revenue through agents and other middleman. The British government had only to obtain the revenue from the zamindars. Second, the other reason was the need for the British colonial government to create a powerful class of people who would be loyal supporters and serve as safety valve during crisis. The zamindari system created such loyal zamindars.



Fig 3: Three Land Revenue system under the British Colonial Government

The imposition of these three categories of land revenue system brought a different degree of hardship to the peasants (Henningham 2008, 226). The British superimposed on the existing system their own tenure system leading to greater exploitation without the safeguards which had protected the peasants (Chandra 1992, p. 46). The imposition of new land tenure system resulted in rack-renting, sub-infeudation and insecure tenures. The cultivators were often coerced into producing cash crops like tea, coffee, rubber, indigo and cotton etc.

Gandhi and Champaran Satyagraha

Champaran Satyagraha was the first civil disobedience and popular movement that Mahatma Gandhi had led the movement. Champaran is in North Bihar where the European Planters took a lead in growing indigo. The system was locally known as tinkathia system that forced the cultivators to grow indigo on 3/20th part of their agricultural fields. But as German synthetic dyes began to replace natural ones throughout the world the demand for indigo declined. The European indigo planters demanded that the cultivators pay them large amounts of rents to release them from their contracts, even though indigo cultivation was forced and also illegal. This system was based on exploitation and the peasants were unhappy from this system. The colonial state accelerated the process of commodity production in India mainly with the object of gearing the entire economy in colonial India to the requirements of British metropolitan interests. The growth of indigo production in the nineteenth century and its large-scale export to England and other European countries clearly reveals this fact (Shukla 1993, pp. 102-106) [10]. Some local peasant's leaders wanted to change the prevailing tinkathia system. The cultivators could not grow the food crops they needed, nor did they receive adequate payment for the indigo. Raj Kumar Shukla and Sant Raut persuaded Gandhi to go to Champaran. The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Champaran was the signal of beginning of Satyagraha. Mahatma Gandhi arrived in Champaran 10 April 1917 and stay on the house of Sant Raut. The Gandhi came to Champaran with eminent lawyers such as Brajkishore Prasad, Rajendra Prasad, Anugraha Narayan Sinha and Ramnavmi Prasad. On his arrival the District

Magistrate served him with a notice that he was not remain in the district of Champaran. Gandhi disobeyed this order. He was summoned to appear before the court. The magistrate said 'if you leave Champaran now, the case against you will be withdrawn. Gandhi denied and said I would be here till issues could not be resolved. Gandhi started enquiry with local educated people. Meanwhile, the Bihar government set up its own Commission and nominated Gandhi as its member.

The Commission concluded with various evidences that tinkathia system could be abolished, the planters' demand be termed illegal and cultivators compensated. The recommendation of the Commission was accepted by the government. The planters were asked to return twenty-five percent of the illegal dues to cultivators. The tinkathia system was ended and soon after the European planters left Champaran area. This was the first victory for Gandhi and his methods of civil disobedience in India. Gandhi was vision for Champaran Satyagraha. Therefore, appointed a group of fifteen volunteers to carry on the constructive work in Champaran. Gandhi now emphasized constructive work of social uplift through education, sanitation and the like so he advised schools to be opened in the villages of Champaran (Mittal and Dutt 1976, p. 29) [6].

Conclusion

British colonial rule in India brought about major transformation in agrarian structure. The traditional agrarian structure had been broken and it divided the agrarian structure into the proprietors, working peasants and labourers. The colonial agrarian structure system was hierarchical in nature in which the zamindars were on the top. While intermediaries of land revenue collection and cultivators were on the middle and lower position respectively. Therefore, a triangular relationship was developed in the agrarian structure. The colonial agrarian structure had also developed absentee landlord's mechanism who in turn appointed others to collect the revenue. This led to sub-feudation and increase in the number of intermediaries leading to rack renting. Moneylenders, traders, speculators and the parasite sections took advantage of the situation leading to increasing land alienation. As result, the peasantry was increasingly joining the ranks of the agricultural labourers and many of the cultivating owners owned no or little land. Bihar was epicentre for peasant movement in the 19th and 20th century. The Kol of 1834-36, Santhal rebellion and Munda Ulgulan 1899 were major peasant movements led by local tribal in the 19th century. These were all isolated instances of peasant uprising with the leadership being provided by the local peasant leaders themselves without any national perspective. Champaran agrarian movement was the first popular movement that Mahatma Gandhi under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The movement was against the tinkathia system. In 1919-20 Swami Vidyananda was leading the peasant movement in the area of Darbhanga Estates. Protest focused on Darbhanga Raj. Till 1930s political consciousness increased almost all the sections of society due the national and international events. In this perspective, peasant organizations were formed. Peasant organizations were both regional and national in character. It tried to represent the interests of all categories of peasants. One of the famous and largest peasant organizations was the All India Kisan Sabha under the peasant leader Swami

Sahajanand Saraswati. In Bihar Swami Sahajanand Saraswati was active to mobilize peasant movement. He had organized Bihar Kisan Sabha in 1929 and led a number of agitations against local zamindars and provincial government. The establishment of an all India organization for peasants gave a thrust to peasant agitations.

References

1. Bhalla GS. "Peasant Movement and Agrarian Change in India", *Social Scientist*. 1983; 11(8):39-57.
2. Chandra Bipan. *Peasantry and National Integration in National and Left Movements in India*, Modern Publication: Delhi, 1991, 1-280.
3. Henningham Stephen. "Agrarian Relations in North Bihar: Peasant Protest and the Darbhanga Raj:1920-20", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*. 1976; 16(1):1-40.
4. Henningham Stephen. "The Agrarian Question and Peasant Movements in Twentieth-Century India: A Review of Some Studies of Bihar", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 1984; 11(4):222-237.
5. Jha Hetukar. "Permanent Settlement in Bihar", *Social Scientist*. 1980; 9(1):53-57.
6. Mittal SK, Dutt Krishna. "Raj Kumar Sukal and the Peasant Upsurge in Champaran", *Social Scientist*. 1976; 4(9):25-36.
7. Das N Arvind. "Peasants and Peasant Organizations: The Kisan Sabha in Bihar", *The Journal of Peasant studies*. 1982; 9(3):40-87.
8. Sengupta Nirmal. "Agrarian Movements in Bihar", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 1982; 9(3):15-39.
9. Sharma GP. "Nationalist Response to Agrarian Conflict: Dr Rajendra Prasad and Peasant Politics in Bihar in the 1930s", *Studies in People's History*. 2015; 1(1):1-22.
10. Shukla Prabhat Kumar. "Indigo and the Raj: Peasant Protests in Bihar, 1780-1917", *Social Scientist*. 1993; 21(3):102-106.
11. Singh Lata. "The Bihar Kisan Sabha Movement. *Social Scientist*. 1933-1939; 20(5):21-33.