



Peasant struggles in colonial South India: The interrelationship between nationalism and social emancipation

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Abstract

This research article critically examines the major peasant struggles that emerged in colonial South India between 1850 and 1950, situating them within the broader framework of agrarian history, colonial exploitation, and socio-political transformation. While conventional nationalist historiography has frequently interpreted peasant movements as peripheral or supportive components of the larger anti-colonial freedom struggle, this study argues that the agrarian uprisings of South India possessed an autonomous historical significance rooted in the lived experiences of rural communities. These movements were not merely reactions against British colonial policies such as excessive land revenue demands, exploitative tenancy systems, and economic extraction, but also represented organized resistance against deeply entrenched indigenous structures of oppression, including feudal landlordism, caste discrimination, bonded labour, and the practice of *vetti* (forced labour). By examining three major agrarian movements the Moplah Rebellion of Malabar (1921), the Rampa Rebellion (1922–24), and the Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–51) the article demonstrates that peasant resistance evolved through distinct regional, social, and ideological contexts while sharing a common aspiration for justice, dignity, and equitable access to land and resources. These movements reflected the active participation of marginalized peasants, tribal communities, agricultural labourers, and lower-caste groups who challenged both colonial authority and indigenous systems of domination. The study further argues that, for the peasants of South India, the concept of *Swaraj* extended far beyond the attainment of political independence from British rule; it embodied a broader vision of agrarian democracy, redistribution of land, abolition of exploitative labour relations, social equality, and freedom from caste-based oppression. By integrating colonial records, regional histories, and contemporary historiographical debates, this article highlights the multidimensional character of South Indian peasant struggles and emphasizes their crucial role in reshaping the social, economic, and political landscape of modern India. It concludes that these agrarian movements should be understood not merely as nationalist revolts but as transformative social revolutions that simultaneously challenged imperial domination and indigenous hierarchies, thereby contributing significantly to the discourse on social justice, democratic rights, and the making of modern India.

Keywords: Peasant struggles, colonial South India, agrarian movements, social emancipation

Introduction

The advent of British colonial rule brought profound and far-reaching changes to the agrarian structure of India, fundamentally altering the economic, social, and political foundations of rural life. In South India, colonial land revenue policies, particularly the implementation of the Ryotwari System across most parts of the Madras Presidency and the continuation of the Zamindari system in several regions, transformed traditional patterns of land ownership and agricultural production^[1]. These systems imposed heavy land revenue assessments, encouraged commercialization of agriculture, and exposed cultivators to chronic indebtedness, resulting in widespread rural distress. The colonial state, local landlords, moneylenders, and revenue intermediaries collectively created a multilayered structure of exploitation in which peasants, tenant farmers, agricultural labourers, tribal communities, and lower-caste cultivators bore the greatest burden. Frequent crop failures, fluctuating agricultural prices, forced evictions, usurious lending practices, and the absence of institutional support further deepened agrarian insecurity and intensified socio-economic inequalities^[2]. Under these circumstances, peasant resistance emerged not merely as spontaneous reactions to economic hardship but as organized movements demanding justice, dignity, and structural transformation. Unlike many agrarian protests that focused solely on issues

such as land revenue reduction, tenancy rights, or debt relief, the peasant struggles of South India assumed a distinctly multidimensional character by simultaneously challenging British imperial authority and indigenous systems of social domination. These movements confronted deeply entrenched caste hierarchies, feudal landlordism, bonded and forced labour practices such as *vetti*, and the denial of social, political, and economic rights to marginalized communities. Consequently, the idea of freedom embraced by South Indian peasants extended well beyond the objective of achieving political independence from colonial rule; it encompassed aspirations for social equality, equitable land distribution, agrarian justice, human dignity, and the democratization of rural society^[3]. In this context, the relationship between nationalism and social emancipation acquired a unique historical significance. Although many peasant movements drew ideological inspiration from the broader Indian nationalist movement and occasionally collaborated with the Indian National Congress, they also pursued independent programmes that reflected local realities and the specific grievances of rural communities. As a result, the interaction between nationalist politics and agrarian struggles was characterized by both cooperation and ideological divergence, particularly regarding questions of land reform, caste inequality, class exploitation, and the redistribution of rural power.

Understanding these movements therefore requires moving beyond a narrow nationalist framework to recognize them as transformative social struggles that sought to dismantle both colonial domination and indigenous structures of oppression, thereby contributing significantly to the evolution of modern India's democratic, agrarian, and social justice traditions^[4].

Agrarian Structure of South India and the Colonial Assault

The agrarian structure of South India during the colonial period differed considerably from that of northern India due to variations in land tenure systems, patterns of land ownership, social organization, and regional historical developments. The British administration introduced the Ryotwari System across most parts of the Madras Presidency with the stated objective of establishing a direct fiscal relationship between the colonial state and individual cultivators (*ryots*), thereby eliminating the role of intermediary landlords^[5]. In theory, this system recognized cultivators as proprietors responsible for paying land revenue directly to the government. However, in practice, the Ryotwari System became an instrument of colonial economic extraction rather than agrarian reform. Revenue assessments were often fixed at exceptionally high levels without adequate consideration of agricultural productivity, soil fertility, irrigation facilities, market fluctuations, or climatic uncertainties^[6]. Peasants were required to pay land revenue even during periods of drought, floods, crop failure, or famine, compelling many cultivators to borrow money at exorbitant interest rates from local moneylenders. As indebtedness increased, numerous peasants lost their land through mortgage, distress sales, or confiscation, resulting in widespread land alienation and rural impoverishment. Instead of creating a secure class of independent cultivators, the Ryotwari System intensified economic insecurity and strengthened colonial control over the agrarian economy^[7]. Although the Ryotwari System formally abolished the legal authority of zamindars in large parts of South India, it did not eliminate rural exploitation. Rather, a new class of informal intermediaries gradually emerged in the form of wealthy landlords, village headmen, revenue officials, merchants, and moneylenders who exercised enormous economic and social power over rural society^[8]. These groups controlled access to agricultural credit, irrigation facilities, markets, and tenancy agreements, enabling them to dominate small cultivators and landless agricultural labourers through exploitative lending practices, excessive rents, and coercive labour arrangements. Chronic indebtedness forced many peasants into dependency, while the absence of institutional credit and effective legal protection further strengthened the position of these rural elites^[9]. Consequently, the colonial agrarian system created a multilayered structure of exploitation in which the colonial state, local elites, and moneylenders collectively extracted surplus from the peasantry^[10]. Equally significant was the close alliance between colonial agrarian policies, feudal power, and the caste hierarchy. Land ownership remained overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of dominant upper-caste groups such as the Mirasidars of Tanjore, the Namboodiri Brahmins and Jenmis of Malabar, the Reddi and Velama Doras of Telangana, and other influential landed elites who enjoyed substantial social, economic, and political authority^[11]. In

contrast, lower-caste communities, Dalits, tribal populations, tenant cultivators, and agricultural labourers possessed little or no ownership rights over land and were frequently subjected to oppressive systems of tenancy, bonded labour, and customary obligations^[12]. The widespread practice of *vetti* (forced and unpaid labour) compelled marginalized communities to provide labour and services to landlords without fair compensation, reinforcing patterns of social exclusion and economic dependence^[13]. Thus, colonial agrarian policies did not dismantle traditional structures of inequality; instead, they interacted with existing caste and feudal institutions to consolidate a highly unequal rural order. The combination of colonial revenue extraction, informal landlordism, exploitative credit relations, and caste-based discrimination generated widespread agrarian distress and created the socio-economic conditions that ultimately gave rise to a series of powerful peasant movements across South India^[14]. These struggles were directed not only against British colonial authority but also against the deeply entrenched systems of feudal domination, caste oppression, and unequal land relations that shaped rural society during the colonial era^[15].

The Convergence of Nationalism and Peasant Movements

The relationship between the Indian nationalist movement and peasant struggles in South India was complex, dynamic, and mutually influential. With the launch of Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920, the freedom struggle expanded beyond urban elites and educated middle classes to become a truly mass movement that drew active participation from peasants, tribal communities, agricultural labourers, and other marginalized sections of society. Nationalist campaigns advocating boycott of foreign goods, non-payment of taxes, promotion of *khadi*, and non-cooperation with colonial institutions inspired rural populations to challenge British authority^[16]. At the same time, peasant communities interpreted the nationalist call for *Swaraj* through the lens of their own everyday experiences of exploitation, poverty, caste discrimination, and unequal land relations. Consequently, agrarian movements in South India were not merely extensions of the nationalist movement but autonomous struggles that simultaneously sought political freedom, economic justice, and social emancipation^[17]. While nationalist leaders viewed peasant mobilization as essential for weakening colonial rule, peasants expected the freedom movement to address issues such as excessive land revenue, exploitative tenancy, bonded labour, forced labour (*vetti*), and landlord oppression^[18]. This convergence created powerful alliances but also generated ideological tensions whenever national leadership hesitated to support radical demands for agrarian restructuring and social equality. Thus, the interaction between nationalism and peasant resistance in South India reflected both cooperation against colonialism and independent aspirations for transforming the rural social order^[19].

a. Resistance to Forest Laws and National Consciousness: The Rampa Rebellion (1922–24)

One of the most significant examples of this convergence was the Rampa Rebellion (1922–24), which emerged in the forested Godavari Agency region of present-day Andhra Pradesh under the charismatic leadership of Alluri Sitarama

Raju ^[20]. British colonial forest legislation severely restricted the customary rights of tribal communities over forests, grazing lands, forest produce, and shifting cultivation, thereby disrupting their traditional livelihood and cultural practices. The declaration of reserved forests, restrictions on collecting forest resources, and compulsory labour for colonial projects generated widespread resentment among the Koya and other tribal communities. Although the immediate cause of the rebellion lay in the denial of traditional forest rights, the movement gradually acquired a broader political dimension. Alluri Sitarama Raju admired Mahatma Gandhi and initially supported the ideals of the Non-Cooperation Movement, particularly the promotion of *khadi*, national self-reliance, and resistance to colonial authority ^[21]. However, unlike Gandhi's commitment to non-violence, Raju concluded that armed resistance was necessary to confront the oppressive colonial administration in the tribal areas. The rebellion evolved into a highly organized guerrilla movement in which tribal fighters attacked police stations, government outposts, and armouries, seized weapons, and challenged British administrative control over the region. Although the rebellion was eventually suppressed and Raju was executed in 1924, it demonstrated that tribal resistance against colonial forest policies had become inseparable from the wider nationalist struggle. More importantly, it revealed that for forest-dependent communities, *Swaraj* signified not only political independence from British rule but also the restoration of traditional rights over land, forests, and natural resources, thereby linking environmental justice, tribal autonomy, and nationalism within a common framework of resistance ^[22].

b. The Moplah (Mappila) Rebellion of Malabar (1921)

The Moplah (Mappila) Rebellion of 1921 in the Malabar region of present-day Kerala represents one of the most complex and debated agrarian movements in colonial Indian history because it combined elements of anti-colonial nationalism, agrarian class conflict, religious mobilization, and social protest. The agrarian structure of Malabar was characterized by highly unequal land relations in which the majority of cultivators were Mappila Muslim tenants, while ownership of land remained concentrated in the hands of upper-caste Hindu *Jenmi* landlords, particularly the Namboodiri Brahmins and influential Nair families ^[23]. Tenants faced exorbitant rents, insecure tenancy rights, arbitrary evictions, and various forms of economic exploitation, creating deep resentment against the existing agrarian order. The political atmosphere generated by the Khilafat Movement and the Non-Cooperation Movement brought nationalist ideas into rural Malabar, encouraging peasants to challenge colonial authority and participate in broader anti-imperialist mobilization. Initially, the movement developed within the combined framework of the Indian National Congress and the Khilafat Movement, reflecting a shared opposition to British rule. However, as tensions intensified and colonial repression increased, the rebellion rapidly transformed into a large-scale agrarian uprising directed not only against British administrative institutions but also against the oppressive landlord system that had long dominated rural society ^[24]. Police stations, government offices, courts, revenue records, and landlord estates became principal targets of attack, symbolizing resistance against both colonial power and indigenous

structures of exploitation. Although communal violence during the later stages of the rebellion has generated considerable historiographical debate, the movement cannot be understood solely through a religious lens. At its core, it reflected the deep socio-economic grievances of an exploited peasantry seeking relief from oppressive tenancy arrangements, landlord domination, and colonial injustice ^[25]. For the Mappila peasants, therefore, the ideal of freedom extended beyond political independence and embodied a broader aspiration for social justice, economic security, equitable land relations, and liberation from both colonial rule and indigenous systems of exploitation. The Moplah Rebellion thus illustrates how nationalism and social emancipation became deeply intertwined within the agrarian politics of colonial South India ^[26].

The Dimension of Social Emancipation: Caste, Class, and Left-Wing Influence

From the 1930s onward, the character of peasant movements in South India underwent a significant transformation as the focus of agrarian struggles gradually shifted from immediate economic grievances to broader questions of social justice, class relations, caste inequality, and democratic rights ^[27]. While the earlier phases of peasant resistance had largely concentrated on issues such as excessive land revenue, exploitative tenancy, forest restrictions, and colonial repression, the emergence of organized peasant politics and the spread of socialist and communist ideas introduced a more comprehensive ideological framework. The establishment of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) in 1936 marked a decisive turning point in the history of agrarian movements by providing peasants with an organized national platform to articulate demands relating to land reforms, tenancy security, debt relief, fair wages, and the abolition of feudal exploitation ^[28]. Simultaneously, the growing influence of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and regional left-wing organizations encouraged peasants to interpret rural oppression not merely as a consequence of British colonial rule but also as the outcome of deeply entrenched class exploitation and caste domination within Indian society itself ^[29]. Consequently, the demand for political independence became inseparable from the struggle for agrarian democracy, social equality, redistribution of resources, and the dismantling of oppressive social institutions. In South India, therefore, peasant movements increasingly sought to transform the entire structure of rural society by challenging the concentration of land ownership, the power of feudal landlords, bonded labour, caste discrimination, and patriarchal authority. The concept of *Swaraj* acquired a broader and more radical meaning, representing not only national liberation but also the creation of a socially just and economically equitable rural order ^[30].

The Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–51)

The Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–51), fought in the princely state of Hyderabad under the rule of the Nizam, represents the most comprehensive expression of this transformation and is widely regarded as the largest and most influential peasant movement in modern Indian history. Organized under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and supported by the Andhra Mahasabha, the movement mobilized thousands of peasants,

agricultural labourers, tribal communities, and members of marginalized castes against the oppressive feudal order maintained by the Nizam's administration and powerful landlords known as the Deshmukhs and Doras^[31]. These landlords exercised extensive political, economic, and judicial authority over rural society and subjected peasants to excessive rents, illegal levies, arbitrary evictions, physical violence, and numerous forms of social humiliation. One of the principal objectives of the movement was the abolition of *vetti*, the system of forced and unpaid labour that compelled lower-caste peasants and agricultural workers to perform compulsory services for landlords without remuneration. The eradication of *vetti* symbolized not merely an economic reform but a profound assertion of human dignity, equality, and freedom against centuries of feudal oppression^[32].

The Telangana movement also represented a landmark in the history of women's participation in agrarian and revolutionary politics. Unlike many earlier nationalist movements in which women were often confined to supportive or symbolic roles, women in Telangana emerged as active political participants, organizers, couriers, intelligence gatherers, and even armed combatants. They played crucial roles in mobilizing villages, resisting landlord violence, protecting peasant organizations, and sustaining the movement under conditions of severe repression. Equally important, the struggle challenged deeply rooted patriarchal practices within rural society by encouraging women to question domestic violence, child marriage, forced marriages, polygamy, restrictions on mobility, and gender-based discrimination. Through their active involvement, women gained greater social visibility, political consciousness, and leadership opportunities, demonstrating that agrarian revolution and gender emancipation were mutually reinforcing processes. Thus, the Telangana movement broadened the meaning of social liberation by integrating women's rights into the larger struggle for agrarian justice and democratic transformation^[33].

Another defining feature of the Telangana Armed Struggle was its ambitious programme of land redistribution and agrarian reform. During the course of the movement, peasant organizations reportedly brought more than three million acres of land under popular control and redistributed substantial portions of this land among landless cultivators and poor peasants. In many liberated villages, peasants established alternative systems of local governance, settled disputes through village committees, organized collective agricultural production, abolished illegal exactions, and introduced more egalitarian forms of social administration. Although many of these achievements were later reversed following the suppression of the movement, the Telangana struggle demonstrated the practical possibility of restructuring rural society through collective action. It provided one of the earliest and most significant experiments in implementing the principles of land reform, social justice, democratic participation, and economic equality in modern India^[34].

The Telangana Armed Struggle therefore marked the culmination of a historical process in which anti-colonial nationalism, agrarian class struggle, anti-caste resistance, and demands for social transformation converged into a unified movement for comprehensive liberation. It revealed that the aspirations of South Indian peasants extended far

beyond the removal of colonial rule; they sought the abolition of feudal landlordism, the redistribution of land, the eradication of bonded and forced labour, the destruction of caste-based oppression, gender equality, and the establishment of a democratic rural order founded on justice, dignity, and equality. Consequently, the Telangana movement occupies a central place in the history of modern India as a powerful example of how the struggle for national independence became inseparable from the broader quest for social emancipation and agrarian democracy^[35].

Conceptual Framework

The historical experience of peasant movements in colonial South India demonstrates that agrarian resistance evolved along two interconnected yet distinct dimensions. The first dimension consisted of anti-imperialist nationalism, which involved resistance to British colonial authority through opposition to exploitative land revenue policies under the Ryotwari system, protest against restrictive forest laws, rejection of colonial administrative institutions, and participation in wider nationalist campaigns such as the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements^[36]. The second dimension was internal social emancipation, which focused on dismantling indigenous structures of oppression embedded within rural society. This included resistance to feudal landlordism, abolition of caste discrimination, elimination of bonded and forced labour (*vetti*), redistribution of land, improvement of tenancy rights, and the empowerment of lower-caste communities, tribal populations, women, and landless peasants^[37]. These two dimensions were not mutually exclusive but deeply interconnected. For the peasantry of South India, genuine *Swaraj* could not be achieved through political independence alone; it required the simultaneous transformation of unequal social, economic, and cultural relations. Thus, South Indian peasant struggles represented a unique synthesis of anti-colonial nationalism and social revolution, making them one of the most significant movements in the making of modern India's democratic and egalitarian aspirations^[38].

Contradictions between the Congress, Nationalism, and Peasant Movements

The relationship between the mainstream Indian nationalist movement, led primarily by the Indian National Congress, and the radical peasant movements of South India was neither uniform nor entirely harmonious. Although both shared the common objective of ending British colonial rule, they frequently differed in their understanding of the nature of oppression, the methods of political struggle, and the vision of post-colonial India^[39]. The Congress viewed national unity as the foremost requirement for achieving independence and therefore attempted to build a broad coalition comprising landlords, industrialists, merchants, professionals, middle-class intellectuals, and peasants. In contrast, many peasant movements regarded colonial exploitation as inseparable from indigenous systems of landlordism, caste hierarchy, and class domination. Consequently, while the nationalist movement emphasized political freedom from British rule, agrarian movements increasingly demanded structural transformation of rural society through land redistribution, abolition of feudal privileges, elimination of bonded labour, and social equality. This divergence produced a complex relationship

characterized by cooperation in anti-colonial campaigns but disagreement over the scope and direction of social and economic change^[40].

One of the principal sources of tension arose from the Congress's commitment to the principle of class harmony. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and social reconciliation, the Congress generally sought to avoid direct confrontation between different social classes. It attempted to unite landlords, peasants, traders, industrialists, and other social groups within a common nationalist front against British imperialism. Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship further encouraged cooperation between labour and capital, as well as between landlords and tenants, rather than revolutionary class conflict^[41]. As a result, the Congress often remained reluctant to endorse militant agrarian movements that threatened the economic interests of powerful landed elites, many of whom were themselves active supporters or influential members of the nationalist movement^[42]. While Congress leaders acknowledged the hardships faced by cultivators and supported moderate reforms such as reductions in land revenue and protection of tenancy rights, they generally avoided advocating radical measures such as the confiscation and redistribution of land or the violent overthrow of feudal authority. This cautious approach reflected the Congress's broader strategy of preserving national unity by minimizing internal social conflicts during the struggle for independence^[43].

The ideological differences became even more pronounced whenever peasant movements adopted revolutionary or armed methods of resistance. During the Moplah Rebellion (1921) and the Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–51), for example, the Congress leadership either distanced itself from these movements or openly criticized their methods. In the case of the Moplah uprising, although the movement initially developed within the wider framework of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements, its subsequent transformation into a violent agrarian revolt, accompanied by communal tensions, led many Congress leaders to condemn the violence while expressing sympathy for the underlying agrarian grievances^[44]. Similarly, during the Telangana Armed Struggle, the Congress was reluctant to support the Communist-led armed resistance against the Nizam and the feudal landlord system because it feared that revolutionary politics could undermine national stability and create class divisions at a crucial moment in India's transition to independence. For the Congress, the immediate objective remained the achievement of political sovereignty and national integration, whereas the peasant movements increasingly viewed independence as meaningful only if accompanied by far-reaching social and economic transformation. Thus, the divergence reflected not simply differences in political tactics but fundamentally different conceptions of freedom, democracy, and the future organization of Indian society^[45].

Despite these ideological and strategic differences, peasant communities did not reject the language or symbols of nationalism. On the contrary, rural movements across South India frequently invoked Gandhi's name, carried the tricolour flag, promoted *khadi*, and employed nationalist slogans to legitimize their local struggles against colonial authority and social oppression^[46]. However, peasants interpreted these symbols through the prism of their own lived experiences rather than strictly following the

ideological framework of the Congress leadership. For cultivators, agricultural labourers, tribal communities, Dalits, and other marginalized groups, *Swaraj* represented far more than the transfer of political power from British rulers to Indian leaders^[47]. It signified freedom from oppressive landlords, exploitative tenancy systems, forced labour (*vetti*), caste discrimination, indebtedness, and economic insecurity. Historians have therefore described this phenomenon as "autonomous nationalism," a form of popular political consciousness in which rural communities appropriated nationalist ideals while simultaneously redefining them according to their own social, economic, and cultural realities^[48]. This autonomous interpretation of nationalism demonstrates that the peasant movements of South India were not merely subordinate extensions of the mainstream freedom struggle but independent historical forces that contributed to the expansion of democratic consciousness, social justice, and the meaning of freedom in modern India^[49]. Their struggles reveal that the quest for national independence and the pursuit of social emancipation were deeply interconnected, yet not always identical, objectives within the broader history of India's anti-colonial movement^[50].

The peasant struggles of colonial South India were not merely agrarian protests or subsidiary components of the Indian nationalist movement; they represented a simultaneous struggle against British colonialism and indigenous systems of feudalism and caste oppression. While these movements strengthened the anti-colonial struggle, they also demanded land reforms, the abolition of *vetti* (forced labour), social equality, and the rights of marginalized communities. For South Indian peasants, *Swaraj* meant not only political independence but also social justice, economic equality, and democratic agrarian relations. Thus, these movements broadened the meaning of Indian nationalism by linking the quest for national freedom with the ideals of social emancipation and inclusive democracy.

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