



ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514

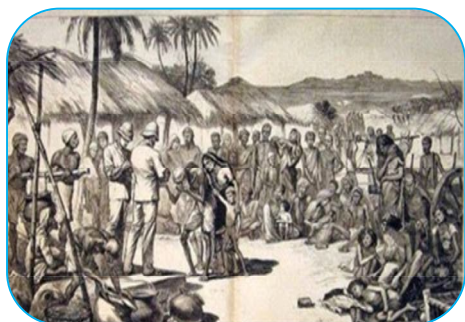
VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 8 | MAY - 2019

PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN COLONIAL INDIA: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

This paper attempts to carry out a comparative analysis of the agrarian conditions prevalent in Punjab and Bengal in the mid 20th century- the similarities they shared and the differences they exhibited. This is a useful exercise to understand the nature and programmes of the various peasant movements which developed in these regions, since these movements grew out of or at least were greatly influenced by the prevailing conditions and agrarian relations within the two provinces. There is often a tendency to argue that Punjab showed signs of development of the capitalist mode of production in agriculture from the colonial period

itself, while eastern India (mainly Bengal and Bihar), it's supposed antithesis remained gripped by semi-feudal and pre-capitalist agrarian relations. However, this paper argues that the agrarian situation in both Punjab and Bengal, in fact, remained by and large similar, that is, semi-feudal and pre-capitalist in character. This was mainly a product of India's colonial subjugation and integration with the metropolitan economy as a peripheral colonial one.

KEYWORDS: Peasant Movements.

INTRODUCTION :

Peasant protests and agitations formed an integral part of the broader anti-colonial movement in India. In fact for the success of national movement it was imperative to secure the support and active participation of the peasantry who formed the vast mass of Indian population and voice their specific concerns and demands through its programmes. The political discourse in India underwent a major change following the revolt of 1857. The

experience of 1857 showed that the success of an armed rebellion was highly unlikely in the face of superior might of British administrative and military machinery. A varying cross section of the Indian people understood that violence could not be an effective strategy for confronting the colonial rule and alternate avenues of struggle had to be explored. Understanding Gramsci's concept of hegemony therefore becomes important in this respect. The colonial state in India was a semi hegemonic one allowing space for peaceful political propaganda and

agitation. It was built on the notions of popular consent and of it being inherently just and fair, notions which had been meticulously inculcated. But if a movement became violent it could be easily crushed by the superior armed might of the colonial state.¹ In this sense the revolt of 1857 marked a major break and many agitations in the late 19th and 20th centuries directed against colonial rule operated with this understanding. One of the

¹ Mukherjee, Mridula, 'Peasant Resistance and Peasant Consciousness in Colonial India: Subalterns and Beyond', Economic and Political Weekly, Oct. 8 & Oct. 15, 1988

earliest in this series of movements was the struggle of the peasants of Pabna in Bengal. Launched in 1873 the main aim of the Pabna peasant struggle was the defence of rights of the occupancy tenants from infringement by landlords.² This movement became especially remarkable because in spite of various attempts by the landlord supported press to present this movement as a threat to law and order in the district it remained non violent to a great extent. The peasants mostly remained disciplined and did not resort to violence instead they chose to confront the landlords through legal battles. Sengupta notes that "...the legalistic passive character of tenant resistance was one of the novel features of this important agrarian movement."³

Instead of individually examining each and every peasant movement which developed in Punjab and Bengal from the 1920s to the 1940s I will out of the constraints of space limit myself in this paper to a comparative analysis of the agrarian conditions prevalent in Punjab and Bengal in the mid 20th century- the similarities they shared and the differences they exhibited. This I think will be a useful exercise to understand the nature and programmes of the various peasant movements which developed in these regions, since these movements grew out of or at least were greatly influenced by the prevailing conditions and agrarian relations within the two provinces. There is often a tendency to argue that Punjab showed signs of development of the capitalist mode of production in agriculture from the colonial period itself, while eastern India (mainly Bengal and Bihar), its supposed antithesis remained gripped by semi-feudal and pre-capitalist agrarian relations. However, my attempt in this paper will be to challenge this widely prevalent misnomer and to argue that the agrarian situation in both Punjab and Bengal, in fact, remained by and large similar, that is, semi-feudal and pre-capitalist in character. This was mainly a product of India's colonial subjugation and integration with the metropolitan economy as a peripheral colonial one.⁴

The extent to which conditions in the two provinces diverged depended mainly on varying geographic and climatic features and two key political factors which need to be emphasised. Firstly, in Punjab, the revenue settlement was temporary, and could be increased periodically, while in Bengal, it was permanent and remained fixed. Bose shows how agrarian relations though structured in diverse ways in different parts of Bengal were greatly influenced by the vagaries of the world market during the colonial period. He notes how the regional economy of Bengal suffered from the twin effects of "fluctuations in the world market" and "colonial government's financial policies". The shift from cultivation of food crops to cash crops such as Jute in order to meet growing rent demand and the increasing dependence on market for subsistence is but one example of the impact of colonialism on agrarian relations within the province.⁵ This dependence for subsistence on market proved especially catastrophic for poor peasants when grain prices escalated in the early 1940s as a result of the British policy of war financing.

Secondly, Punjab served as a major recruiting ground for the colonial army and this affected the economy and society of the province in diverse ways. A possible alternate source of income always existed there, an avenue which remained absent in Bengal. However, the recruitment of a major chunk of colonial army from Punjab was the reason why any signs of discontent and agitation in the Punjab

² In the 20th century, these relatively well to do occupancy tenants or Jotedars themselves became exploiters of sharecroppers in Bengal and a major movement of the sharecroppers called the Tebhaga movement was launched in 1946 to challenge their domination. For further reference see Sen, Sunil, 'The Agrarian System: Structural Change', Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47, People's Publishing House, 1972

³ Sengupta, Kalyan Kumar, 'Peasant Struggle in Pabna, 1873: Its Legalistic Character' in A.R. Desai ed. Peasant Struggles in India, Oxford University Press, 1979, p180

⁴ In this link, the metropolitan economy is almost always accorded primacy. The interests of the colonial economy remain subordinate to those of the metropolis. For further reference, see Mukherjee, Aditya, "Return of the Colonial In Indian Economic History: The Last Phase of Colonialism in India", Presidential Address, Modern India, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, New Delhi, 2007

⁵ Bose, Sugata, Agrarian Bengal: Economic, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p 275

countryside were dealt with extreme severity and completely suppressed. But at the same time the demands of the army made it imperative for the colonial rulers to secure a high degree of loyalty of the Punjab peasantry and this they sought to do by passing the Land Alienation Act in 1900 and offering handsome monetary rewards to the soldiers who had served in the First World War.⁶

Both Punjab and Bengal experienced an ever-growing demand of surplus from land. In Bengal where the revenue settlement was permanent, it was a result of increasing rent rates and the perpetual desire of zamindars and jotedars to extract a higher proportion of the surplus.⁷ In Punjab, where the settlement was periodically revised, this increase in demand was triggered by frequently shooting up revenue rates, and at a later stage, even the rent rates. This pressure, in turn, led to growing indebtedness and a switch to cultivation of cash-crops (cotton in Punjab and jute in Bengal) for which there was a higher demand in the world market. The cultivation of cash crops was accompanied by export of higher quality food grains (rice in Bengal and wheat in Punjab) to outside markets and import of cheaper substitutes for subsistence.⁸

In colonial Punjab, only certain castes and tribes were given the right to own land under the Land Alienation Act of 1900. This measure was dictated by the colonial government's need to appease the dominant groups in Punjab and prevent growth of discontentment among them in order to ensure continued recruitment to the army. By this act the traditional trading and money-lending castes such as Khatri, Aroras and Banias were prohibited from purchasing agricultural land. Thus, "...under the protective umbrella of the provisions of the Land Alienation Act, the Agriculturist mortgagee elbowed the professional moneylender out in many areas of the province." Such a measure was further made possible by the fact that the traditional landowning castes were numerically far greater in Punjab in comparison to those traditionally involved in trading and money-lending.⁹ However it was claimed that this step would ensure the development of agrarian capitalism in Punjab, a claim which has been taken by many scholars on its face value without subjecting it to critical scrutiny.

The agricultural castes and tribes designated under the Land Alienation Act came to monopolise money lending in Punjab and became the chief creditors by taking land on mortgage. In addition these dominant landed groups in rural areas organised themselves into a political front called the Punjab National Unionist Party to safeguard their own interests. In eastern India as well, agriculturalist money lenders contrary to popular assumption became quite dominant in the credit market towards the close of the 19th century. The agriculturist moneylenders in Punjab as well as in Bengal increasingly tended to take the land on mortgage and gradually reduce the landholding peasant to the status of an unprotected tenant or sharecropper. Growing indebtedness, a result of increasing demand for surplus in the form of rent, revenue or both increasingly pushed the small peasant into this trap.¹⁰ The economic depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s further aggravated the situation. Bose notes that reeling under the

⁶ Josh, Bhagwan, 'Economic and Social Background', Communist Movement in Punjab 1926-47, Anupama Publications Delhi, 1979, p21

⁷ The jotedars were occupancy tenants who sublet their land to sharecroppers (adhiars or bargadars) for cultivation and extracted 50% of the produce. A large section of jotedars was drawn from the bhadralok. These were either officers employed by colonial state, lawyers and other professionals or men looking for a lucrative source of income in the absence of alternate sources of employment. This group vehemently opposed the introduction of any tenancy legislation. For further reference see Sen, Sunil, 'The Agrarian System: Structural Change', Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47(1972), p-4

⁸ Mukherjee, Mridula, 'Punjab and Eastern India: Polar Opposites or Treading the Same Path?', Colonizing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2005, p173

⁹ Josh, Bhagwan, 'Economic and Social Background', Communist Movement in Punjab 1926-47, Anupama Publications Delhi, 1979, p 34

¹⁰ Mukherjee, Mridula, 'Punjab and Eastern India: Polar Opposites or Treading the Same Path?', Colonizing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2005, p174

impact of depression many peasants in Bengal lost their lands and became sharecroppers or bargadars increasingly reduced to a status of dependency.¹¹

In both the provinces agriculturalist money lenders increasingly came to acquire substantial proportions of land by alienating small peasant holders. These alienated peasants who were the actual cultivators were thus transformed into sharecroppers largely left at the mercy of rich or middle level land owners. With the increasing domination of agriculturalist money lenders the condition of the peasants worsened and many independent land holders were reduced to the status of unprotected tenants expected to bear all the expense of cultivation and enjoying no security of tenure.¹² Land was increasingly being leased out to sharecroppers in the form of batai or bhag cultivation. Under the system the produce was shared half and half between the land owner and the actual cultivator.¹³ Thus the assumption that the domination of agriculturalist money lenders promoted the development of Punjab agriculture along capitalist lines falls flat. No attempts were made to improve agriculture and undertake direct cultivation.¹⁴

The two provinces were similar in another respect as well. In Punjab as well as in Bengal, economic demands of peasants were often given a communal colour by reactionary politicians. Communal and class loyalties often vied with each other to acquire primacy in the peasantry's consciousness and the degree to which communal mobilisation became successful is indeed unfortunate. Consequently, peasants often found themselves confronting the landlords not on specific economic grievances, but along communal lines. Mukherjee has illustrated this fact for Punjab, while Bose has shown communal politics at work in case of Bengal peasantry. This was in fact the sad reality not only of Punjab and Bengal but of many other parts of India.

In the final analysis it can be safely concluded that in Punjab as well as in Bengal, the accumulated surplus was invested not in modernizing agriculture and affecting any fundamental break with the system by introducing new modes of production, but in usury, purchasing more land for renting and leasing out and thereby perpetuating the prevailing agrarian relations within an overarching colonial structure. During colonial rule various forms of surplus appropriation thus served to reinforce semi feudal and pre capitalist agrarian relations. This was a story not only of Punjab and Bengal but one common to most parts of India. New development models in agriculture as well as in other spheres (whether political, cultural or economic) could be successfully implemented only after affecting a structural break from colonialism. In fact the overthrow of colonial rule was a pre condition for embarking India on the path of independent self reliant development.

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¹¹ Bose, Sugata, Agrarian Bengal: Economic, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947, Cambridge University Press, 1986, P 277

¹² Mukherjee, Mridula, 'Punjab and Eastern Inda: Polar Opposites or Treading the Same Path?', Colonizing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2005, p175

¹³ Sen, Sunil, 'The Agrarian System: Structural Change', Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47, People's Publishing House, 1972, p-15

¹⁴ Mukherjee, Mridula, 'Punjab and Eastern Inda: Polar Opposites or Treading the Same Path?', Colonizing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2005, P176

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