

Block

# 6

## **NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL GROUPS-I**

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### **UNIT 25**

**The Peasantry** **5**

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### **UNIT 26**

**The Working Class** **19**

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### **UNIT 27**

**The Capitalist Class** **32**

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### **UNIT 28**

**The Landlords** **46**

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# BLOCK 6 NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL GROUPS-I

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## Introduction

The Indian Nationalist Movement, in order to be truly national, had to encompass various classes and groups. It could not afford to take on board one or two classes and leave the rest because it would have created unmanageable social tension. At the same time, it was difficult to reconcile the interests of the antagonistic classes and to bring them together with the same fervour in the movement. The conflicts between the peasants and the landlords, and between the workers and the capitalists were increasingly getting intensified. This Block discusses in detail the relationships between the Congress (and the nationalist movement) and various classes over the period.

In **Unit 25**, the relationship between the nationalist movement and the peasantry has been discussed. The peasant agitations against the colonial rule began right since the beginning of the establishment of the colonial rule in 1757 in Bengal. For over a century, these agitations were led by the traditional leadership. In the late nineteenth century, some middle-class, modern educated persons took up the cause of the peasants and tribals and voiced their demands. Early nationalist leaders bitterly criticised the colonial government for being responsible for the poverty and misery of the peasantry. But it was only in the early twentieth century that the nationalist movement reached out to the peasantry and supported the movements of the latter. Gandhi was the most important nationalist leader who seriously attempted and succeeded in drawing the peasants into nationalist fold. From around 1918, the peasants became increasingly associated with the nationalist movement. However, the Congress, the premier nationalist organisation, sought to restrain the class-antagonism inherent in peasant movements against the landlords because it did not want to alienate the landlords. The main objective of the Congress was to direct peasant movements against imperialism. But in this quest, many just demands of the peasants were not taken up. Nevertheless, the Congress and the nationalist movement in general played the crucial role of imbuing the peasant movements with modern consciousness and in expanding the scope and visibility of even smaller struggles.

The rise of modern industry resulted in the rise of the modern working class. The organised working class was a very small proportion of the Indian population during colonial times. But it was concentrated in certain cities and towns and could be effectively mobilised for political purposes. Nationalism, as the predominant ideology of the time, had its impact on the workers. However, the relationship between the workers and the nationalists, particularly represented by the Congress, was not always close and uniform. It is the nature and dynamic of this association that we will discuss in **Unit 26**.

The **Unit 27** deals with the relationship between the Congress and the Indian capitalists. The modern Indian capitalist class emerged during the late nineteenth century under the shadow of colonialism. It did mature in the twentieth century since the First World War, grew in number, and was able to acquire a dominant position in many industries. However, the attitude of the capitalists remained ambivalent towards the nationalist movement. It generally did not support the

mass movements, and extended its support to the Congress mainly during the constitutional phases when the Congress adopted a moderate tone. Only during the 1940s, when it had become clear that the Congress would come to power, the capitalists openly sided with the Congress and its policies.

The **Unit 28** discusses the position of the landlords in the colonial society, their links with the colonial government, and the ambivalent attitude of the Congress towards them. It is generally accepted that the position of the landlords radically changed after the failure of the revolt of 1857. Their independence was undermined and they became completely subservient to the colonial state. For their support to the colonial government, they were awarded with more positions and economic leverage. The Congress, pursuing its agenda of unity among Indians of all classes, did not want to rattle the landlords by supporting the radical demands of the peasant movements. However, the increasing intensity of the peasant movements in many parts of the country, and the rise of leftist leadership within the Congress and the Communists outside it, made their position untenable. Ultimately, the Congress, which was to assume power after independence, decided that landlordism had to be abolished with or without compensation.



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# UNIT 25 THE PEASANTRY\*

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## Structure

- 25.1 Introduction
- 25.2 Debate on the Relationship between Nationalism and the Peasantry
- 25.3 The Condition of the Peasants under Colonialism
- 25.4 Peasants and the Early Nationalism
- 25.5 Mass Nationalism and the Peasantry
  - 25.5.1 Gandhi and the Peasantry
  - 25.5.2 Peasant Movements during the Non-cooperation
  - 25.5.3 Peasant Movements during the 1930s
  - 25.5.4 Nationalism and Peasantry during the 1940s
- 25.6 Peasantry and Indian Nationalism – An Assessment
- 25.7 Summary
- 25.8 Exercises

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## 25.1 INTRODUCTION

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The establishment of colonial rule in Bengal in 1757 triggered resistance from many sections of Indian people, including the peasantry. The peasants' resistance to colonial exploitation and intervention in their lives took various forms ranging from everyday resistance to rebellion. For about a century, these resistance movements were led by dispossessed zamindars, local notables, monks and other religious leaders, and peasant or tribal leaders such as Birsa Munda. These movements culminated in the general revolt against British rule in 1857. Some important peasant rebellions occurred till the end of the century, such as Munda rebellion. However, after 1857, we find increasing involvement of middle-class, modern educated persons in peasant resistance movements. As the idea of nationalism gripped the persons educated in modern system, these ideas, in some form or the other, were carried to the peasantry also. In this Unit, we will discuss the interaction between nationalism and peasantry to explore its various dimensions.

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## 25.2 DEBATE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND THE PEASANTRY

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The historians have varied views regarding the relationship between the Congress, the foremost nationalist organisation, and the peasants. In this section, we will discuss the views of some historians on this issue.

The nationalist historians either pay little attention to peasant agitations or view the peasants as inert masses who were woken up by the nationalist leaders for participation in nationalist struggles. It is assumed that the peasants were apolitical to whom the nationalist activists brought the politics. The peasantry is generally seen as an undifferentiated mass whose arrival in the political arena was due to influence of the Gandhian nationalism. Thus, the peasant movements in the twentieth century were subsumed within the nationalist movement.

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\* Resource person: Prof. S.B. Upadhyay

Most of the writings on peasantry belong to the broad Marxist approach. Although the Marxist historians accept that the nationalist movement made tremendous impact on peasant consciousness and movement, they tend to view the influence of the Congress, particularly Gandhi, as negative. They conceive the nationalist movement as bourgeois which preserved the interests of the propertied classes and was inclined to hinder, curb or even suppress the movement when it became militant. They argue that the Congress did not take up the anti-landlord demands of the peasants and discouraged the class organisations of the peasantry. R.P. Dutt and A.R. Desai formulated the basic Marxist approach regarding the attitude of the Congress towards the masses, and many later Marxist historians followed in their wake. [For details on Marxist views, see S.B. Upadhyay 2015].

In his early writings, Bipan Chandra takes a critical view of Congress' policy towards the peasants. He states that 'In the name of national unity against imperialism, the peasants' interests were more or less completely sacrificed. National integration was promoted at the peasants' unilateral cost. For years the National Congress failed to evolve a broad based agrarian programme. All the three major movements launched by Gandhi namely, those of 1920, 1930 and 1942, started without any such programme.' He even argues that in case of a confrontation between the peasants and the landlords, Gandhi usually tried to moderate peasants' demands and restricted their militancy. So far as taking up the crucial peasants' demands are concerned, the record of the Congress Ministries from 1937 to 1939, 'was in this respect quite dismal. Their agrarian legislation was weak and meagre, the only significant relief being given vis-à-vis moneylenders. Above all, their attitude towards the peasantry was not favourable.' In the 1940s, although the Congress adopted the measures which resulted in the abolition of zamindari, it did not benefit 'the mass of lower peasantry'. Such stance of the Congress was determined not by deferring to the interests of the big landowners and zamindars, but due to the needs to accommodate the interests of the rich peasants, the small and ruined landlords, certain sections of the middle classes who owned lands and were also involved in petty moneylending, and merchants and moneylenders who were closely involved in various operations in the countryside [Bipan Chandra 1976: 18-21].

Sumit Sarkar, in an essay, 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism' (1985), argues that the Congress politics of mass mobilisation, under its tight organisational control, 'fitted in perfectly with the interests of a bourgeoisie, which needed to utilize mass discontent, and yet wanted to keep it within bounds'. Even during the 1940s, the 'Fear of popular "excesses" made Congress leaders cling to the path of negotiation and compromise, and eventually even accept Partition as a necessary price'.

According to Dhanagare, the 'most important social function of the Gandhian "constructive" activities was that of tension management, which explains the alliance of rich landowners with their tenants and labourers' [D.N. Dhanagare 1983: 104]. According to Kapil Kumar, Congress bourgeois leadership 'exploited the peasants' support to secure political independence oblivious of the economic aspect of swaraj and the demands of the peasantry'. And the main 'cause of the withdrawal of the two mass movements (1920-22 and 1930-2) had been the fear of no-rent campaigns which meant adding anti-feudal struggle to anti-colonial struggle' [Kapil Kumar 2011: 146, 147]. He even argues that 'Gandhi had in reality exercised a restraining influence on the revolutionary potentiality of the

peasants at Champaran which might have erupted into militant struggles but for his intervention' [Kapil Kumar 1983: 17, 19].

Several studies on peasant movements emphasise on the leadership of the village elite who provided the bulk of Congress support in rural areas. D.A. Low and Jacques Pouchepadass underline the role of the 'dominant peasants' playing crucial role in the agrarian movements in general and in the nationalist movements in particular. This dominant peasantry was actually those groups of peasants who were considered as natural leaders in the villages. They manage to bring along the lower classes and castes of villagers in any movement they support. [See Shahid Amin 1988: 106].

One of the most important historiographical trends, the subaltern historiography, dismisses all other writings as 'elite', or even belonging to the discourses of 'counter-insurgency' which tend to depict the peasant rebels as anarchists or disruptive. In the subalternist view, the national movement led by the Congress was elitist which hampered the growth of peasant rebellions against the Raj. The peasant movements developed independently of the national movement and there was no close, positive relationship between Congress nationalism and the peasantry. Ranajit Guha, Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, and David Hardiman are some important subalternist historians who have written on this issue.

Mridula Mukherjee offers a spirited defence of the Congress' role in initiating and sustaining the peasant movements in several areas. According to her, the national movement played an extremely crucial role in generating peasant movements, particularly after 1918. Since then, the peasant struggles 'tended to emerge either alongwith and as part of the national struggle or in areas and among sections that had at one time or another felt the impact of the anti-imperialist struggles.' The cadre and the organisations which had earlier played a role in the national movement were later actively involved in launching and sustaining the peasant struggles. Even the activists The strong Kisan Sabha movements during the 1930s were basically based on this new cadre. Gandhiji, in particular, played the most important role in this. The national movement was a multi-class movement, based on the ideology of anti-imperialism. This necessitated the adjustment of peasants' class demands to the overall requirements of the nationalist movement. Therefore, even if the idea of restraining the peasant movements at certain points of time is proved, it would not mean that 'the peasantry was betrayed or its interests sacrificed'. Such tactical adjustments are part of a common struggle in which many groups with different interests participate. [See M. Mukherjee 2004].

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### **25.3 THE CONDITION OF THE PEASANTS UNDER COLONIALISM**

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In colonial India, the peasant movements arose mainly as a result of the many changes introduced by the British in the agrarian structure of the country. The pre-colonial system of rights and entitlements in the land was deeply disturbed by the new land revenue policies imposed by the British which strongly favoured private ownership of land. For the wars of expansion pursued by the East India Company, increasingly more finances were required. Agriculture was the main source of revenue. Initially, a system of revenue farming was introduced and the

job of the collection of revenues was assigned to the highest bidders. This led to extreme exploitation of the peasants, poverty and famine, and unrest among the people. Later, to make the land revenue collection more regular, three land revenue systems were introduced in various parts of India: Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari. In all this, the revenue demand was pegged at a very high level in permanently settled area which prompted the zamindars to extract even more from the tenants. In Ryotwari areas, there was a provision for periodic revision which resulted in increase of rent every few years which proved a burden on the peasants and did not give them an opportunity to save. High burden of taxes and strict collection in time, without remission even in times of adversity, forced the peasants to borrow from moneylenders. Over time, this indebtedness resulted in increasing loss of peasants' control on land.

Gradually, colonialism brought about significant changes in the rural areas, particularly in the structure of land relations. Traditional structures of economic relationship were displaced by new economic relations and institutions which had absentee landlords and moneylenders at the top, and share-croppers, tenants-at-will and agricultural workers at the bottom. There occurred a phenomenal increase in the number of intermediaries between the state and the peasants. There was a decline in agricultural productivity, stagnation in agricultural output, decrease in per capita availability of food, and impoverishment of the peasantry. The colonial emphasis on strict delineation of private property assigned most of lands to the landlords which resulted in the hardship of the peasant-cultivators. Thus, by 1947, most of cultivable land was owned by the landlords of various types, one very important category being that of the absentee landlords. Many moneylenders became landlords. There was also a concentration of land in the hands of upper landlords. Thus, in UP during the 1930s, just 1.5 per cent of the landlords possessed 58 per cent of land. In Bengal province, 13.8 per cent of the landlords owned 39.3 per cent of land with an average holding on 1228 acres per estate. Another important development in the rural areas was the increasing hold of the usurer who became a crucial link in the chain of colonial surplus extraction. The moneylender ensured that the revenue was paid to the colonial government in time, even though the peasants had to remain indebted during most of their lives. The usurer also lent money for growing of commercial crops and their export. Many landlords also lent money. Thus, there was a strengthening of both the landlords and the moneylenders during the colonial period, and they were able to extract whatever gain the peasants could have made by selling their commercial crops. These developments resulted in differentiation among the peasantry and the immiseration of the majority of them. Only 29 per cent of the rural population consisted of peasant proprietors while around 60 per cent were tenants-at-will, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers.[Bipan Chandra 1976:3-7]

All these developments created increasing discontent among the peasants against moneylenders, landlords, and the colonial state. Resistance and rebellion had occurred since the beginning of the British rule. The rise of the nationalist movement provided the peasants new avenues to voice their grievances.

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## **25.4 PEASANTS AND THE EARLY NATIONALISM**

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, after the Revolt of 1857, the middle-class involvement in peasants' problems and their agitations was noticeable. These individuals served as important intermediaries between the

peasants and the colonial administration. They also occasionally played the role of leaders in peasant movements. One of the early peasant agitations with some involvement of middle-class nationalist-minded intelligentsia was the indigo rebellion in Bengal in 1859-60. The peasants in many parts of Bengal had refused to plant indigo for the European planters who had been forcing the peasants to cultivate it. The Bengali intellectuals brought this issue to the notice of Indian public. The play *Neel Darpan* by Dinabandhu Mitra in 1860 depicted planters' oppression and peasants' protests. In Bombay Presidency, the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha was the first to associate itself with peasant grievances when it began espousing the cause of the peasants in the Presidency. The peasants sought help and guidance from its Poona-based leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhale. These leaders helped the peasants with the drafting of memorials and petitions thus articulating their problems better. In Punjab in 1907, the peasants in the Chenab Canal Colony organised agitation against the draconian colonial laws which interfered in the inheritance of land. Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh from Lahore Indian Association were among the leaders of this movement. The peasants withheld the payment of taxes and at many places militant demonstrations took place. In other parts of the country also, similar anti-government peasant protests were witnessed with some involvement of the nationalist intelligentsia.

The nationalist leaders and the Congress in the early period were fully aware of the problems facing the peasantry and held the colonial administration responsible for them. They criticised the British for burdening the peasants with high revenues. They asked the government to lower the revenue demands on the peasant, and pleaded that the revenue demands should be fixed permanently and should not be increased periodically. They blamed the government's revenue policies as responsible for increasing poverty among the peasantry and frequent famines. Dadabhai Naoroji, R.C. Dutt, Dinshaw Wacha, G.K. Gokhale, B.G. Tilak and many other nationalists took up the issues which aggrieved the peasantry. In several resolutions, the Congress raised the problems of distress among the peasants.

However, the Congress ignored the demand for a permanent fixation of rent and tenure in Zamindari areas. The Congress in the early period also did not pay attention to the fact that all farmers for whom it was demanding proprietary rights did not cultivate the land. Thus, the Congress generally failed to take a strong anti-landlord and pro-peasant stand. In Bengal, there was another trend surfacing. The peasant movements in several parts, representing the majority Muslim peasantry, got gradually alienated from the middle-class nationalists who took a pro-landlord position. Similarly, the Congress did not take the side of the peasants in Punjab when the issue of land alienation to the moneylenders and other non-cultivating classes came to fore.

Thus, although the earlier nationalists felt quite concerned about the peasants, they were not particularly interested involving them in the nationalist movement. The politics of the moderates was not based on appealing to and involving the masses, and the appeal of the extremists remained confined to the urban population.

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## 25.5 MASS NATIONALISM AND THE PEASANTRY

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A closer relationship between the Congress and the peasants was forged in the period of mass nationalism beginning in 1918. Since then, the Congress and other nationalist leaders became increasingly involved with the peasants in various ways. In this section, we will discuss the different dimensions of this association.

### 25.5.1 Gandhi and the Peasantry

The peasants were not much involved in Congress politics until Gandhi came on the scene. The active involvement of Gandhi drastically changed the nature of nationalist association with peasantry. Now the actual work of integrating peasants with the national movement started which shifted the focus of the national movement from constitutional to mass politics. Gandhi considered the peasants as a very important force which needed to be mobilised if the Congress had to fight against colonial rule. Champaran in Bihar and Kheda in Gujarat provided the ground which disseminated the pro-peasant ideology of Gandhi, brought him to notice as the leader of the masses, and linked the nationalist movement to the peasantry. In Champaran, the peasants were agitating against the planters who were not only forcing the peasants to grow indigo under the exploitative *tinkathia* system (a kind of forced cultivation of indigo in 3/20<sup>th</sup> of land held by the peasant) but also paid a price for indigo which was even lower than that of the food crops. One of their leaders, Raj Kumar Sukul, contacted the nationalist leaders, including Gandhi, to come and see the problems of the peasants. After some hesitation, Gandhi agreed to lead the movement. The peasants responded with enthusiasm effecting huge mobilisation in the area and defied the British authority. Acts of violence also took place and some local landlords were also attacked. Gandhi and the Congress did not approve of these acts. Nevertheless, the peasants showed faith in Gandhi and the Congress, and this area became a base of nationalist mobilisation even later. Gandhi's intervention brought the hated *tinkathia* system to an end and helped in determining the rent payable by the peasants to the planters. Gandhi's success in Champaran was looked upon as an important victory which immediately made him famous on the national scene.

Similarly in Kheda, on the request of the local peasant leaders, Gandhi decided to support the struggle of the peasants for revenue remission in 1918. The local peasants, largely belonging to the Patidar caste, were feeling very discontented with the government because of the extremely strict schedule of land revenue collection. In 1918, the peasants had lost about 25 per cent of their crop due to excessive rains. They wanted that the land revenue installments should be suspended. They sent several petitions to the government. However, the Government was adamant on recovering its dues as per its schedule. The peasants launched agitation to fight against this injustice by deciding to withhold the payment of land revenue. Gandhi supported their just demand. Although the struggle did not succeed, the government at least agreed not to confiscate the property of the non-paying peasants. This area also remained a nationalist base for a long time to come. In both these movements, the peasants had started the struggle on their own before contacting Gandhi and other nationalists for support and leadership. The mobilisation of the peasants was largely independent of the Congress. However, these areas became nationalist strongholds in subsequent nationalist movements against the British rule.

In Bardoli, the nationalist leadership, between 1921 and 1927, undertook the task of generating a model peasant movement by linking the local peasant discontent with the larger problem of nationalism. The issue was the periodic upward revision of land revenue without paying attention to the ground situation. The peasants of this region had begun agitation to oppose one such revenue enhancement which would be done in 1925-26. The government did not care about the agitation and increased the revenue demand. In protest against this arbitrary increase, the peasants, in consultation with the nationalist leaders, decided to implement complete non-payment of land revenue in 1927. This started the famous Bardoli movement. The nationalist leaders fully supported the movement and Gandhi ashrams of the area helped in mobilising the peasants and sustaining the movement. The government tried to forcibly collect the entire revenue but failed to do so. Finally, a compromise was reached and the revenue demand was lowered.

Gandhi clearly perceived that the involvement of the peasant masses in the nationalist movement was essential if the Congress claimed to represent the nation and fight successfully against the British rule. He, therefore, sincerely endeavoured to bring the peasants into nationalist fold by propagating his constructive programme, village uplift, *charkha*, and *swadeshi*. But his focus was on the nation as a whole and he did not wish to alienate any section within Indian society. He, therefore, assiduously avoided taking up any contentious issue which would create a wedge between the peasants and their immediate oppressors such as moneylenders and landlords. Gandhi did not wish to create or support class conflict between either the peasants and landlords or between the peasants and agricultural workers, but he also did not want to alienate any section whose demands were not taken up by the Congress. Thus, although Congress main support base was among the rich and middle peasantry, Gandhi's constructive programmes helped the Congress to spread nationalist message among the poor peasants and agricultural workers as well, quite often cutting across caste lines. Gandhi panchayats were formed in many villages as nationalist organisations to propagate the Gandhian ideas about khadi and abstention from alcohol and drugs. They sometimes also asked the villagers to eschew non-vegetarian food. These panchayats could be led by persons of any caste, including the lower castes. Thus, in a village of district Gorakhpur in UP, a Gandhi panchayat deposed the reigning high-caste and wealthy headman of the village, and many lower caste persons refused to offer services and goods to his family as it was perceived as anti-nationalist.

The Mahatma and his message were politically appropriated by the peasants who interpreted them in their various ways to fight against the landlords and the colonial state. The local press also contributed in building the image of the Mahatma and disseminating his supposed message. Rumours played an important role in the process of peasants' interpretation and appropriation of Gandhi's message. In the eyes of the peasants, Gandhi became the symbol which represented justice and freedom from oppression of the landlords, moneylenders and the colonial state. They justified their violent actions also in the name of Gandhi and his call to fight injustice.

### **25.5.2 Peasant Movements during the Non-cooperation**

Due to the policies and actions of the colonial state and its protégé, the landlords, discontent was rising among the peasants. The effects of the World War further

exerted pressure on the Indian people in general. The rise in prices of various commodities, and problems faced in transport and shipping resulting in high prices of salt, cotton cloths and kerosene, unsettled the peasantry. The failure of monsoon in 1918 had disastrous consequences resulting in famine. Diseases of various kinds also made their appearance resulting in a large number of deaths. The poverty of the common peasant was increasing due to growing pressure on land in the absence of large urban employment opportunities. Arbitrary enhancement of rent, eviction from the land, forced labour, various other forms of landlord-imposed taxes, and coercion of several kinds created an explosive situation.

In UP, the situation was quite bad. The taluqdars were given enormous powers by the colonial state to make them allies. These big landlords practiced arbitrary eviction of tenants, levied illegal taxes, and charged very high rents. Some of the Home Rule members formed Kisan Sabhas in 1918 to organise the peasants. By 1919, there were about 450 branches in the province. A little later, the Congress also became active among UP peasants.

In the Awadh region, a powerful peasant movement developed under the leadership of Baba Ramachandra. This movement gained momentum when Ramachandra was arrested and the Congress leaders, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, became involved. The rumour about Mahatma Gandhi's arrival to secure the release of Ramachandra brought tens of thousands of peasants on the streets. In this situation, the Non-cooperation movement provided the peasants an opportunity to voice their grievances and to link their movements with the nationalist mainstream. The nationalist struggle against the colonial rule also gave inspiration to peasants and their leaders in several regions to express their grievances more openly. However, some of the earlier leaders, such as Madan Mohan Malaviya, preferred to stick to the constitutional path. This led to the Congress and the non-cooperators establishing their own Oudh Kisan Sabha in 1920 which now affiliated more than 330 kisan sabhas. The peasants were asked not to offer *begaar* (unpaid labour) and refuse to cultivate those lands from which another tenant was evicted. The association of peasants' movement with the Congress gave rise to strong Kisan Sabha movement in many parts of the country since 1918. The peasants interpreted the Congress support in their own ways which quite often went against Congress' official position. For example, peasants' insistence on no-tax to the government and no-rent to the landlord, boycott of those persons who went against peasants' demands, and occasional violent acts to send their message across did not go well with the Congress higher leadership. In 1921, in some of UP districts, there were significant peasant agitations in which the crops of the landlords were burnt, the landlords' strongmen and the police were attacked, and some markets were looted. The Eka movement in Barabanki district, led by Madari Pasi, rattled the Congress by its violent ways. Such radical tendencies did not accord well with the official non-violent policies of the Congress leading to withdrawal of the Congress leaders.

The presence of the Congress leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru in UP, Ballabhbai Patel in Gujarat and Rajendra Prasad in Bihar provided the peasants and their leaders much needed encouragement in their struggles. The peasants and their local leaders sought in the Congress an all-India organisation which would listen to their grievances and present their demands to the colonial authorities. On the other hand, the support received from the peasants provided the Congress much-

needed legitimacy to be a mass party which represented the Indians as a whole rather than the interests of the narrow upper and middle classes.

Gandhian nationalism also appealed to the tribal people in various ways. It ranged from violent protests (as in Gudem Hills of Andhra Pradesh led by Sitaram Raju and in Kumaun and Garhwal led by Badridutt Pande) to conscious change in their lifestyle to embrace vegetarianism and teetotalism. The uprising led by Sitarama Raju continued till 1924 against forest laws and moneylenders. In Rajasthan, the anti-feudal peasant movements were very active during the 1920s. Motilal Tejawat and others led the Bhil movement against forced labour and illegal cesses. The trend everywhere was to link the local movement to the nationalist one, whether the Congress leadership supported the particular movements or not. As Shahid Amin and other historians have argued, the peasants tended to interpret the Gandhian messages in their own ways which might not be in accordance with the official Congress policies.

Many middle and upper level Congress leaders adopted the strategy of harnessing the peasants' mobilisation to the nationalist cause without letting these agitations move into militant channels. In Awadh, the militant peasant movement led by Baba Ramchandra during 1918-20 was sought to be moderated and controlled by the Congress to the nationalist end without fully meeting the peasants' grievances. Similarly, in Bihar, the Congress leadership pursued the dual strategy of containing the militant peasant leaders like Swami Viswananda while bringing the peasants closer to the nationalist movement. In Kheda district in Gujarat, the peasant agitation was incorporated into the nationalist struggle. In Andhra Pradesh and Orissa also, the strong peasant movements were adopted by the Congress while keeping their militancy in check.

In some areas, such as in Gujarat and parts of Bengal, the Congress was able to control the peasant movements and channelise them in the desired direction in conformity with its own programme of the time. In some other areas, such as in parts of UP, the peasant movements turned militant. In such cases, the Congress did not further involve itself with them, which probably made it easy for the colonial authorities to suppress them. In Gorakhpur, when the peasant movement turned violent resulting in the looting of the market and killing of several policemen in Chauri-Chaura in 1922, Gandhi decided to withdraw the Non-cooperation movement.

In Bengal and Punjab, during the late 1920s, the Congress did not take up the demands of the predominantly Muslim peasants. Even in Bihar, the Congress vacillated in providing full support to the peasant agitations against landlords. In Malabar, a strong peasant movement developed in 1921 against the colonial state and the state-supported landlords. Initially, it received support from the Congress and Khilafat leaders. The movement did not remain non-violent and the peasants attacked the landlords and the government properties. The government repression resulted in hardening the religious ideology of the movement which now took communal overtones. The Congress withdrew from the movement and the massive state repression brutally crushed it resulting in large number of deaths and arrests.

However, in raiyatwari areas, the Congress more strongly took up the demands of the peasants against revenue enhancements. In Bardoli taluqa of Gujarat, the Congress leaders such as Vallabhbhai Patel and Kunvarji and Kalyanji Mehta

mobilised the peasants to resist the government demand of enhanced revenue in 1927. In coastal Andhra, the attempt by the colonial government to raise the revenue in 1927 met with stiff resistance from the peasants which developed into a strong movement led by Congress leaders.

### 25.5.3 Peasant Movements during the 1930s

The Civil Disobedience Movement witnessed even larger and more conscious peasant participation in nationalist movement. The politically surcharged atmosphere in the wake of the protests against Simon Commission was further intensified due to the impact of the World Depression by 1929. The peasants were getting agitated over the fall in prices of their products while they had to pay rents, revenue, taxes and debts at pre-Depression rates. The launch of the Civil Disobedience movement in such an atmosphere brought a very large number of peasants within the ambit of the nationalist movement. No-rent and no-revenue campaigns in various parts of the country were taken up by the peasant leaders. The emerging leftist trends in the Congress also influenced the growing peasant movements. A new generation of radical leadership emerged from among the Congress left wing and the communists who from now onwards would be closely attached to the peasant movements all over the country. Sahajanand, N.G. Ranga, Sohan Singh Josh, Indulal Yagnik, Jayaprakash Narayan, Mohanlal Gautam, Kamal Sarkar, Ahmed Din and many others became prominent in mobilisation of peasantry.

Powerful peasant movements developed in UP against eviction, enhancement of rent and forced labour in early 1930s. Gandhi advised the peasants to pay part of the rent and send their grievances to local Congress offices. The peasants interpreted the Gandhian message variously in their own ways and in many cases all payments to the landlords were stopped. Local leaders resorted to militant actions against landlords in the name of Congress. Cognisant of peasant distress in 1931, the Congress leadership authorised non-payment of rent in some UP districts. In 1936, the UP Congress leaders supported the call for abolition of landlordism.

In other parts of the country also, powerful peasant movements arose. In Bengal, Bankim Mukherji led the peasants of Burdwan against canal tax. In Orissa, strong peasant movements developed both in British India and princely states. In Punjab, very powerful and organised peasant movement emerged on various issues related to revenue, land settlement and illegal levies. In addition, defiance against colonialism by manufacturing salt on a large scale was also undertaken. Boycott against foreign goods and liquor was carried on as it was done in previous campaigns. The massive repression by the colonial state against the Congress leaders and the peasantry led to decline in the participation in many areas. At the same time, the smaller peasantry resorted to no-rent movements and in the tribal areas there were campaigns against forest laws. These movements tended to take a radical turn which the Congress wanted to avoid in search for a broader unity among Indians of all classes.

However, such unity was not easy to achieve as the landlords, propped up by the colonial government, pressurised the peasants to give in to their illegal exactions. In Bihar, Swami Sahajanand started a movement to protect the occupancy rights of the tenants, and formed Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha in 1929. In the early 1930s, the Kisan Sabha, under the influence of the Socialists, took up radical

demands and organised a broad front of the peasantry. In Andhra, N.G. Ranga also mobilised the peasants and formed a Kisan Sabha. The Kisan Sabha movement spread to other regions of the country also and it raised the demand for the abolition of zamindari. In 1936, at the Lucknow session of the Congress, All India Kisan Sabha was formed with Sahajanand as its first president. It later issued a Kisan manifesto which demanded abolition of zamindari and occupancy rights for all tenants. Under pressure from its socialist members and leaders, the Congress adopted an Agrarian Programme in December 1936. The broad base created for the Congress by Kisan Sabha's mobilisation of the peasants led to its massive victory in the elections of 1937.

The formation of Congress ministries in several provinces in 1937 charged the peasants and their leaders with new energy and raised their expectations. The Congress ministries undertook certain measures to reduce the debt burdens by fixing interest rates in all provinces ruled by it, enhancements of rent were checked, many cultivators were given the status of occupancy tenants in UP, in Bihar *bakhast* lands were partly restored to tenants, in Maharashtra the *khoti* tenants of landholders were given some rights, and the grazing fees on the forest lands were abolished. However, there were several issues on which the Congress was seen by the peasant leaders as not paying attention to the peasants' grievances or even going back on its earlier commitment.

The Kisan Sabhas had initially aimed to create mutual understanding between the peasants and the landlords. However, owing to the adamant and oppressive attitude of the landlords, the Kisan Sabhas were forced to adopt militant posture. But they kept spreading nationalist ideology among the peasants in support of the Congress' political programme. But the right wing leaders in the Congress did not want the hegemony of the left and also endeavoured to check the peasant militancy. On the other hand, the peasants were expecting that the Congress ministries would meet their demands. Their movements in certain areas, such as in Bihar, was also intensified. But the Congress government in Bihar took a pro-landlord position which compelled the peasant leaders to launch a massive movement under the aegis of Bihar Kisan Sabha for the restoration of *bakast* lands. The landlords felt threatened and appealed to the provincial government. Ultimately, the musclemen of the landlords and the state police suppressed the movement. The Bihar Congress now distanced itself from the Kisan Sabha and its militancy. Ultimately, certain concessions, compromises, and repression by the police and landlords resulted in decline of the movement.

In some other provinces also, the conservative stance of the Congress ministries was becoming clear and the radical peasant demands were sought to be checked, the interests of the landlords were protected, and the activities of the Kisan Sabha were curtailed. In the Haripura session of the Congress in February 1938, the Congress members were prohibited to become the members of Kisan Sabhas. The Congress leaders also did not intervene when the peasant movements faced severe repression in Princely States. [Bipan Chandra et al 1988: 197-209 and 343-50; Sumit Sarkar 1983: 239-42, 274-78, 315-6; S. Bandyopadhyay 2004: 407-10].

#### **25.5.4 Nationalism and Peasantry during the 1940s**

The Quit India movement began under the condition of leadership vacuum. Almost the entire top leadership of the Congress was arrested, and even other

leaders were forced to go underground. Local leaders sprang up who spurred the peasants to attack the government property such as police stations, treasury buildings, railway stations, post offices and electric installations. Europeans were attacked and sometimes killed in public. All sections of peasants, cutting across caste lines, and even many landlords supported the movement believing that the British rule was at an end. Peasants and agricultural workers participated in destroying the symbols of colonial authority in villages and established their own raj. In Bihar, UP, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bengal, Maharashtra, Gujarat and several other parts of the country the peasants rose along with workers and middle classes against the colonial rule. The student volunteers played an important role in organising the movements and leading the attacks. In some parts of the country, as in Ballia district of UP and parts of Orissa and Maharashtra, independence from British rule was declared and new governments were set up for a few days.

Later in the 1940s, some of the peasant movements became very militant and radical. The communist-led Bengal Kisan Sabha prepared the ground for the widespread Tebhaga movement in 1946 which continued for about a year before being suppressed by the government and the landlords. In Hyderabad, a princely state, a long protracted peasant rebellion against the landlords and the Nizam was organised by the communists. The Telangana movement, as it was called, began in mid-1946. It covered about 3,000 villages and a population of about 30 lakhs. All classes of peasants participated in it and won many successes before it was put down by the Indian army. The movement was formally withdrawn in October 1951.

During the 1940s, the Congress accepted the idea of zamindari abolition on a larger level. In its election manifesto of 1946, it proposed that landlordism would be abolished after paying an equitable compensation to the landlords. The Zamindari Abolition Acts, in fact, provided generous compensations to the landlords and also allowed them enough time to dispose of their lands in the ways they desired. It is true that substantial tenants and rich peasants also benefited from abolition of landlordism. But the poor peasants and agricultural workers did not gain much from such measures.

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## **25.6 PEASANTRY AND INDIAN NATIONALISM – AN ASSESSMENT**

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The peasant movements against colonial rule had existed since much before the emergence of the nationalist movement in the late nineteenth century. However, the rise of nationalism helped to re-define the peasant movements. The idea of nation spread by the nationalist movement played a big role in raising the consciousness of the peasantry and creating the basis for the formation of All-India Kisan Sabha. It made the peasantry realise that they had certain common interests at all-India level. It encouraged the localised peasant movements to assume national character and significance.

On the other hand, the peasant movements provided strength to the nationalist movement in its anti-imperialist struggles. The limited social base of the Congress in the early period compelled its leaders to seek broader support among the middle classes and the masses. Peasantry was one very important group which could be mobilised to bolster the nationalist cause. The peasants also had their own

grievances against the colonial regime as they were among the most exploited and oppressed groups in Indian society due to extractive colonial policies. To promote nationalist ideas among the peasants the nationalist leadership attempted to portray the peasantry as a cohesive group above the divisions of caste, class and religion. However, the thrust towards class antagonism against the landlords was sought to be checked, and the mobilisation was intended primarily for forging an all-class and all-India alliance against imperialism. The idea of a single cohesive group of peasantry was also useful in allowing the nationalist leadership to integrate small and ruined landlords with the broad notion of peasantry. Secondly, by regularly taking up the peasants' demands, the nationalists wished to integrate the peasantry into the nation. As a part of this strategy, the Congress was not much in favour of separate peasant organisations. The nationalist belief was that the primary contradiction of the peasants lay with imperialism and, therefore, they should direct their struggles against it.

However, in the name of all-class unity, the Congress did not even support the just struggles of the peasantry against high rents and unfair dues imposed by the landlords. The problem with the nationalist mobilisation of the peasantry lay in its avoidance of the struggle against landlords. Except in UP, the top nationalist leadership mobilised the peasants primarily around the anti-imperialist struggles on reducing the revenue demands of the state. So far as peasants' plight from the excessive rent demanded by the landlords and by the exploitative moneylenders was concerned, the apex nationalist leadership generally ignored or even opposed the peasant movements against such exploitation.

Yet, the Congress succeeded in mobilising the peasantry because it was not organically linked to the feudal elements. The Congress could accommodate radicalism such as anti-revenue and anti-rent propaganda within its ideological fold. The willingness of the Congress to support and voice the peasants' demands at various levels afforded them the opportunity to integrate the peasants into broader nationalist movement. The peasantry supported the nationalist cause because they thought that through it their basic problems related to land, rent / revenue, and debt would be solved. Quite often, therefore, the peasants interpreted and worked on the nationalist ideas in their own ways. The nationalist message was perceived by the peasants not just against the colonial rule but against all other forms of oppressors including the landlords, moneylenders, traders, and shopkeepers.

Most studies reveal that the social base of the Congress derived neither from the upper-caste landed aristocratic groups nor from the lower-caste poor peasants and agricultural labourers. It was mostly derived from the rich and middle peasantry. However, all sections of peasantry, in varying measures, participated in nationalist movements, although the participation of the upper layers of peasantry might have been greater.

Even when the peasant movement tended to go beyond the Congress programme, it used nationalist ideas and its aims and intents were expressed in nationalist idioms. Despite disagreements with the official Congress policies, the peasant leaders generally used nationalist rhetoric and names of the prominent Congress leaders to carry out their programmes. The Congress was also getting increasingly involved in peasant agitations to counter the colonial government and to extend its own hegemony over this crucial and most numerous segment of Indian society.

It is doubtful whether the intricacies of the Congress' anti-imperialist programme was imbibed by the peasants or whether the meanings of anti-imperialist pan-Indian nationalism deeply seeped into the consciousness of the peasantry. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that the peasants were aware of the broad direction of Congress movement and used the nationalist symbols and the names of the leaders in the course of their agitations. They also internalised many of the nationalist ideas coming to them either from the Congress or other nationalists and revolutionaries.

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## **25.7 SUMMARY**

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The peasant resistance to colonial intervention began right from the initial period of the colonial rule. For about a century or even longer, the peasant protests and resistance against colonialism and its allies such as the landlords and moneylenders were led by traditional leadership which were in many ways closely associated with the peasants. In the late nineteenth century, some middle-class, modern educated persons took up the cause of the peasants and tribals and voiced their demands. However, middle-class leadership reached the peasants only in the second decade of the twentieth century. Gandhi was the most important nationalist leader who seriously attempted and succeeded in drawing the peasants into nationalist fold. In his wake, many Congress leaders became involved in peasant movements. However, the Congress tried to restrain the class-antagonism inherent in these movements against the landlords. The main objective of the Congress was to direct peasant movements against imperialism. In this quest, many just demands of the peasants were not taken up or ignored. Thus, although the Congress in particular, and the nationalist movement in general, played the crucial role of imbuing the peasant movements with modern consciousness and in expanding the scope and visibility of even smaller struggles, the Congress did not at times press for those peasants' issues which it had taken up itself.

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## **25.8 EXERCISES**

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- 1) Discuss the views of various historians regarding the relationship between nationalism and peasantry.
- 2) Describe the initial process through which a close association between peasant movements and nationalist movement began.
- 3) Discuss the association of nationalism with the peasant movements in UP and Bihar during the 1920s and 1930s.
- 4) What was the nationalist strategy with regard to the peasant movements?

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# UNIT 26 THE WORKING CLASS\*

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## Structure

- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 Growth and Conditions of Modern Working Class
- 26.3 Nationalists and the Workers in the Early Phase
- 26.4 Nationalists and Working Class in the Era of Mass Nationalism
  - 26.4.1 Working Class Movements from 1918 to 1926
  - 26.4.2 Working Class and Nationalist Movement between 1927 and 1937
  - 26.4.3 Working Class and Nationalism from 1937 to 1947
- 26.5 Summary
- 26.6 Exercises

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## 26.1 INTRODUCTION

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The rise of modern industry resulted in the formation of collectivities of workers in certain cities. In some big urban centres (such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Kanpur, Ahmedabad, and Jamshedpur), their presence was overwhelming. Any political party trying to build its base would attempt to mobilise them. Nationalism was the most important ideology and sentiment spreading throughout India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The workers were also not untouched by it. However, the relationship between the workers and the nationalists, particularly represented by the Congress, was not always close and uniform. It is the nature and dynamic of this association that we will discuss in this Unit.

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## 26.2 GROWTH AND CONDITIONS OF MODERN WORKING CLASS

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The growth of plantations, coal-mining, railways and mill industries in the nineteenth century resulted in the rise of the modern working class. It was a modern working class in the sense of relatively modern organisation of labour and a relatively free market for labour. There were certain important exceptions to this rule. The plantation workers, who also worked for the capitalist employers and produced goods which were sold in the international markets, were recruited and worked under unfree conditions. In fact, for the majority of the workers in colonial India, the recruitment and working conditions were not as free as were present in some other countries which were capitalistically more developed. This situation had its impact on the working class movement as it developed over the years.

Plantations and railways were the initial enterprises to herald the era of colonial capitalism in Indian subcontinent. A British company, the Assam Tea Company, was established in 1839 to set up tea gardens in Assam. Coffee plantations were started in South India by 1840. The Great Indian Peninsular Railways laid its first line between Bombay and Thane in 1853. Another line was opened by the

Eastern Indian Railway between Calcutta and Raniganj in 1854. By 1857, there was 288 miles of railway tracks in India. The real expansion occurred after the Revolt of 1857 when the British rulers realised its significance for military purposes. Coal production had begun as far back as 1775. The Bengal Coal Company was established in 1843. However, it was only the beginning of railways which saw a real growth in its production because coal was essential for running the railway locomotion. By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, its production rose to around three million tons.

The first cotton mill was built in Bombay in 1854 by a Parsi businessman and it started production in 1856. Cotton mill industry developed rapidly in cities like Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Sholapur and Nagpur. It was mostly owned by the Indians. In contrast, the jute mills remained in foreign hands for a long time. A Scottish entrepreneur started the first jute mill in Kolkata in 1854. It also expanded rapidly over the next fifty years. The mill industry got enormously strengthened by the 1870s with a large number of workers employed in them. In 1890, over 3 lakh workers were employed in factories and mines.

By 1914, there were 264 cotton mills in India employing 260,000 workers, 60 jute mills with 200,000 workers, the railways provided work to 600,000 people, the plantations to 700,000 workers and mines to 150,000 workers. An increasingly growing number of workers were concentrated in small enclaves within city boundaries or around plantations. By 1921, over 28 lakhs persons were employed in organised industries. Besides, a large number of people were employed in the non-organised sector in urban areas, for example, domestic servants, and casual workers in the market. The modern working class, although derived from the agricultural labourers and marginal peasants in the countryside, was quite different its position. It was numerically small compared to the overwhelming number of labouring poor and small peasants in the rural areas. But it was concentrated in certain crucial areas from where the emergent modern politics could be influenced.

The working and living conditions of the workers were extremely bad. Long hours of work, low wages, unhygienic conditions at working places, employment of small children, discrimination against women workers, poor and unsanitary housing, high levels of indebtedness, and no guarantee against accident, sickness or old age created a situation in which the death rate was very high among workers leading to a high rate of turnover. In most places, the workers had to labour for 12 to 16 hours or even more under intolerable conditions. They had then to live in houses in the cities which had an average of 5 persons in one small room. Women workers faced even harsher situation labouring both in the mills, plantations or collieries and also working at home under unbearable conditions. The conditions of the plantation labourers were particularly bad because they were confined in a restricted area and were legally bound to work for the period of the contract. They almost faced the situation of prisoners of the planters who employed recruiting and disciplining agents called *sirdars* and security guards to supervise and coerce them to work.

The government passed Factory Acts in 1881 and 1891. However, these applied only to children and women and not to the adult male labourers who formed the bulk of the workforce, and, even in their cases, the protection was not comprehensive. The machinery to enforce the provisions of the Acts was even weaker. The provisions of these Acts were flouted without much fear of penalty.

The Factory Act of 1911 restricted the working hours of adult males to 12 hours on any one working day. The amended Factory Act of 1922 further reduced the working time to 11 hours.

The situation on the wage front was no better in the initial years. The industrial wages were not much above the agricultural wages on the whole. The rates were different in different centres. While in Bombay the wages were the highest, in Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Nagpur and other centres they were low. In the plantations the wages were even lower. However, even in Bombay, the wages remained at subsistence level till around 1918. Between 1918 and 1921, the wages in Bombay, as in other centres, registered considerable increase, even in real terms. This was the result of the agitations by the workers as well as the beginning of trade unions among them. The situation slowly improved in the long run both in regard to the security of jobs and rise in wages. However, the picture was not so good for the smaller and less organised and unorganised industries. There the wages remained much lower and there was no security of jobs either.

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### 26.3 NATIONALISTS AND THE WORKERS IN THE EARLY PHASE

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During the early period, some social reformers showed interests in the improvement of workers' conditions. Sasipada Banerjee, a Brahmo social reformer, formed an organisation, the Workingmen's Club, in 1870 to work for the amelioration of the conditions of workers in Bengal. He also brought out a monthly journal entitled *Bharat Sramjeebi* for spreading education among workers. In Mumbai, S.S. Bengalee and N.M. Lokhanday were involved in various activities among the workers. Lokhanday, an associate of the great social reformer, Jotiba Phule, published an Anglo-Marathi weekly, *Dinbandhu*, since 1880. He also formed the Bombay Millhands' Association in 1890. Some other important organizations active among the Bombay workers were the Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha formed in 1909, and the Social Service League established in 1911. However, these bodies were primarily interested in welfare activities and did not have much organizational base among the workers. Their work was mostly of a philanthropic nature, and not much political. Their main aim was to persuade the colonial government to make legislation to improve the harsh working conditions of labourers.

So far as the nationalists were concerned, they were so much enamoured by the ideology of industrialism that they regarded any legislative intervention for ameliorating the appalling conditions of workers as unnecessary and uncalled-for. None of the major works by early nationalists showed concern for the misery of the labouring classes, as they did for the peasantry. The Indian National Congress also did not mention the industrial workers in its early resolutions. When the first Factory Commission was appointed in 1875 to enquire into the conditions of the factory workers in Bombay, the nationalist opinion was not in favour of any legal intervention on this issue. Even when the Factory Act of 1881 was passed, which did not go far in addressing the terrible conditions of work, the nationalists were against it. The *Amrit Bazar Patrika* clearly expressed the nationalist sentiment on this issue by writing that 'A larger death rate amongst our operatives is far more preferable to the collapse of this rising industry' [cited in S.B. Upadhyay 2004: 146]. Dadabhai Naoroji declared in the second session

of the Indian National Congress that the Congress 'must confine itself to questions in which the entire nation has a direct participation, and it must leave the adjustment of social reforms and other class questions to class Congresses' [cited in Bipan Chandra et al : 211]. Thus, the nationalist leadership in pre-1905 phase displayed strong reservation towards any legislative measures by the colonial government, and by and large remained indifferent to the conditions of the workers.

One major reason for such reaction of the nationalists was because the British cotton textile industry was seen to be behind the move to regulate the hours of work in Indian industries which were perceived by it as competitor. The nationalist press, therefore, bitterly criticised any attempt to restrict the working hours in Indian industries. The fact that extremely long working hours were neither in the interest of Indian industries nor of the workers was overlooked by the nationalists. Even when the workers protested against such long working hours, the nationalist opinion dubbed it as the result of outside interference rather than any genuine grievance of the workers. One of the nationalist papers, *Kalpataru*, summarised the prevailing opinion of the nationalists when it wrote in September 1905: 'We have to build a nation and it matters not if all the mill hands are placed at the altar of martyrdom' [cited in S.B. Upadhyay 2004: 149].

Such nationalist reaction was prompted by the nationalist fear that the fledgling Indian industries would be destroyed due to any interference by the colonial government which worked in the interests of the British cotton manufacturers. On the other hand, when the workers' protests were against the colonial state, the nationalists, particularly of the extremist stream, promptly supported them. They made a very clear distinction between the grievances of the workers employed in the industries owned by Europeans and Indians. For example, the nationalists quickly extended support to the strike by the signallers of the GIP Railway in 1899 and appealed to the public to raise funds for the strikers. Similarly, they expressed sympathy for the mint workers who were worked for long hours and whose conditions were very bad. They also supported the strikes of the postal employees and some nationalists demanded that unions should be formed among these workers.

Thus, the pattern of early nationalist response to the workers' grievances and protests was very clear. If the protests were against the Indian industrialists, the nationalists did not support them, and wanted the matters to be resolved internally without government intervention. However, if the protests were against the colonial government, many nationalists supported the workers. The nationalists wanted to enlist the support of the workers for the nationalist cause but not at the cost of the supposed interests of Indian capitalists. The early nationalists quite clearly sought indigenous bourgeois development for the country and opposed any move which they perceived to be against this.

But, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the nationalists of extremist variety began to see the workers as an ally in the quest for national freedom. Thus, during the Swadeshi Movement, the nationalists reached out to the workers, particularly in Bengal, and were involved in various protests and strikes by the workers, especially in foreign-owned companies. Government of India Press, railways and jute industry were the main concerns in which the nationalists supported and organised workers' protests. The workers as a collectivity were

sought to be involved in political matters and nationalist mobilisations. Right on the first day of protests against the partition of Bengal in 1905, the workers struck work and joined the demonstrations.

Nationalists such as G.S. Agarkar, B.C. Pal, C.R. Das and G. Subramania Iyer spoke for pro-labour reforms. In 1903, Iyer emphasised the need for the workers to form their own organisations to fight for their demands. Other Swadeshi leaders in Bengal, such as Aswini Coomar Banerji, S. Haldar, Premtosh Bose and Apurba Kumar Ghosh, were involved in several protests and strikes of the workers, particularly in foreign-owned companies. In Punjab, Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh were actively involved in the strikes by workers in government concerns in 1907. They were deported by the colonial government for this. In Tamil Nadu, the nationalist leaders, such as Subramaniya Siva and Chidambaram Pillai, organised strikes in foreign-owned cotton mills. The workers were sought to be involved in nationalist agitations as well. The *hartals* to protest the partition of Bengal witnessed many strikes and participation of workers in demonstrations. During the Swadeshi movement, some preliminary efforts were made to form trade unions. Some temporary organisations of workers were formed. But, due to lack of consistency, long-term organisations could not develop and, after the decline of the Swadeshi Movement, the labour unions floated during the height of the movement disappeared.

The greatest demonstration of the workers' nationalist fervour was seen in 1908 when there were massive strikes and protests against Tilak's imprisonment. The workers from the mills and other industries violently protested against the government for unfairly imprisoning Tilak when he wrote articles in defence of the revolutionaries such as Khudiram Bose and others. As Tilak was sentenced for six years, the millworkers decided to strike work and hold demonstrations for six days, one day for each year. The strike was almost total bringing out thousands of workers on the streets, despite the fact that there were no noticeable leaders managing the strikes and demonstrations. These events in Bombay in 1908 were a high watermark of the relationship between the nationalists and the workers.

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## 26.4 NATIONALISTS AND WORKING CLASS IN THE ERA OF MASS NATIONALISM

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The graph of working class movements all over India cannot be neatly drawn in terms of periods. Nevertheless, for the sake of presentation, we have here adopted a period-wise structure for working class activities and their relationship to nationalist movement.

### 26.4.1 Working Class Movements from 1918 to 1926

The First World War caused steep rise in the prices of necessary commodities while the wages did not rise much. The real earnings of the workers, therefore, registered a sharp decline causing tremendous hardship to them. The news from the War front and the relatively better situation of workers in Western countries, combined with the Russian Revolution, instilled a new consciousness among the workers. The era of mass nationalism, enunciated by Gandhi in India, was the most important factor in the post-War scenario. Various middle-class leaders, including the nationalist ones, were now taking increased interests in workers'

problems. Earlier protest activities by the workers had also made them aware of their strengths and weaknesses and made them conscious of the need for larger organisation. Thus, economic distress, beginning of the era of mass nationalist politics, Russian Revolution, and formation of International Labour Organisation (ILO) created the situation for greater politicisation of labour and formation of labour organisations. All these factors heralded the era of general industrial strikes and of trade unionism. The strikes which were resorted to since 1918 were much larger, more intense, and better organised. The years from 1918 to 1922 were very important for labour movement. There were a large number of strikes and protests all over the country, the workers became involved with the nationalist upsurge during this period, and various unions all over the country were formed leading to an all-India federation, AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress).

The Madras Labour Union, formed in April 1918, is generally considered to be the first trade union in India. B.P.Wadia, a nationalist leader and an associate of Annie Besant, was instrumental in its organisation. It was mainly an organisation based on the workers of Carnatic and Buckingham Mills in Madras. But workers from other trades such as tramways, rickshaw-pullers, etc. also joined the union in the initial stage. For the first time in India, there was a regular membership and the members were to contribute one *anna* as monthly subscription.

Around the same time, labour agitation had started in Ahmedabad which was to lead towards a completely different model of labour organisation. The workers in Ahmedabad were agitating for a bonus to compensate for the rise in prices. Ansuayaben Sarabhai, who was involved with the agitation, got in touch with Gandhiji and requested him to come to Ahmedabad. Gandhiji stood by the workers' side and demanded that the workers should be given 35 per cent bonus. On the refusal of the millowners, he called for a strike and insisted that the principle of arbitration should be accepted. He also went on a fast to persuade the millowners. Finally, the millowners accepted arbitration and as a compromise, the arbitrator recommended 27.5 per cent increase in wages. On the basis of this struggle and on the Gandhian principles of conciliation and arbitration, the Textile Labour Association, also known as Majur Mahajan, was established in Ahmedabad in 1920.

The atmosphere of mass politics created by the Khilafat Movement, anti-Rowlatt agitations, and the Non-cooperation Movement had influenced the workers who demonstrated their collective strength in many industries across the country. The millworkers in Bombay effected general industrial strikes in 1919 and 1920 involving over a lakh of workers. On several occasions, the workers in various parts of the country struck to protest government repression of nationalist movement. In April 1919, after government repression in Punjab and Gandhi's arrest, workers in Gujarat, Bengal and Maharashtra struck work, and held violent demonstrations. In 1919, the rumour of Gandhi's arrest brought a large number of Bombay workers on the streets which also witnessed some violence. In 1920, the Bombay millworkers twice struck work and held demonstrations after the death of Tilak to pay obeisance to him. In November 1921, there occurred a large-scale strike in Bombay mills in support of Congress' call to boycott the visit of Prince of Wales. More than a lakh of workers participated in militant demonstrations all over the city.

In its Amritsar Session, held in 1919 in the wake of rising unrest among workers, the Congress passed a resolution directing its provincial committees and other associated bodies to work for promoting labour unions throughout the country. These labour unions would try to secure fair wages and good living conditions for the workers. Again in 1920, in its Nagpur Session, the Congress passed a resolution: 'This Congress expresses its fullest sympathy with the workers in India in their struggle for securing their legitimate rights through the organization of trade unions, and places on record its condemnation of the brutal policy of treating the lives of Indian workers as of no account under the false pretext of preserving law and order. The Congress is of the opinion that Indian labour should be organized with a view to improve and promote their well-being and secure to them just rights and also to prevent exploitation i) of Indian Labour, ii) of Indian resources by foreign agencies' [cited in S. Sen 1977: 221-2]. As is evident, the resolution basically underlined the exploitation of the workers by foreign companies and the repression by the colonial state. No clear stand was taken about the exploitation and maltreatment of labour by Indian industrialists.

The launch of the Non-cooperation Movement helped in various ways to energise the labour movements all over country. It inspired the workers and their leaders to struggle for their just rights, and several nationalist activists directly participated and led the labour agitations in various parts of the country. There were hundreds of strikes all over India in many enterprises during 1918-21, including some general industrial strikes. In Bombay Presidency, there were numerous strikes pointing to a general unrest among workers to improve their conditions. In Bengal, the Khilafat agitators and some Gandhians supported and participated in many strikes and agitations by jute workers in and around Calcutta. The Khilafat activists and the Non-cooperators held a lot of meetings in Calcutta and preached Hindu-Muslim amity, setting up of arbitration courts, abandoning liquor and toddy, and boycott of law courts and foreign goods. Even unorganised workers such as carters, tramway workers and taxi-drivers were involved in their own struggles. The wave of struggle extended to coal workers and also to the tea garden workers in Darjeeling and Dooars. There were 137 strikes in Bengal between July 1920 and March 1921. In Raniganj coalfields, Swami Viswananda and Darsanananda, deputed by the Congress, organised and mobilised the workers against European Managing Agencies which were in control. They formed two labour associations in this area, and they preached equality of all humans and the need to improve the conditions of the workers. They also led an important strike in East India Railways which continued for about three months. Even in the tea gardens, Non-cooperation Movement inspired the belief that the British rule was to end soon resulting in the demise of the hated garden managers. Several sporadic agitations took place, with some help from the Congressmen. C.R. Das was an active Congress leader in Bengal who worked for linking the Congress with the emergent labour movement and wanted that the Congress should actively involve itself with promoting labour struggles against capitalists. Some Congress leaders, however, had misgivings about this strategy and wanted only a restricted involvement of the Congress in labour issues so as not to alienate the Indian industrialists. In Jamshedpur, the Jamshedpur Labour Association, was formed during the 1920 strike by the Congress leaders. In 1925, the renowned Congress leader, C.F. Andrews, became its president. Gandhi also visited the place and exhorted both the employers and the workers to work according to the principle of harmonious relation between labour and capital.

The heightened political activities during this period resulted in formation of several unions in many centres. By 1920, according to an estimate there were 125 unions consisting of 250,000 members. This was a fairly impressive growth by any standards. All these developments led to the establishment of the AITUC in 1920, with Lala Lajpat Rai, the Congress President of that year, as its first president and Dewan Chaman Lall as its first general secretary. Tilak, before his death in August 1920, was the moving spirit behind the formation of the AITUC. Many people connected with labour were realising that there was a need for a central organisation of labour to coordinate the works of the trade unions all over India. The formation of the ILO acted as a catalyst for it. The ILO was established in 1919 according to the terms set by the Versailles Treaty which ended the World War I. It was felt that there should be a national organisation of the trade unions whose nominees could be chosen to represent the Indian labour in the ILO.

The emphasis of the AITUC was to associate the workers with the nationalist movement. A large number of Congress activists were among the 800 delegates who attended the AITUC conference from all over the country. 60 unions had affiliated with it and 42 more had sent their willingness to affiliate. By all counts, the formation of the AITUC was a success. Overall, the AITUC claimed to represent over 500,000 workers from all over the country.

Lajpat Rai, in his first presidential address to the AITUC, emphasised the urgent need for organisation among workers, and declared that 'We must organize our workers, make them class conscious.' He warned the capitalists that if the 'capital wants to ignore the needs of labour and can think only of its huge profits, it should expect no response from labour and no sympathy from the general public' [cited in S. Sen 1977: 171]. He linked capitalism with imperialism and militarism and emphasised that the organised labour was very significant in the fight against them. Dewan Chaman Lall moved a resolution in favour of *Swaraj* and emphasised that it would be a *Swaraj* for the workers as well. All important leaders of the Indian National Congress, except Gandhiji, were enthused by the formation of the AITUC and send congratulatory messages for its conferences in 1920 and 1921.

The Congress' interest in labour declined after the withdrawal of the Non-cooperation Movement. The labour movements also registered a decline in this period due to various reasons. The years between 1922 and 1926 were a time of industrial recession and the workers were at a receiving end. The industrialist sought to cut wages which the workers now found difficult to resist. Although a few important strikes, particularly in Bombay, took place, the overall scenario pointed towards a retreat of working class activism as the job market was shrinking. The number of strikes declined from 376 in 1921 to about 130 annually between 1924 and 1927. Between 1923 and 1930, the Congress passed just one resolution on labour issues in 1926 in which it wanted the Gandhian constructive programme to be extended to the workers in urban areas.

Gandhi had different ideas about capital-labour relationship. He considered the capitalists as trustees and the workers as partners, both working for common public good. He believed in amicable and mutual settlement of all contentious issues and strongly discouraged class conflict. The role of trade unions, according to him, was not just to agitate for wages and other workers' issues by holding

strikes. They should rather work for the social and cultural improvements of workers and their families. His idea of constructive work among the labourers included establishment of day school for children, enforcement of prohibition, educating the workers for proper and ethical behaviour, and so on. He warned that 'It will be the most serious mistake to make use of labour strikes for political purposes' [cited in V. Bahl 1988: 6]. He firmly believed that 'Labour must not become a pawn in the hands of politicians on the political chessboard'. He chastised the Bengal Congress leaders in 1921 for supporting labour militancy by stating that 'We seek not to destroy capital of capitalists but to regulate the relations between capital and labour' [cited in S. Bandyopadhyay 2004: 378]. All disputes should be settled through mutual understanding and arbitration. There should be no role of strikes in labour-employer relationship. Such views were not in conformity with the practice of trade unions. Thus, the TLA, under instructions from Gandhi, did not affiliate with the AITUC when the latter was formed. Gandhi did not even send a message to the first conference of the AITUC. He did not approve the idea of a central organisation of the working class which encompassed various unions.

#### **26.4.2 Working Class and Nationalist Movement between 1927 and 1937**

Although some of the Congress leaders had been involved with the labour movements in several places and had been active in certain unions, their main interest of the Congress had been towards overall national movement. Although the labour had been deeply influenced by the nationalist movement in general, the inconsistent involvement of the Congress in their economic struggles had created the space for others with different ideologies. In the late 1920s, the leadership of organised labour was moving towards the communists who were energetically organising and mobilising the workers to raise their voice for their just demands. After 1926, the communists had started making an impact in the labour movement in some centres, particularly Bombay. Workers' and Peasants' Parties were organised in several parts of the country under the leadership of S.A. Dange, P.C. Joshi, Muzaffar Ahmed and Sohan Singh Josh. In the re-energised nationalist atmosphere, the communists quickly spread their influence among workers and became the leading force in labour unions in Bombay and Calcutta. Their leadership of the legendary 1928 cotton textile strike in Bombay and 1929 jute textile strike in Calcutta made them into the most important player in labour movement. The 1928 strike propelled the communist-led Girni Kamgar Union to become one of the most important unions. Its membership increased from 324 to 54,000. In many other industries located in various parts of the country, the communist influence quickly spread among workers. With their worker-oriented ideology and hard work, the communists made a strong impact among labour unions. By the end of 1928, the communists and other leftist forces had acquired an upper hand in the AITUC.

The national scene had again become charged up in 1928 due to agitation against the all-White Simon Commission. Angry demonstrations were held all over the country to protest the exclusion of Indians from deciding their own constitution. In line with the Indian National Congress, the AITUC resolved in 1927 to boycott the Simon Commission and the workers enthusiastically participated in demonstrations against the Commission. The unprecedented depression in the world economy in 1929 resulted in recession in Indian industries as well. Lowering

of wages and large-scale retrenchment was resorted to by the industrialists to economise. Schemes of rationalisation were set in motion which increased the intensity of work without raising the wages. Strikes took place at various places against these measures. The workers at several places also held strikes and militant demonstrations during the Civil Disobedience Movement. There were many strikes on economic as well as political issues all over the country between 1927 and 1931.

This period witnessed the legendary strikes by the Bombay textile workers in 1928 which lasted for about six months. The general industrial strike in textile industry of Bombay was repeated in 1929 which, however, failed. There was also a protracted strike of workers in Tata Iron and Steel Works in Jamshedpur. In 1929, there was a general strike among the jute workers of Calcutta. The militancy exhibited by workers was partly due to the rise of the communists in the workers' organisations. In 1931, the workers of Sholapur staged militant strike. The workers in Bombay and Calcutta also struck work. In 1932, significant strikes occurred in the railway workshops in Bengal, Madras and Bombay presidencies. In 1934, a big strike occurred in textile mills in Bombay. Many of these strikes now happened under communist leadership with the Congress not playing an important role in these, although the presence of nationalist sentiments cannot be discounted.

During this period, the tussle within the AITUC between the liberal-reformist leadership and the leftist-communists got bitter in the wake of long-drawn strikes at certain centres and power struggle within the organisation. There was also deep disagreement between the two sides about international affiliation of the AITUC. While the communists wanted to affiliate it to the Red International Labour Union, the other group wanted to associate with the International Federation of Trade Unions. At the 8<sup>th</sup> session of the AITUC in 1929, the organisational split came. While the AITUC remained with the communist leadership with help from the left nationalists such as Nehru and Bose, the other group formed the Indian Trade Union Federation.

Within the AITUC, the conflict of politics still persisted between the left-nationalists with allegiance to the Congress and the communists. The fateful decision of the communists to keep away from the Congress in 1928 proved costly for them. The government, sensing their isolation, clamped hard and arrested the major communist leaders to be tried under Meerut Conspiracy Case. After the failed strike of Bombay textile workers in 1929, the membership of the Girni Kamgar Union declined precipitously to 800. The second split occurred in 1931, when the communists moved out to form the Red Trade Union Congress. In 1935, with the change in the policy of the Communist International which now wanted the communists all over the world to follow the 'United Front' strategy and work jointly with bourgeois liberals and socialists against the rising tide of fascism, the communist-controlled Red Trade Union Congress joined the AITUC, which was at that point controlled by the supporters of M.N. Roy.

Some Congress leaders, such as Subhas Bose, wanted that the Congress should take more interest in labour issues and support the workers in their just struggles against both the foreign and Indian capitalists. Nehru declared in 1929 that 'if we spread socialist ideas we are bound to come into conflict with the capitalists. But this should not deter us from working for the welfare of the peasants and

workers' [cited in V. Bahl 1988: 9]. However, although local Congress leaders and activists were supportive of and involved in labour agitations, the central leadership did not do much to actively associate the Congress with the workers' struggles. Even Nehru, as the president of the AITUC in 1929, reminded the delegates that the Congress was 'not a labour organisation', but 'a large body comprising all manner of people' [cited in S. Bandyopadhyay 2004: 378]. The imperative to lead the national movement comprising all kinds of people in basically non-violent way did not permit the Congress to closely identify with any single class or group. The growing influence of the communists also alarmed the Congress leadership and determined its guarded approach to labour.

However, in 1931, the Congress, in its Karachi Session, passed a resolution which promised that the Congress government, after independence, would provide the workers a proper wage, healthy working conditions, protection for old age and sickness. It would restrict the number of hours, provide maternity leave for women, grant the right to form labour unions, and seek to improve overall condition of labour. In the wake of its decision to participate in elections, the Congress Working Committee constituted a Labour Committee in 1936 to help the workers in their problems and struggles. The Congress manifesto also supported union-formation among the workers.

On the whole, due to its national commitment, its paradigm of a bourgeois economic development, its policy of class conciliation rather than class conflict, and the Gandhian ideology of non-violence which was often superseded in working class struggles, the Congress had not been much involved organisationally in the labour movement until quite late. However, the nationalist movement worked as a great inspiration in energising the workers to struggle tenaciously for their rights.

### **26.4.3 Working Class and Nationalism from 1937 to 1947**

The formation of Congress ministries in various provinces in 1937 resulted in increased working-class activities. In 1935, the communists, again on instructions and changed line from the Comintern, decided to join hands with the Congress. The AITUC supported the Congress candidates during 1937 elections. Increased civil liberties and pro-labour attitude of some important Congress leaders provided a favourable ground for labour movement during the period of the Congress ministries.

The number of trade unions registered a significant increase from 271 in 1936-37 to 562 in 1938-39, and their membership rose from 261,047 to 399,159 in those years. The moderate National Federation of Trade Unions came together with the AITUC on the same platform in 1938. There were a few notable strikes in this period. The general strike of the jute workers in Bengal in 1937 lasted for 74 day involving 225,000 workers. It was supported by the Congress which passed a resolution condemning the repression by the state. In Bombay, a big strike in textile industry occurred in 1938 against the Industrial Disputes Bill introduced by the Congress ministry in the province. Besides these, there were several important strikes in Kanpur, Madras and many other centres. In Jamshedpur, the Congressmen had been active in labour organisations right since 1920 strike. However, as this industry was under the premier Indian industrialists, the Tatas, they remained a little careful in order not to hurt the Indian industry.

They mostly tried mediation which would be acceptable to both sides. But, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Congressman Abdul Bari turned out to be a firebrand labour leader. He became very popular among the workers owing to his militant position and anti-capitalist speeches.

In 1938, the strike wave reached a very high level, particularly on the issue of the recognition of unions by the management, which frightened the industrialists. On the labour issue, the Congress was divided between the right wing (which did not want mass agitations and did not wish to involve workers in organised form in the Congress) and the left wing which favoured the involvement of the Congress in mass politics and taking up the demands of the workers. However, in 1937, even Nehru advised the workers in Kanpur that they should not do anything which might cause obstruction in the smooth working of the mills, as this would ultimately mean a loss for the workers as well. To restrict the labour militancy, the Congress ministry in Bombay passed the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act in 1939. For the recognition of a union, it made the clause of arbitration necessary. Strikes could be legal only if a proper notice had been given and the arbitration process was over.

In the beginning of the War, the Congress ministries resigned to protest the unilateral decision by the colonial government to involve India in War. The communists were also opposed to what they termed as imperialist war. The workers of Bombay staged anti-War strikes and demonstrations. Over 90,000 workers participated in the strike. During the ensuing Quit India Movement, the nationalist activists tried to involve the organised workers all over the country and succeeded to a large extent. In Ahmedabad, Jamshedpur, and some other places, there were militant strikes by the workers. In Tata Iron and Steel Plant workers struck for two weeks demanding the formation of national government. In Ahmedabad, the textile workers' strike continued for over three months. In other places also, such as in Kanpur, Bombay, Delhi, Nagpur, Madras and Bangalore, there were strikes and demonstrations by workers in support of the nationalists. However, during the War period, the Congress could not undertake any organised activity among the workers, although individual Congress persons were involved in union activities and the Gandhians in constructive work.

In 1945, large number of workers in various places held strikes and demonstrations in support of the INA prisoners. In 1946, the workers in Bombay turned violent in support of the revolt by RIN ratings. Led by left unions, between two and three lakh workers struck work and held militant demonstrations. They fought with the police and the military leading to the death of 250 agitators, including the millworkers.

In the post-War period, when the contours of a national government were becoming apparent, the political rivalry within the trade unions became even more acute. After its victory in several provinces in 1946 elections, the Congress Working Committee decided in 1946 that the Congressmen should further involve themselves in labour matters but they should 'discriminate between occasions on which labour action deserves their support and those which called for restraints and discussions' [cited in N. Basu 2008: 26]. To propagate its viewpoint among the workers and to organise them on that basis, the Congress had earlier formed Congress Majdoor Sevak Sangh and Hindustan Majdoor Sevak Sangh. Later, it was able to mobilize a large number of trade unions and in May 1947, the Indian

National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was formed. It had 200 unions with a membership of about six lakhs. In 1948, the unions under the influence of the Congress Socialists came out of the AITUC and formed the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat (HMP). In 1949, another organisation called United Trade Union Congress was formed under the famous trade union leader, Mrinal Kanti Bose. In 1949, the HMP and the IFL united to found the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). Thus, in 1949, there were four central trade union federations – the AITUC, the INTUC, the HMS and the UTUC.

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## 26.5 SUMMARY

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The organised working class was a very small proportion of the Indian population during colonial times. Yet, its concentration in certain important cities gave it cohesion and political visibility. The nationalists in the early period were not much interested in the issues of the workers. Since they favoured an indigenous capitalist path of development, they even opposed legislation to regulate the working conditions in mills and factories. However, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the nationalists belonging to the extremist wing realised the political importance of the workers and sought to mobilise them for the nationalist cause. In the period of mass nationalism, enunciated by Gandhi, the workers' participation in the nationalist activities became more frequent. However, the generalised, multi-class orientation of the Congress, and the arrival of the Communists on the political scene with their radical agenda for the working class led to rather inconsistent engagement between the Congress and the working class. Although the workers were inspired by the nationalist sentiments, the Congress could not consistently mobilise them in its movements because it did not take up the core issues of the workers and did not support their militant movements due to the fear of antagonising the Indian industrialists. Therefore, the relationship between the Congress and the working class remained rather weak, despite the fact that many individual Congress persons were involved in workers' struggles.

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## 26.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) Why did the early nationalists oppose the legislation for improving the conditions of the workers?
- 2) What were Gandhi's views on the relationship between labour and capital?
- 3) Discuss the relationship between the Congress and the workers during the early 1920s.
- 4) Describe the response of the workers to the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements.

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# UNIT 27 THE CAPITALIST CLASS\*

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## Structure

- 27.1 Introduction
- 27.2 Debate on the Relationship between the Congress and the Capitalists
- 27.3 Emergence and Growth of the Capitalist Class in India
- 27.4 Capitalist Response to National Movement in Early Phase
- 27.5 Ideology of the Early Nationalists
- 27.6 Mass Nationalism and the Capitalists
  - 27.6.1 From Rowlatt Satyagraha to Simon Commission
  - 27.6.2 Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement
  - 27.6.3 Post-War Period
- 27.7 An Assessment of the Capitalists' Attitude to the Congress
- 27.8 Summary
- 27.9 Exercises

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## 27.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit, we will discuss the relationship between Indian national movement and the Indian capitalist class. Much heated debate has been generated on this issue among historians for a long time. This Unit will acquaint you with this debate before analysing the various features of responses of the capitalist class and the nationalist movement towards each other since the beginning. It is important to understand that the relationship between a vast and ambitious national movement and a fledgling class which was partly dependent for its existence and growth on the colonial connections would be fraught with many inconsistencies which cannot be encapsulated within a singular narrative.

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## 27.5 DEBATE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONGRESS AND THE CAPITALISTS

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There has been heated debate among the historians of India on the relationship between the capitalist class and the national movement, particularly the stream represented by the Congress. Quite often the lines are so sharply drawn that it is difficult to find a common ground. The Marxist historians have generally taken a very critical view of the link between the Congress and the capitalists. M.N. Roy, the initiator of Marxist historiography in India, considered the Congress as basically a bourgeois organisation which ceased to be progressive and turned reactionary and an ally of imperialism as a result of the surging mass movement during the early 1920s. R.P. Dutt, another important Marxist ideologue and historian, regarded the Indian bourgeoisie (in which he included the leadership of the Congress) as basically a national bourgeoisie which had a dual characteristic. In his book, *India Today*, he argued that the Indian bourgeoisie had a genuine contradiction with imperialism and resisted the onslaught of foreign

goods and capital, but, when faced with the spectre of mass upsurge, it sided with imperialism. He also identified the Congress with bourgeois interests.

Another set of Marxist thinkers, such as Suniti K. Ghosh, argue that 'the Indian capitalist class comprised and comprises two categories: one that is big is comprador and the other that is small and medium is national' [S.K. Ghosh 1988: 2445]. Ghosh asserts that the Indian big bourgeoisie had been an ally of imperialism in India since its beginning. According to Amiya K. Bagchi, the abolition of feudalism and establishment of proper capitalist relations were not part of the agenda of either the British capitalist in India or of Indian capitalists. The Indian capitalist class has mostly professed a reactionary ideology which disregarded democratic and secular values. [A.K. Bagchi 1991].

G.K. Lieten argues that while the Indian capitalist class was comprador earlier, it became national in character since the 1920s. However, during the high tide of nationalism, as during the Civil Disobedience Movement, the big Bombay capitalists were 'rather on the side of the colonial administration than on the side of the nationalist forces'. [G.K. Lieten 1983: 33]. According to Lieten, the strategy of both the capitalists and the dominant section of the Congress were short-term struggle and long-term compromise. While industrial depression, boycott and violence hung over the heads of the industrialists, it 'forced them into the role of brokers between the Congress-led nationalist movement and the colonial government'. The Indian bourgeoisie did not always remain within the ambit of nationalism, but quite often tried to enter into separate agreements with colonial government behind the back of the Congress. The Indian capitalist class played a dual role attempting to be on the side of both the nationalists and the colonial rulers.

Kapil Kumar asserts that the capitalists played a crucial role in determining the policies of the Congress. He argues that the capitalist class followed a conscious strategy of controlling the peasant movements, supporting the right wing in the Congress, financing individual Congress leaders on personal basis, buying large chunks of land, and pressurising the Congress to ban Kisan Sabhas. [Kapil Kumar 1991].

On the other hand, an important group of historians, prominently Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee, and Bhagwan Josh strongly argue that the Indian capitalist class was anti-imperialist, had developed into a conscious collectivity by the 1920s, and was in the nationalist camp particularly since the 1920s. They insist that there was an irresolvable and antagonistic contradiction between Indian bourgeoisie and colonialism. Therefore, there was no possibility of any long-term compromise between them. Thus, it was owing to economic factors that the Indian capitalist class opposed imperialism as it was hampering its long-term growth. The leading capitalists clearly recognized this situation and sided with the Congress against colonial government.

Bipan Chandra argues that the Indian capitalist class never played the role of comprador nor was it subordinated to British capital at any stage. While the Indian economy as a whole was structurally subordinated to imperialism, the Indian capitalist class was an independent class which struggled against imperialism and for independent capitalist development. However, it was also sometimes compelled to compromise with imperialism as it was the capitalist

class of a colonial and underdeveloped economy. The economic weakness of the Indian capitalist class was the reason for its political weakness and its partial dependence on the colonial government. It had a two-fold relationship with imperialism: 'long-term antagonism and short-term accommodation and dependence'. He, however, concedes that the 'overwhelming majority of the capitalists could not ... be described as active anti-imperialist' [Bipan Chandra 1979].

Aditya Mukherjee strongly puts forward the view that the Indian capitalist class remained broadly within the nationalist camp particularly since the 1920s. It believed that only a national government could bring about economic development in India. The ideological and political position of the Indian capitalists was far in advance of their actual economic position which was quite weak. According to Mukherjee, the Indian capitalist class evolved into a 'mature self-conscious class' in struggle against the colonial rule and British capitalist class. It also was able to overcome the internal contradiction so as to emerge as the first class-conscious group in colonial India. The Indian capitalist class tried successful strategy to contain the left trends without, however, going on the side of imperialism. It always remained on the side of nationalist forces, even though it encouraged and strengthened the nationalist right wing to restrict the influence of socialists and communists. The Indian bourgeoisie was successful in projecting its own class interests as the strategic national interest. This could happen because in the colonial situation, 'there was, up to a point, a genuine unity of interest between the national bourgeoisie and the rest of society, as all of them were oppressed by imperialism'. [Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1988]. Although there were certain differences between the capitalists and the nationalists, these differences finally got 'resolved around a compromise programme, with each group... making substantial alterations in their original stands'. There was also no fundamental difference between the approaches of the left nationalists such as Nehru and K.T. Shah and the capitalist class so far as planning and the nature of state's role in it was concerned. Both groups shared certain common basic ideas, the most important of these being 'the overthrow of the colonial state structure', and 'its replacement by an independent indigenous capitalist state structure'. Mukherjee regards the Bombay Plan (1944) as the embodiment of the Indian capitalists' desire for a national government, economic planning and independent economic development. Although there were some differences between them regarding the methods to be adopted to achieve these goals and the extent of state intervention, both groups showed remarkable unity in their basic assumptions [A. Mukherjee 1978].

Bhagwan Josh emphasises that the Congress should not be viewed simplistically as a bourgeois party but should be considered as an anti-imperialist front for all Indian people, an all-class party which was not guided by the will of any particular group or served the interests of any one section of Indian society. There was no pre-determined direction in which the national movement moved. Its direction was decided by how the representatives of various conflicting classes struggled to achieve their hegemony. The march of the national movement did not depend on the participation or non-participation of the capitalists. At various points of time the Congress received support from sections of traders, merchants, businesspeople and industrialists while several sections opposed it. The Congress engaged in both constitutional and non-constitutional struggles against foreign rule. However, the capitalist class only supported the constitutional forms of

struggle and kept aloof or even opposed the non-constitutional forms [Bhagwan Josh 1991].

Claude Markovits is opposed to the idea that the Indian capitalists had evolved into a conscious class. He argues that the capitalist class even during the 1930s had not evolved into a 'very articulate capitalist class capable of acting as a unified lobby and of pursuing a long-term policy to achieve well-defined objectives'. Despite the awareness of common interests among some capitalists, there was no long-term unity of purpose. Moreover, the economic nationalism professed by the Congress was not the main reason for the capitalists to support the Congress whenever it did. The more important factor in the link between Gandhi and the capitalists was that 'between Hindu banias and a Hindu political leader, rather than a link between an emerging capitalist class and a national leader'. This relationship had a large religious component and was traditional in nature. The most modern sections of the capitalists, such as the Tatas, were in fact the 'least pro-nationalist' [C. Markovits 1985: 182, 189].

Dwijendra Tripathi presents a variegated picture of capitalists' response to the national movement. In the initial phase, before the arrival of the Gandhian mass movements, the Indian capitalist class was weak and did not see much conflict of interest with the British business as it was dependent on British technology, and technical and even managerial personnel for establishing industries in India. After the First World War, when the capitalists in India grew in strength a conflict with the British capital became inevitable. However, the capitalist class did not sever its links with the British business. It also could not afford to antagonise the intensifying national movement led by the Congress and Gandhi. To cope with the situation, it evolved a four-pronged strategy: '(1) keep aloof from the confrontationist politics of the Congress, (2) support constructive activity of the Congress to establish a claim on its gratitude, (3) influence policy formulation within Congress, and (4) act in unison with nationalist forces in legislative assemblies and similar other forums' [S.P. Thakur 1989: 1437-8].

According to Manali Chakrabarti, the Indian big business class advocated economic nationalist policies during the inter-war period. However, it was not only the Indian but also the British business class located in India which wanted protectionist measures for Indian industries. However, despite their orientation towards economic nationalism since the 1930s, the capitalist class was basically guided by their economic interests rather than any attachment to nationalist sentiments. [M. Chakrabarti 2009: 1031].

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### **27.3 EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF THE CAPITALIST CLASS IN INDIA**

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Most early Indian industrialists developed from the merchants who played the role of middlemen and collaborators for British businessmen. There was thus a harmonious relationship in the early period between the big Indian businessmen and the British capitalists and the latter served as models for setting up industries in India in the initial period. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Indian capitalists were beginning to mark their independence by forming their own organisations such as the Bengal Chamber of Commerce in 1887 and the Indian Merchants Chamber of Bombay in 1907.

There was steady growth of Indian industries since the mid-nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Indian capital was dominant in cotton industry. The growth of mills continued until the mid-1890s when a series of developments – such as the Bubonic Plague, currency fluctuations, famine and communal riots – seriously disrupted the growth story. The faith in the beneficial effects of the Raj began to dwindle.

Since the First World War, the Indian capitalists made inroads into many sectors. The processes of import substitution, expansion of domestic market, growth of internal trade and transfer of capital from moneylending and land to industrial investment resulted in increasing control of Indian capital. Thus, by 1944, about 62 per cent of larger industrial units and 95 per cent of smaller industrial units were controlled by Indian capital. Industries such as sugar, cement, paper, iron and steel were established almost anew by Indian capitalists. In the industries such as jute, mining and plantations, which had been under prolonged dominance by foreign capital, Indian capital moved in substantial quantities. Indian investment in cotton textiles grew enormously so that by 1919 the share of British cotton textile industry in India's domestic consumption fell down to 40% and the Indian cotton manufacturers also made inroads into some foreign markets such as China. In another big industry—Jute—it was the British capital which had held almost total domination until the early twentieth century. However, during the period between 1914 and 1947, there was a rapid expansion of the Indian capital in jute industry owing to several national and international factors. During this period, the Indian capitalist class also grew significantly in size.

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## **27.4 CAPITALIST RESPONSE TO NATIONAL MOVEMENT IN EARLY PHASE**

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The fortunes of most of the big merchants and industrialists in the nineteenth century were made under the aegis of the colonial government. Close collaboration with the British business and the need for British technical skill in the early years of industries had resulted in dependence upon the colonial rulers. The Indian businessmen kept a political low profile and tended to be on the right side of the rulers for the smooth conduct of their business and industry. The top echelons of Indian businessmen also maintained close social links with the British. However, through the Bombay Association (formed in 1852), some of Bombay's businesspeople experienced some amount of political activity and acquired some political awareness. Later during the Ilbert Bill controversy, some of prominent businessmen, led by Jamsetji Jejeebhoy, participated in a big public meeting called by some nationalist leaders such as Pherozeshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji and Badruddin Tyabji on 28 April 1883. In Bombay Presidency Association, established in January 1885, some of Bombay businessmen and entrepreneurs participated. Some of them were also a part of the Indian National Congress when it was founded in December 1885. The Congress received small donations from individual businessmen although the Indian business community as a body did not financially contribute much. On the whole, between 1850 and 1895, with some exceptions, the political involvement of the Bombay millowners was negligible.

Thus, despite the display of political awareness and the realisation that the colonial government gave precedence to the British cotton industry over Indian ones, the Indian industrialists were too weak and too dependent on British technology to

support the Swadeshi movement. On the other hand, the leaders of the Swadeshi movement vociferously supported the Indian industries which benefitted many Indian industrialists, such as the Tatas, in mobilising capital for their ventures. But the big capitalists generally remained opposed to the Swadeshi movement. Such disinclination to support the nationalist cause also derived from selfish motives. At the height of the Swadeshi movement, the cotton millowners profited enormously due to high demand for Indian cloths. But they hiked the prices of the cloth and refused to lower them even on nationalist request. The Indian businessmen benefited from the Swadeshi movement in many other ways, but they generally refused to support it openly or as a collective. Thus despite the tariff laws of 1878 and 1894, which were against the interests of Indian industries and which the Indian millowners bitterly resented, the millowners as a group generally remained entirely loyal to the Raj during this period. [See Gita Piramal 1991 and B.R. Nanda 1991]

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## **27.5 IDEOLOGY OF THE EARLY NATIONALISTS**

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The economic ideology of the early nationalists favoured a system of independent capitalist development in the country. Economic nationalism, as the early nationalist economic thought has been called, was basically bourgeois nationalism which sought to formulate economic policies which would promote national development without dependence on a foreign country. However, their aim was not to benefit just one class—the capitalists. Instead, they professed industrialism as the remedy for the poverty of the country. They wanted capitalist development because it could, in their view, alleviate the miseries of the Indian people in general. Despite the fact that during the early period the Indian industrialists were basically pro-government and did not contribute much to the national movement, the early nationalists favoured the capitalist path because they believed that only through capitalist industrialisation the country could become independent and prosperous.

The nationalist leaders worked to introduce the spirit of entrepreneurship among the people, urged the need for promoting technical and industrial education, tried to help in mobilisation of internal sources of capital, preached that Indian poverty and backwardness was due to lack of industries which must be revived if India could progress, and asked the Indian people to use only Indian-made (Swadeshi) goods. By the end of the nineteenth century, most nationalist leaders strongly demanded that India should be rapidly industrialised. They severely criticised the free trade policies of the colonial rulers and demanded that tariff barriers should be raised for the protection of emerging modern industries in India. They argued for the state intervention to promote, sustain and strengthen the Indian industries. Some nationalist leaders formed industrial associations and organised industrial conferences and exhibitions in order to spread the ideas of industrialism among people in general and entrepreneurs in particular. M.G. Ranade, for example, was among the founders of the Industrial Association of Western India in 1890. Finding the colonial government not only lacking in efforts to help the Indian industries but also hampering their growth in favour of British industries, the nationalists criticised the government on all such issues on every available forum. [Bipan Chandra 1966: 55-141, 736-759].

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## 27.6 MASS NATIONALISM AND THE CAPITALISTS

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In the course of Gandhian phase of mass nationalism beginning from the 1918, we can discern various responses from the capitalists which included the industrialists, merchants and traders. Since the big industrialists generally dominated the attention of the media as well as the government and nationalists, their reactions to mass nationalism should be more closely analysed. We will discuss the responses of the industrialists and the nationalists towards each other in basically three phases: from the Rowlatt Satyagraha to the Simon Commission, during the Civil Disobedience Movement and during the War, and finally after the War.

### 27.6.1 From Rowlatt Satyagraha to Simon Commission

The mass and agitational phase of nationalism, beginning in 1918, unsettled the industrialists and big business groups, and prompted even those few capitalists, who had earlier supported the movement, to withdraw. During this period, the large business houses did not provide any support to the Congress. In fact, many of them actively opposed the movement and for this received favours from the colonial government, including knighthood. Another factor in political inactivity of the industrialists was a series of long labour strikes, particularly in Bombay, led by the Communists. The fear of socialism and violent labour unrest pushed the millowners closer to the government. The government also supported the industrialists in their fight against labour and by 1930 the workers' agitations and unions had been suppressed.

During the Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Non-cooperation movement very few capitalists made donations for the Congress, and no industrialist signed the satyagraha pledge against the Rowlatt Bills in 1919. On the other hand, the actual support from the business class came from small traders and shopkeepers who generally supported the movement enthusiastically, participated in the *hartals* declared by the Congress, and also contributed to its funds. Gandhi was aware that his call for boycott of foreign goods would lead to profiteering by Indian industrialists. So, he exhorted them 'to conduct their business on national rather than on purely commercial lines'. But the industrialists did not pay any heed to his appeal. Motilal Nehru later criticised them for being 'bent on profiting by the sufferings of the nation'. Even as late as 1934, some Congress leaders were complaining that the industrialists did not contribute much to Congress funds to enable it to fight elections, and 'that the upper middle class and the industrialists are not at all taking their share of the burden of India's freedom' [B.R. Nanda 1991: 184-5, 186].

During the Non-Cooperation movement, Gandhi made it clear that whether the merchants and businesspersons complied with the call of boycott of foreign goods or not 'the country's march to freedom cannot be made to depend upon any corporation or groups of men. This is a mass manifestation. The masses are moving rapidly towards deliverance, and they must move whether with the aid of the organised capital or without' [cited in S. Bhattacharya 1976: 1828]. Although, Gandhi's thoughts were not in favour of capitalism as such, the capitalists and merchants found Gandhi's belief in non-violence as opposed to radical changes and his theory of trusteeship as a support to private property and wealth. There was a shrewd perception by many capitalists that their hope lay in

Gandhi for restraining the nationalist movement taking an anti-capitalist and radical stance. However, the big industrialists still did not come out in support of the national movement during the anti-Rowlatt agitations, even though the small traders were fully supportive and active. The small businesspeople, including the cotton merchants in Bombay, supported the Non-Cooperation Movement also despite facing personal losses, while the industrialists did not. Some industrialists such as Purshottamdas Thakurdas, Jamnadas Dwarkadas, Cowasji Jahangir and C. Setalvad openly opposed the movement. They formed an Anti-Non-cooperation Society in Bombay. The Congress and Gandhi noted that the success of the Swadeshi led to profiteering as the Indian cloth-producers enjoyed monopoly and in many cases arbitrarily increased prices. The industrialists, on their part, remained apprehensive of the mass movement and boycott as it might create labour problems in their mills. In fact, both profiteering by industrialists and hoarding by traders, and labour unrests in many industrial centres were noted.

From 1922 onwards, however, the slump in the industry compelled most industrialists to side with the Congress in its demand for protection for industries. The millowners and the Swarajists in the Legislative Assembly both called for the abolition of 3.5% excise duty on cotton. In the mid-1920s, their strategy was to try to influence the constitutionally-minded nationalist leaders to take a pro-Indian industry stand in the legislatures and to orient the Congress to speak in favour of business interests. It was in this period, that the Indian business community established their central organisation called FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers Commerce and Industry) in 1927. [See S. Bhattacharya 1976].

### **27.6.2 Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement**

Once the depression in the industry set in, the industrialists wanted the government to take strong measures to minimise their losses. The demands of the industrialists included an increase in the duties on imported cotton goods, devaluation of rupee and no preferential treatment for the British cotton industries in Indian markets. The colonial government refused to concede any of these demands. Certain other developments raised fear among the Indian industrialists that the colonial government did not care for their interests. For example, the Ottawa Conference held in 1932 privileged the British industries in the colonial markets. Resentment against such imperial preferences ran high in the ranks of Indian capitalists. Similarly, the decision of the colonial government to link the Indian rupee to the British pound and fix the rupee-sterling ratio at 18d created suspicion in the minds of the Indian industrialists that the intentions of the government were not correct.

The disenchantment with the government led to pro-Congress tilt among the industrialists. The Congress also responded positively by including most of their demands in its list. Another factor was the rise of new groups among industrialists from among the merchants who had held pro-Congress positions. All this resulted in capitalist support for the early phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement. However, general capitalist support for the movement did not continue when Gandhi resumed the movement in 1932 after the failure of talks with the government. The rise of the Congress left wing and Nehru's left-leaning speeches further alienated the capitalists from the Congress. Their interest in pro-Congress politics was only revived during the late 1930s when the Congress decided to work the Government of India Act of 1935.

According to Claude Markovits, there were three phases in the political participation of the Indian capitalists during the 1930s: 'a phase of relative unity in 1930-1931, a phase of open split in 1932-1936 and a new phase of greater unity in 1936-1939'. The Indian business class initially supported the Civil Disobedience Movement launched by Gandhi to get concessions from the British government, particularly related to its harmful currency policy. However, this support became lukewarm in the later stage due to militancy exhibited by workers and for the fear of widespread unrest. Still later, when the Congress put a brake on the mass agitational politics and decided to participate in constitutional politics, the capitalist class again started backing the Congress.

Before the launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Indian capitalists tried to convince Gandhi to avoid open confrontation with the government and to enter into negotiations with it. However, Gandhi had other ideas. He refused to attend the First Round Table Conference to be convened in London in November 1930 to talk about constitutional and political reforms. In the initial phase of the movement, the business groups suffering from Depression and irked by governmental apathy, extended support to the movement in the hope that it would pressurise the colonial regime to make concessions in financial and monetary matters. The more intelligent section of the capitalist class realised that 'it could not fight foreign interest without the weight of the Congress and therefore could not go further than Gandhiji....' Thus, the capitalist organisation FICCI, during the early phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement, supported the basic demands of the Congress by stating that 'No constitution will be acceptable to the country including the Indian mercantile community which does not give sufficient and effective power to a responsible Indian government to carry out the administrative and economic reforms indicated by Mahatma Gandhi'. The FICCI also restrained the industrialists from participating in the Round Table Conference as a mark of solidarity with the Congress, and Thakurdas was persuaded to resign his seat in the central legislative assembly. Many businessmen, as other Indians, felt naturally inclined to take a nationalist position. Thus, when Tata and a few other industrialists wanted to form a pro-government capitalist organisation, Purshottamdas strongly reacted by saying that 'Indian commerce and industry are only an integral part of Indian nationalism and that deprived of its inspiration in Indian nationalism, Indian commerce and Indian industry stand reduced to mere exploitation'.

During the second phase of Civil Disobedience, the capitalists were a divided lot. As the movement progressed and reached the masses while the government showed no signs of compromise, there occurred a split in the ranks of the big business class. One group, led by the Tatas, openly opposed the Congress and sought to derive all benefits from the imperial government it could under the circumstances. Another group, led by Ahmedabad millowners, sided with the Congress and took advantage of the latter's boycott of foreign goods 'to enlarge their share of the internal market for piecegoods at the expense of both Bombay and Lancashire'. This group, and the group led by Lala Shri Ram, remained solidly behind the Congress even during the period of its weakness. Yet another group, led by Birla and Thakurdas, sought to play the middlemen between the Congress and the colonial government. Birla exhorted the British government to realise that 'Gandhiji and men of his type are not only friends of India but also friends of Great Britain, and that Gandhiji is the greatest force on the side of

peace and order. He alone is responsible for keeping the left wing in India in check.'

In the third phase, the conservative policies of the imperial government, the vocal emergence of the left wing in the Congress, and the decline in Congress-led mass movement united the Indian capitalist class in their support to the moderate sections within the Congress. Thus, 'the Indian capitalists denounced the 1939 Indo-British Trade Pact, which was not basically harmful to Indian interests, while in the provinces the Congress ministries often took a tough anti-labour stance, which satisfied business interests'. The new Congress ministries therefore were faced with a difficult task: they had to try to reconcile the interests of both capital and labour which had supported them in the elections, and both equally hoped that Congress rule would bring benefits to them. The ministries were in danger of being subjected to contradictory pressures from above and from below. The Congress High Command, with which the capitalists wielded more influence than the trade unions, was likely to pressurize them towards taking a stand against labour; while local Congress organizations, more responsive to direct pressure from workers, would advocate support for their demands. The provincial governments would be hard put to find a middle way.

The various actions of the Congress ministries, particularly their labour policies began to convince the capitalists that the Congress was not against their interests and wished to promote inter-class conciliation. The Congress ministries, while making some concessions to the workers, tried to check labour militancy by participating actively in labour affairs. The labour struggles were viewed as disruptive and avoidable and a policy of mutual adjustment between workers and their employers was put forward. On the whole, the Congress provincial governments put at rest the fears of the industrialists that the Congress might not succeed in controlling labour. The Congress also allayed the fears of the capitalists that it did not desire to nationalise various sectors of economy and industry, and instead it would favour a policy of collaboration with private enterprises.

Though Congress provincial governments were not always successful in accommodating Indian capitalist interests and could not prevent conflicts from arising between them and sections of the business class, an overall view of the two years of Congress rule in the provinces reveals that a certain amount of stabilization did occur in relations between business and Congress. While during the Second World War many businessmen reverted to a policy of close collaboration with the British authorities in order to benefit from the war orders, the business class as a whole did not break with the Congress during the war period. When the Congress Party made its final bid for power, businessmen found themselves in a position to influence developments to a certain extent.

In the beginning of the Second World War, the Congress ministries resigned to protest the unilateral decision of the imperial regime to include India in the War. However, the Congress decided not to seriously hinder the war efforts of the government. The industrialists also cooperated with the government and supplied goods and services required for the war. But some of them did not hesitate to declare their support for the Congress as G.L. Mehta, the FICCI president, stated: 'Indian commercial organizations did not feel apologetic about the fact that they were fully in accord with the essentials of Congress demand for freedom and transfer of power.'

And yet, when the Quit India movement was launched, many industrialists, including Thakurdas, openly stood against open confrontation with the colonial government. But some of them allowed their workers to go on strike to express solidarity with the jailed Congress leaders. On the whole, however, the capitalists pursued the dual policy of deriving maximum benefit from their support to the government in its war efforts while at the same time making overtures to some of the Congress leaders and occasionally contributing to the Congress funds. [C. Markovits 1985: 179, 180; D. Tripathi 1991: 109, 110, 106, 96, 97, 115; C. Markovits 1981: 498, 524, 526; M. Chakrabarti 2009: 1012].

Bipan Chandra argues that the leaders of the Indian capitalists were farsighted who deftly handled the radicalism of Nehru in the mid-1930s, and managed to persuade him to follow a bourgeois liberal path of growth. It was their biggest achievement which kept the socialist radicals at bay by supporting the right-wing of the Congress which increasingly became stronger as freedom approached. Although a group of capitalists in Bombay reacted strongly against Nehru's radical speeches, most other industrialists took a more cautious stand. Birla and others put their faith in Congress right wing and in Gandhi to restrain Nehru. They were successful in their 'strategy of nursing him, opposing him, and, above all, of supporting the right wing in the Congress' which 'played an important role in first containing him and then moulding him so that, by 1947, the capitalist class was ready to accept him as the Prime Minister of independent India and to cooperate with him in the task of building up its economy along the capitalist path' [Bipan Chandra 1979: 198.].

### 27.6.3 Post-War Period

Due to the ambivalent attitude of the Indian capitalist class, it never had a decisive influence on the nationalist politics. However, by early 1940s when it was clear that colonial rule would end, the capitalist class veered towards the position adopted by the Congress as was clear in its major policy document, the Bombay Plan, in 1944. After the War, when the capitalists realised that the Congress might come to power sooner than later, they became openly supportive of the Congress and even backed the idea of long-term economic planning and state control of certain industries, particularly heavy industries. Although the capitalists had not given much support to, not even shown much interest in, the National Planning Committee (NPC) instituted by the Congress in 1938, they later produced in 1944 the Bombay Plan which supported state initiative and control in certain sectors of national economy.

An important section of the Congress, since the early 1930s, had professed the idea of centrally planned economy. Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru and others expressed their strong opinion on this issue. They considered state-sponsored forced industrialisation as the only way to pull India out of poverty and unemployment, as well as to boost national security. The capitalists were somewhat cautious about this view during the 1930s. But during the 1940s, they became quite convinced about the merit of full-scale state intervention in capital goods and defence-related industries.

Although the capitalist class increased its strength after the First World War, and particularly during the 1930s, it still was not strong enough to independently carry out industrialisation in India without the help of the state. Moreover, the threat of foreign competition (from Japan, Germany, America and Britain) loomed

large. The Indian capitalists, therefore, chalked out a plan which supported the role of a national state and planning in initiating and sustaining an independent capitalist development in the country free from imperial control and providing protection to the national capital against the inflow of foreign capital. The Bombay Plan, devised by the Indian capitalists, in 1944 proposed the role of a national state in promotion of industrialisation, particularly in the areas of heavy and capital goods industries as well as in developing infrastructure. The Indian capitalist class realised that it was not strong enough to undertake investment in such core areas of economy. It, therefore, emphasised the crucial role of state's intervention and control in such areas. The desire to free the country's economy from foreign control was another important motivating factor behind the support of the capitalist class for state's role. [D. Lockwood 2012; A. Mukherjee 1976].

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## **27.7 AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CAPITALISTS' ATTITUDE TO THE CONGRESS**

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There seems to be a pattern in the response of the industrialists to the Congress. While in a peaceful atmosphere they openly supported the Congress on important issues of national importance, in times of mass movements they were extremely hesitant and appeared to be siding with the government. Even though the Congress received support from the capitalists in various forms since the 1920s, it does not mean that the capitalists influenced the Congress policies and programmes in any significant ways. Whatever little influence it did have was limited to the conservative section of the Congress. The popular orientation and massive organisation of the Congress could not make it pursue a straight pro-capitalist line. Although the businessmen contributed to Congress funds, they could not dictate terms about its policies. In any case, their contribution to the overall Congress funds was relatively small. Moreover, the ambivalent response of the capitalists to the Congress did not really empower them to decide the policies of the Congress. If the Congress advanced towards a capitalist path of development, it was owing to its own ideology, and not due to any direct or indirect pressure by the capitalists.

Reacting against the adverse economic policies of the colonial government, the Indian industrialists looked forward to the Congress as a counterweight to colonialism. However, the fear of mass upheaval in general, and industrial unrest in particular, were inhibiting factors in their full-fledged support to the Congress. There have always been differences within the ranks of the Indian capitalists in their attitude towards Congress and the Raj. For example, during the 1920s, while Birla supported the Congress, Thakurdas opposed it and sought the active cooperation of the Liberals for creating a moderate political constituency.

Although the Indian capitalists by and large supported the national movement since the 1920s, it favoured constitutional forms of struggle and the idea of sorting problems out at the negotiating table. They wanted moderate constitutionalism and favourable policies for industrial development. They sought a conciliation between the Congress and colonial government which would alleviate the fear of radical mass upsurge. They were generally opposed to prolonged mass struggles as it would unleash the revolutionary forces which could be a threat to capitalism. The capitalists were also against any long-drawn movement which would antagonise the government and hamper the business activities.

The Congress, on its part, tried to take the capitalists on board in their bid to launch an all-class movement. But it was not willing to compromise on fundamental issues. So, although the big business was apprehensive about the Gandhian mass movements, the Congress went ahead with them despite strong reservation of the capitalists. Although many capitalists believed that Gandhi would act on their behalf, Gandhi had his own plans and ideas to fight against colonialism. At one stage, the opposition of the Bombay industrialists to the Civil Disobedience Movement prompted the Congress Working Committee to draw up in August 1930 'a list of 24 mills in Bombay which were to be boycotted'.

Some capitalists joined the national movement in their individual capacities and went to jails, such as Jammalal Bajaj, Vadilal Mehta, Samuel Aaron, and Lala Shankar Lal. Some others such as G.D. Birla, Ambalal Sarabhai and Walchand Hirachand generously contributed to Congress funds. So far as small traders and merchants were concerned, they actively supported and participated in the national movement.

The rise of a strong left wing in the Congress made the capitalist class to reassess the situation and make adjustments accordingly lest the movement would go in a radical direction. The capitalists also avoided forming an exclusive party of their own as it would have been counter-productive. Instead, they strongly supported the right-wing in the Congress which, in their opinion, would protect their interests by keeping the struggle within constitutional limits and which would be opposed to radical elements inside and outside the Congress. Thus, the Indian capitalists, particularly the more farsighted among them, fought on two fronts simultaneously. On the one hand, they resented the imperialist policies which hampered their growth, and on the other, they were apprehensive of the radical and revolutionary forces which worked against capitalism.

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## 27.8 SUMMARY

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During the nineteenth century, the Indian capitalists, particularly the industrialists, were quite weak and could not antagonise the colonial government in order to facilitate the import of machinery and technicians from Britain. Thus, although the nationalists took a strong pro-Indian industry position, the Indian industrialists did not support the national movement. In the twentieth century, there was a massive intensification of nationalist sentiments and activities giving rise to huge mass movements. The Congress was the leading organization and Gandhi was the most important leader who inspired and guided these mass mobilizations. The relationship of the Indian capitalist class with the Congress, and particularly with Gandhi, was generally harmonious. Moreover, some leaders of the class spoke a similar anti-colonial language which the Congress used. However, full support to the Congress was not forthcoming as the Congress did not orient its political and economic agenda in complete favour of the capitalists. Nevertheless, the rise of the nationalist movement gave opportunity to the capitalist class to put increased pressure on the government to grant concessions to it. Until the 1940s, the big capitalists generally remained ambivalent in their support to the Congress. Only during the 1940s, when it had become clear that the Congress would come to power, they openly sided with the Congress and its policies.

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## 27.9 EXERCISES

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- 1) Why did the Indian industrialists not support the national movement in the early period even while the nationalist leaders strongly professed a Swadeshi ideology?
- 2) Discuss the varying positions of the Indian capitalists with regard to the national movement in the period between 1930 and 1942.
- 3) Give a brief assessment of the Indian capitalists' attitude to the Congress.



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# UNIT 28 THE LANDLORDS\*

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## Structure

- 28.1 Introduction
- 28.2 Permanent Settlement
- 28.3 Other Forms of Land Administration
- 28.4 Landlords after the Revolt of 1857
- 28.5 Landlords and Early Nationalists
- 28.6 Landlords and the Nationalist Movement during the 1920s and 1930s
- 28.7 Congress, the Left and the Position of Landlords
- 28.8 Summary
- 28.9 Exercises

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## 28.1 INTRODUCTION

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The livelihood of an overwhelming number of Indians depended throughout solely on agriculture, and consequently on the agricultural use of land. Land being thus the basis of life and life-style in India, the management of its cultivation, cultivators and beneficiaries was found to be the matter of paramount importance in the country's political economy. Since the users benefitted from the use of land, or its produce, and land belonged to the state, the Government had a right to make some demand on the benefits of land and extract revenue or tax from its users. As the land revenue – the Government's earning from land – was the major source to finance the state's functioning, it had to be apportioned on all the users carefully and justifiably, and collected from them regularly and efficiently. Fixing and enumerating the tax demand on a plot with the help of revenue officials for a specified period were not easy at all, but enforcing the collection every year within a stipulated time had always been immensely difficult. In this Unit, you will learn about a group of landholders which flourished under the colonial rule.

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## 28.2 PERMANENT SETTLEMENT

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The collection of the taxed amount was generally found to be convenient through a system of assignment, by which the assignees were contracted for collecting and depositing the tax in time to the Government treasury in lieu of grants of land. The administration of land in India was, therefore, run with the help of revenue officials and the collectors, appointed and assigned, respectively, by the Government. In the pre-colonial period the revenue officials were the *Patwaris*, *Chaudharies* and *Quanungos*, as well as *Patels*, *Deshmukhs*, *Deshpandes* and others, backed up by the administrative hands like the *Faujders*. The most conspicuous among the assignees were the *Zamindars* or the small *rajahs* and chieftains, exercising authority over large tracts of territories and their inhabitants in return of the payment annually to the Government the fixed amount of tax from the land-users or cultivators. The other assignees of significance were the

*Jagirdars* who received grants of land from the State (*jagirs*) for their services to the authorities, usually of military nature, on condition of collecting yearly tax for the Government from those cultivating within their domains. The Government also farmed out the responsibilities for tax collection to the *Talukdars* and *Ijaradars* of *taluks* (a good number of villages) or parts of *Parganas* in their respective regions, by allowing them, of course, to retain a certain percentage of the collection for themselves as fees. There were also *Muqaddams* or village headmen who acted as *Talukdars*' agents for collecting the tax in a village and enjoyed some compensation for their exertions. Apart from the percentage of collection they received from the Government, the collectors of each category gained from the difference between what they pulled out of the peasants and what they actually deposited to the treasury, representing their profit or rent. The rent-receivers or the landlords set their own demands for collection so high as to squeeze the maximum out of the cultivators or the *raiyyats*, and leave them "not enough for survival". (Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Moghul India, 1556-1707*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 367.) The lure of rent from land or the income they hardly had earned by working on it, was so great and utterly irresistible that every category which had a link with its administration (apart from perhaps the *Zamindars* and *Jagirdars* who had more than enough on their plates), be it the *Talukdars*, *Ijardars*, *Kanamdars*, *Mirasdars* and *Muqaddams* (who had their own plots or *Khud-Kashta* to be tilled by agricultural wage-earners), or the *Patwais*, *Patels*, *Quanungos*, *Deshmukhs* etc. – all went for a mad rush to acquire for themselves as much land as possible. The scramble resulted in an amorphous growth of variegated landlordism in India, led by the big landlords and followed by the medium, the small and even the tiny ones. Land under this feudal system was neglected, irrigation suffered, production fell and cultivators fleeced, over and above their being ruefully dependent on the landlords for tenure, family welfare and social security. Such landlordist economic and social exploitation that grew rapidly in the pre-colonial days continued unabated throughout the colonial rule over India.

At the beginning of the colonial period the British were oblivious of how landlordism and landlords had been functioning in India and with what effects. They seemed to be happy, as were the later Moghuls ahead of them, to find their coffers being filled up with the revenue collections by the intermediaries – those high or not so high rentiers of land between them and the *raiyyats*. Their viewing the agrarian scenario did not vary much from 1765, when they secured the *Diwani* rights over the imperial (Mughal) revenue, till 1793 – the time the Permanent Settlement of land was introduced by them in large part of the country, i.e. the Bengal Presidency. For the first time the Company raj appeared in 1793 to have been concerned about the unsatisfactory state of affairs in Indian agriculture – the main source of its income. Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement had not aimed at destabilising the arrangement of intermediary, but systematising it and rendering it congenial for agricultural advancement. By entering into a settlement with the *Zamindars* or the big landlords for good on a modest state demand, and by conferring them the property rights over their *Zamindaris*, provided they did not fail to pay their taxes, Cornwallis made the *Zamindari*, or landlordism at the apex, to be attractive on the British aristocratic line of his time for investment in land, and therefore, for taking good care of it to get increasingly profitable returns. Consequently, the *Zamindari* Settlement, since the Permanent Settlement was meant to be made only with the *Zamindars*, lured a large number of merchants

and business magnates to buy *Zamindari* estates from those existing *Zamindars* who had been encumbered with the mounting cost of luxurious living, as well as of unpaid Government taxes. The new *Zamindars* thus bought their *Zamindaris* in some kind of distress sales at a permanently low tax rate, and were in a position – being masters of the domains – to squeeze out high rent from the tenants (*raiyyats*) and dispossess and replace them at will for extracting irregular levies of all imaginable kinds.

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### 28.3 OTHER FORMS OF LAND ADMINISTRATION

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The predicament of the tenants (*raiyyats*) and their helplessness under the *Zamindari* system was bound sooner or later to become too conspicuous in the eyes of the Company raj. And so was to loom disconcertingly very high the disadvantage of having intermediaries between the Government and the tenants, and of not having any direct touch with the *raiyyat* cultivators. In fact the disadvantage seemed to the authorities to be steadily outweighing the advantage of their enjoying the loyalist *Zamindari* support, and of course, some relief from the rigours and strains of tax collection. The alternative was to give up henceforth all the intermediaries altogether, and undertake the meticulous process of collecting revenue in the hard way, i.e. directly from the *raiyyats* – the tillers of the soil. The method that came to be known as the *Raiyatwari* Settlement, based on a plot-wise survey of land, settled for a certain period and revised thereafter, was introduced in the non-*Zamindari* areas of the Madras and the Bombay Presidencies during the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Coinciding with the Industrial Revolution, and falling under the spell of the rising industrial bourgeoisie in Britain, the Company raj at this point appeared to have started disliking the feudal conditions that prevailed in India and taking increasingly an anti-landlordist stand. This trend, apparent between the 1830s and the 1850s, was discernible in the North-Western Provinces and Bombay-Deccan, or the areas that remained outside the pale of both the *Zamindari* and the *Raiyatwari* settlements. In these areas was nurtured the *Mahalwari* or the village community-based Settlements, cutting severely down the *Jagirdari* and *Talukdari* dominance, throwing overboard other existing intermediaries (various kinds of *sanad*-holders, *Muafidars*, *Bisedars*, *Lakhirajdars* etc.), settling land directly with the cultivators for a fixed period, pending revision, and collecting tax with the help of the community and village heads.

It was when the *Mahalwari* Settlement started taking shape in the northern and central parts of the country, and the *Raiyatwari* Settlement being revised in the Bombay-Deccan, between the mid-1820s and the mid-1850s, that landlordism was treated most contemptuously by the Company raj. The aftermath of the Industrial Revolution also saw the rise of the bourgeoisie to power in Britain and the emphatic expression of their hostility towards the British aristocracy. Bred in an emerging industrial society and fed with the liberalist Utilitarian denunciation of feudalism, the new arrivals among the Company raj's high officials were openly hostile against the landlords, and they fondly hoped for displacing landlordism to make room for bourgeois developments in India, initially in its agriculture. Their onslaught on the landlords was concentrated mainly on the legitimacy of their rights over the domains they so unhesitatingly lorded, and also on the regularity with which they were required to collect revenue from their estates and pass it unflinchingly to the Government. If the *Zamindari*, *Jagirdari* and the *Talukdari* titles were not found to be in order, the *sanads* for their claims not

substantiated and the revenue payment to the treasury not regular, the Government took the landlords to the courts of law, cancelled their deeds and resumed or appropriated their estates for settlement with others. There were scorching enquiries into the claims for the *Badshahi*, *Nawabi* and even early Company raj's land-grants to *Lakhirajdars*, *Maufudars*, *Inamdars* and other *sanad*-holders, and also such revenue collectors as the *Malguzars*, *Patwaris*, *Lambardars* etc. Many who could not justify jurisdiction over land in their possession lost either the whole or parts of it. Those who lost the whole were summarily pensioned off, and those who managed to save a part or parts were deprived much of their usurped domains. Raja of Mainpuri, for example, lost *Talukdari* rights over 116 out of 158 villages in the 1840s, and so did Raja Moorsun in Aligarh over 138 of 216 villages. "Lapsed" succession and questionable adoption were also used as pleas by the Company raj, especially under Lord Dalhousie, for the forfeiture of numerous landlords' lands.

The systematic setting aside of landlords of various sizes – big and small – was carried out by the Company raj mostly at the instances of such outstanding devotees of the principles of bourgeois-liberal political economy as Holt Mackenzie, Bird, Thomason and Thornton in the North-Western Provinces and Wingate and Goldsmith in the Bombay-Deccan. They received the support of the Company raj's high-priests (Governors General) of the time between Bentinck and Dalhousie from 1828 to 1856. The landlords on their part did try to withstand the Government's offensive by fighting litigations in the law-courts, petitioning the Governors and Governors General, appealing pathetically to the Court of Directors and Board of Control in London, and even forming in Calcutta in 1839 the Landholders' Society to organise collective resistance. Nothing, however, seemed to be working in their favour, and the Government's campaign generally against feudalism, and particularly against the landlords' usurpation of land, and their living on unearned income and flaunting it all-around, continued unabated – without breaks. The landlords clearly were losing their battle with the Company raj in the vast Indian countryside because of the juridical and moral weakness of their position, but more, and primarily on account of their overbearing oligarchic isolation from the rural populace, including the peasant masses – those poverty-stricken, faceless millions whose enormous number in itself was of some unrecognisable strength. Although heavily dependent on the landlords and habitually respectful to them, the peasantry and others could not but be apathetic towards, if not openly resentful of, the landlords, because of their economic and social exploitation of the entire rural society. Their support base having thus been shrunk into a handful of relatives, dependants, courtiers (*musahibs*) and retainers, the landlords were hardly in a position to stand up to the Company raj's aggression.

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## 28.4 LANDLORDS AFTER THE REVOLT OF 1857

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The landlords' falling into a state of helplessness would have gone on much further had there not been a significant change creeping into the Company raj's fortunes in the agricultural sector. While embarking on anti-landlordism, the British authorities thought of revising the method of land assessment in such a way as to render their revenue demand more equitable for both the *rai-yats* and the State, and thereby also favourable for agricultural improvement. They decided to do this on the basis of the Ricardian Theory of Rent in the West, by taxing the "net" produce of land rather than its "gross" produce. In the maze of detailed

land surveys and assessment procedures for finding out the “net” produce (by deducting from the “gross”, the cost of cultivation and labour, as well as some margin of profit), the Company raj’s revenue mandarins lost their way. They eventually ended up by imposing an exorbitant rate of land tax on the cultivators and enforcing its strict collection from them. The over-assessment between the 1820s and the 1850s increased at the least by 20 per cent (in Hissar and Rohtak), some time even by 70 per cent (in Delhi and the neighbourhood) and on an average by 46 per cent (in Bundelkhand). Its severe collection without any remission resulted in the mounting of arrears of rent and peasant indebtedness, auction sales of land and desertions of field, jacqueries and suicides. Subjected to harsh over-assessment, and consequently to economic distress, the peasants were intensely aggrieved with the Government, and poised for standing up against it. The time of their unrest reached a flash-point in 1857, an ignition provided by the British-Indian army’s mutinous sepoys – many of whom came from among them. The revolt of 1857 could not have become the Great Revolt, which threatened the Company raj’s very existence, without the widespread participation of the peasants and other sections of the civil population, including of course the disgruntled aristocrats and landlords.

The great revolt of 1857-58 proved to be the turning point in the history of the landlords and feudal elements in India, both for their stakes in current situation as well as for their progress in the future. The existing situation offered the opportunity to take on their tormentor – the Company raj – frontally in conjunction with an aroused rural society. This joining of hands of the landlords and the cultivators catapulted the socially overbearing landlords to the position of leadership in the popular anti-imperialist tumult. Following a few dispossessed princes and chiefs operating at the helm of the revolt, some *Zamindars*, *Jagirdars*, *Talukdars* and the like also supplied its leadership at the local level. It was not the number of the participants (not many actively participated in the rising) but the antipathy they generally felt towards the Company raj, and the discontent they shared among themselves as a class, actually mattered the most. Despite the social contradiction with the landlords and persons of their ilk, the rebellious commonalty (peasants in the main) had little alternative to accepting them – even if reluctantly – as leaders of the struggle against the British in 1857-58. Since the common man, woman and the mass of the people were not in a position at that semi-medieval circumstances to throw up a vibrant leadership of their own (the capability for which they did reveal once in a while during the great revolt), and also as the forward-looking, dynamic and ideologically-motivated middle class had not yet emerged, they had to do with, or make the best use of what was available to them – the traditional, status-quoist landlord leadership. Had the rebels succeeded in overthrowing the Company raj under their customary aristocratic leaders – and it could by no means be ruled out – would Hindustan then have been relapsed to the later Mughal days, from colonialism back to feudalism? It did not happen that way, and the British succeeded in winning India once again to themselves, subjecting the defeated rebels to terrible repressions and treating the commoners with utmost racial abuses. Ironically, out of all rebel reverses, and amidst the ashes of destruction and death, rose up again the irrepressible princes, *rajās* and landlords who returned to their domineering exploitative ways in the countryside. They, however, survived not really on their own, but on account primarily of a dramatic change in the over-all British perception of them, and also of the governance of India. The change was

brought about by the fearful British experience of facing a massive upsurge of people with a feudal lining on its crest. They had come to realise the grave danger that the disaffected multitudes could pose to their authority, and therefore, they began living in constant fear of fresh popular outbreaks. The only way out of this alarmist psychotic situation, they felt, was to show the white flag to the feudal elements, or those whom the rebellious peasantry seemed habitually to be following, despite the conflict of interests. Discarding the anti-feudalism of the recent past, and befriending the Indian Chiefs and landlords of diverse denominations by restoring them to their vantage position, were believed together to be the British empire's greatest guarantee against internal insecurities, and also the surest way to keep the traditional India under full control. The drastic change of the British mind in respect of their Indian possessions was put into great effect without any loss of time, and had been solemnly affirmed in the Queen Empress's Proclamation of 1 November 1858.

Consequent to the crisis of 1857-58, when the British authorities decided to take over the entire administration of India into their hands from those of the East India Company, it was incumbent on them to state publicly the basic changes that such momentous development must give effect to. The statement was contained in Queen (Empress for India) Victoria's Proclamation, and it emphasized upon the British resolve hereafter to compromise with the feudal forces in India, to commit themselves to safeguarding and furtherance of interests of the landed aristocracy and landlords of various varieties. "We know and respect the feelings of attachment with which the natives of India regarded the land inherited from their ancestors", the Proclamation announced, and then ran on to pledge the Government solemnly "to protect them in all rights connected therewith", and to pay "due regard to the ancient rights, usages and customs in India". It clearly signified the Government's giving up the Utilitarian stand against feudalism, as well as the liberalist dream of setting India on the capitalist path. Instead it showed the British willingness to share India's total social surplus with the feudal and landlordist contingent (limiting disproportionately of course, the latter's share) and buy some sense of internal security.

Landlordism not only was resuscitated in India by the Proclamation of 1858, it actually flourished under the British Raj's protection almost unobtrusively – without much opposition – till at least 1920. The landlords in effect turned out to be the junior partners of the imperialists in India between 1858 and 1920, and exercised mastery over the rural sector with their elaborate economic and social leverages, and a certain decisive presence in the corridors of power. The landlord-dominated British Indian Association (1851-1876), for example, was accorded by the British a vital share in the governance of the country through the nomination of its leaders to the Viceroy's Council and to the Bengal Legislative Council. The numerical strength of landlords also increased in leaps and bounds, and a considerable number was being continually added to their variegated rank over the vast stretches of the *Zamindari* territories, such as the whole of Bengal Presidency and part of the Madras Presidency, as well as in the *Jagirdari* and *Talukdari* regions of the North-Western Provinces, and in the enormous areas under the *Raiyatwari* and *Mahalwari* systems like most of the Madras and whole of the Bombay Presidencies, practically all of the North-Western Provinces and Punjab (under the village proprietary arrangement). The substantial and well-to-do tenants in all these places went very aggressively over the years for the

acquisition of land, in addition to the originally assigned plots of their own. It was more a kind of land-grabbing than land acquiring, and it had been effected through various questionable means like surreptitiously bringing waste and forest lands into cultivation, encroaching into the village common lands (say, for grazing, holding fairs, celebrating communitarian religious and socio-cultural occasions etc.), exercising pressure on the poor *raiya*s and buying their lands from distress sales, manipulating land records with the help of the *Patwaris* and forcing the poor peasants to part with the land they had mortgaged to their rich neighbours for obtaining ready loans in cash and crops. The neo-landlords in the non-*Zamindari* parts of the country had in fact been offering loans to the needy cultivators and acting as their supplementary rural credit suppliers, over and above the main providers – the professional moneylenders or *mahajans*. It was the *mahajans* or *sahukars* who created havoc in the Bombay-Deccan by taking full advantage there of the rural indebtedness, charging excessive interest on the peasant-borrowing, falsifying records of loans and mortgages, and enforcing the sale of debtors' land and property for re-payment. All these led eventually in 1875 to violent outbursts of peasant protests, widespread attacks on the moneylenders' person and property and destruction of their court papers and land records.

Along with the emergence of the neo-landlords, another important category of substantial landlordist tenants were making their presence strongly felt during 1858-1920 in many parts of the country, especially in the *Zamindari* areas. Such substantial tenants (*Jotedars*) would persuade the landlords to giving them more land over and above their own, if necessary on lease, and arrange for cultivating these through the age-old sharecropping system. Under the yearly sharecropping arrangement the cultivator (*adhiar*) – a sub-tenant or under-tenant – was called upon to raise crops on his own in the *Jotedar's* additionally tenanted land and share the harvested crops, usually in two equal halves with the *Jotedar* or the tenant-landlord, paying him thus a clear 50 per cent produce-rent. Apart from obtaining such high extraction of rent (perhaps the highest), the *Jotedar* enjoyed the privilege of changing or throwing out his *adhiar* if another cultivator offered in the following year more *nazarana* to replace him. These ejections were common in respect not only of the under-tenants, but also of the tenants-at-will or those tenants who lacked occupational rights over their assigned plots. The *Zamindars*, *Talukdars* and all other emergent neo-landlords (including *Deshmukhs*, *Deshpandes*, *Mirasdars* etc.) all over the country periodically evicted *raiya*s from their fields for extracting higher amount of either *nazarana* or rent from them. Over and above these regular evictions, the landlords unfailingly subjected the cultivating peasants to all kinds of irregular forced levies, such as their contributing to the landlords on the occasions of births, deaths, marriages and various other social and religious family functions. The levying of the landlords' irregular imposts were reported to have been of about 25 to 30 kinds, but none had been more demanding and distractingly damaging (especially during the agricultural seasons) than the systematic extraction of forced labour (*begaar*) from the peasants and their dependents. Enforced labour without payment for working in the landlord's field, his household and in any of his pet private projects, be it digging a pond, renovating a temple, repairing a road within the estate, or constructing the living quarters, was rampant and included even the poor peasant women's putting up with his sexual advances.

## 28.5 LANDLORDS AND EARLY NATIONALISTS

The landlords' economic and social exploitation of the *raiya*s was not only condoned by the Colonial State, but also strongly backed up by all its agencies, reducing the peasantry as a whole to a state of utter helplessness. The agencies were the local and village officials, the police in the localities and the sub-divisional and district courts, standing protectively behind the landlords, who manipulated records, refused rent-receipts to tenants and used *lathials* against them at will and at random. Although the Western educated Indian middle classes – the widely awakened future leaders of the country – did take note of the prevailing plights of the *raiya*s and sympathise with their hard and sad lot, they were reluctant altogether to go against the landlords, or to curb landlordism in any way. Despite the early nationalists like G.V. Joshi's concern for the distress that landlordism had caused to the *raiya*s in the *Zamindari* area, and causing simultaneously to them in the *Raiyatwari* areas, the pioneer leaders of the Indian National Congress not only not opposed the landlords, but actually went to the extent of extolling their questionable operations. R.C. Dutt, for example, was convinced that the Bengal *Zamindars* had charged "fair and moderate rent", and that they had succeeded in securing "the prosperity and happiness" of the people of the Bengal Presidency. The Congress's reluctance to oppose the Indian landlords was perhaps on account of its looking up to them for financial and political support, apart from a few of its leaders' having strong landlordist connections. As a very rich section of Indian society, in addition to the growing category of business and industrial magnates, the landlords could facilitate the onward march of the Congress with their position of local power and monetary contribution. There were promoters of the Congress among the landlords, and some of them also distinguished themselves as public men – as connoisseurs of arts and literatures, patrons of social and educational endeavours – without of course, going hardly ever against the grain of their exploitative, extortionist class character. A public-spirited and enlightened *Zamindar* like Joykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara, Bengal, had always been under his skin a ruthless landlord, involved in money-lending, grain-trading and purchasing of encumbered estates. (Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movement in India*, p. 49). With the British Raj thus standing solidly behind the landlords, and the nationalists failing to offer a protective hand, the peasantry had meekly suffered, and resisted when it became absolutely insufferable. Since they were unorganised, bereft of any formation of their own, largely leaderless, and also rudderless because of their not imbibing any ideology, the peasant resistance to landlordism was bound to be sporadic, spasmodic and spontaneous. Spontaneity could hardly be any guarantee of success, and the occasional outbursts between 1858 and 1920 failed to make any significant headway.

Among the such notable peasant unrest over the *Zamindari* extractions and ejections were the peasant movements in Serajganj (Pabna), Bengal, in 1872-73, the Moplah peasants' rising in Malabar against the oppressions of landlords (*Jenmis*)-officials-*mahajans* combine in 1873 (but lingeringly till 1896), the tribal peasants' (including the Rumpas', Santals' and Mundas') risings in the hills against the exploitative landlords and *Dikus* (*mahajans* and traders) and the ham-handed British authorities in Visakhapatnam Agency, western Bengal and southern Bihar intermittently between 1871 and 1900. There were also the Bogra, Mymensing, Dacca and Hooghly *kisans*' agitation against the steep *Zamindari* rent enhancements

in Bengal by fits and starts from 1870 to 1885; the anti-*Jotedari* agitation of the sharecroppers in Bagerhat (Khulna), Bengal, in 1907 and the indigo cultivators' rising against the landlordist oppression of the planters under British cover in 1908 in Champaran, Bihar. Numerous other similarly unfinished landlord-*raiyat* conflicts were strewn over the northern, southern, central and western parts of the country.

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## 28.6 LANDLORDS AND THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT DURING THE 1920s AND 1930s

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The landlords' luck in weathering the storm of peasant protest, of course with the British backing, seemed to be running out from 1920-22 when there was a dramatic turn towards vibrant mass politics. It was in 1920-22 that Gandhiji succeeded in bringing the Congress out of its elitist confines, and steering it to lead the people at large in the Non-Cooperation movement against the British authorities. Peasants naturally were enlisted in this massive anti-imperialist joint front and played a significant role in the national struggle for independence. Once aroused to battle for freedom from the colonial rule, they felt encouraged to fight for freeing themselves from the landlordist clutches. The peasantry waged simultaneously the anti-British and the anti-landlord struggles and combined the "no-tax" slogan with the "no-rent" clarion call. The "no-tax" agitation, initiated by Gandhiji himself as early as 1917 in Champaran (Bihar) and in Kaira (Gujarat), was exemplified explosively in Bardoli (Gujarat) in 1922, in Guntur (in Madras Presidency) in the early 1920s and in Tipperah, Mymensingh, Rajsahi and Dinajpur (Bengal), at the Wahabi instance, in 1920-22. Additionally the Koya peasants under Alluri Sitaram Raju fought for their forest rights in Madras Presidency in 1922, and the tenantry opposed unitedly the imposition of *Chowkidari* tax in north Bihar in 1920-21, against the collection of Union Board tax in Contai, Midnapore (Bengal), in 1921 and against a rise in revenue rates in East and West Godavari (Madras Presidency) in 1927. The instances of anti-imperialist "no-tax" activities coincided with the opening of the floodgates of anti-landlordist "no-rent" campaigns throughout the 1920s, i.e. of the *adhikars* against the *Jotedars* in Jalpaiguri and the 24 Parganas (Bengal) in 1920, of the Muslim Moplah peasants against the Brahmin *Jenmis* (Malabar) in 1921, of the tenants against the extortionist landlords in Cossimbazar, Tamruk and Contai (Bengal) in 1921, against the Midnapore *Zamindari* Company (Bengal) in 1922. To add to these examples, one must include the peasants' resolute "no-rent" confrontation with "the barons of Oudh" (the United Provinces) under Baba Ram Chandra and an young Jawaharlal Nehru in 1921, and its spreading like wild-fire to Rae Bareilly, Fyzabad and Sultanpur, and the extension thereafter to Hardoi, Barabanki, Lucknow and Sitapur (Eka movement) in 1921-22.

Infinitely more than the Government's discomfiture over the "no-tax", the landlords' nervousness in the face of "no-rent" in the early 1920s bordered almost on panic. The landlords found it difficult to control the peasant "no-renters", and they were able somehow to save their skin with the help of the lathi-wielding retainers, the use of the police force, the strong support of the local bureaucracy and the sympathetic hearing of the lower courts of law, who went by the gospel of rent-receipts (often forgotten wilfully to be issued to the tenants). But what reassured the landlords most was the Congress ambivalence towards the "no-rent" campaigns, and its apparent landlord-friendly disposition throughout the

1920s and early 1930s, despite the anti-landlordism of some young Congress activists like Jawaharlal. As early as February 1922 when the “no-tax” move in Bardoli taluka (Gujarat) against the Government was being made, the Congress Working Committee under the Gandhian leadership warned the *raiyats* that “withholding rent payment to the Zamindars is contrary to the Congress resolution and injurious to the best interests of the country” (Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movement in India*, p.33). The principle of the resolution was scrupulously observed in the famous Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 against the payment of revenue to the Government. It also dissuaded hundreds of the Congress followers of Jawaharlal Nehru and Baba Ram Chandra from turning the anti-Government “no-tax” campaign in the U.P. into an anti-landlord “no-rent” campaign in 1930. Gandhiji disapproved of the peasant militancy against the landlords and their non-payment of rent, and in his manifesto to the *kisans* issued in May 1931 he asked the tenant “to pay as early as possible all the rent he can” and expected him and his depressed counterparts to be “treated liberally by the landlords” (Gyanendra Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh*, pp. 104-5). However, despite the discouragement of the Congress High Command and the unleashing of Government repression (both Jawaharlal and Baba Ram Chandra were arrested), the payment of rent to the landlords came practically to a standstill by the end of 1931 in Rae Bareilly, Etawah, Kanpur, Unnao and Allahabad. The younger radical elements in the national movement throughout the 1930s were becoming increasingly aware of the parasitical, exploitative character of the landlords, and turning resolutely against them. The left Congressites, who organised themselves into a Congress Socialist party in 1934, were joined in their opposition to the landlords by the Communist Party of India – already in existence from the mid-1920s. Together they started upholding the cause of the peasant masses, demanding land to the tiller, and advocating even the abolition of landlordism. However, the leftists had not been able in the mid-1930s to persuade the Congress leadership to endorse their anti-landlordism, and had failed to get such slogans as “land to the tiller” or “abolish Zamindari” included in the agrarian programme that the Congress adopted in its Faizpur session in December 1936. The landlords did thus escape in all parts of the country in the late 1930s, especially in the Congress-ruled provinces under Provincial Autonomy, the direct threat to their very existence. But they could not avoid hereafter from facing the persistent Congress demand for substantial curtailment of their dominance through the reduction of rent, abolition of irregular levies and forced labour, annulment of arrears of rent and fixity of tenure of all tenants.

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## 28.7 CONGRESS, THE LEFT AND THE POSITION OF LANDLORDS

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Encouraged by the Congress agrarian programme, guided by the left forces – who combined the various locally grown kisan organisations (Andhra Zamindari Ryot Association, Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, Karshaka Sangham, Kisan Sangh, Workers and Peasants Party, Krishak Samiti etc.) into a nation-wide All India Kisan Sabha in 1936 – and forced by the mounting post-Depression economic pressure, a series of anti-landlord disturbances broke out all over India. They included agitations of farm-hands against the *Mirasdars* in Tanjore (1938); of bonded labourers and sharecroppers against the *Istimrardars* in Ajmer-Merwara, Rajasthan, and Haris against the *Jagirdars* in Sind (1938-39); of *Bargadars* against the *Jotedars* in Bengal (1939); of tenants-at-will against the

*Zamindari* evictions in Ghalla Dher, Mardan, N.W.F.P. (1938); of *Asami-Shikmidars* over *Sir* lands in the U.P. (1938); of *Bakasht* peasants against the landlords in Bihar (1937-39); of all tenants against the *Biswedars* in Patiala and *Khotears* in Maharashtra (1939). There were also anti-landlord agitations in Malabar and Kasargad (1939), as well as in Nellore and Visakhapatnam (1938-39) and at Munagala in Krishna district (1939). Even then, the worsening of their existential crisis had not pushed the landlords to the brink of total collapse mainly because of the extraneous circumstances, namely, the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-45), and India's being dragged into it in favour of the British-led Allied Powers. Since the war meant a state of emergency, and emergency called for sterner governance, the British Raj withheld all traces of constitutionalism and started ruling India through the draconian Defence of India Rules. The illegalisation of public protest and agitation under the D.I.R. came to the rescue of the landlords, and so did the numbing effect of the nationalist controversy over supporting or opposing Britain in the war. The outcome was the combative "Quit India" movement against the Raj on the one hand and the supportive "People's War" line on the other, both contributing to the restraint on the *kisan's* rising temper in the country between 1939 and 1945. The breathing space the war situation thus provided for the landlords went further in their favour when the Government launched a War Fund for meeting its military expenses. The Fund enabled the landed magnates to contribute richly to the British war-efforts and curry their protectors' favour. But, despite all this, the landlords were practically under siege during the war period and the anti-landlord peasant resentment expressed itself sporadically throughout. Its intensity could hardly be guessed without some reference to such agitations as the anti-*Dhaniama* in Surat and Broach (South Gujarat), 1940; anti-*Mirasdar* in Trichinopoly (Madras), 1940; anti-*Malik* in Purnea (Bihar), 1940-41; anti-*Jotedar* in most parts of Bengal, 1940-44; anti-landlordist crop-sharing in Patiala (Punjab), early 1940s; anti-eviction (*Sir* lands) in Gorakhpur and Benares (the U.P.), 1940-41; anti-ejectment (*Bakasht* lands) in most of Bihar, 1941-45; anti-*Zamindari* in Durg (C.P. and Berar) and Surma Valley (Assam), 1940; and also in Ganjam (Orissa), Krishna district and Visakhapatnam (Andhra, Madras) 1940, in North Malabar, 1940-41, and in Thana, Nasik and Kolaba (Maharashtra), 1941.

Once the war ended in 1945, and the Government's iron grip relaxed a bit, the landlords' vulnerability *vis-a-vis* the tenants and their mobilisers, increased manifold. The left-wing *kisan* agitators, who had always been challenging feudalism – the epitome rural expropriation and oppression – now readied themselves for dealing a death blow to the landlordist system. In the winter of 1945 the All India Kisan Sabha demanded the abolition of landlordism, and wanted it to be done – contrary to the prevailing nationalist opinion – "without compensation". About this time the Congress also veered round the leftist position on the issue, but favoured abolition "with compensation" in its Election Manifesto of 1946. Whether it was "with" or "without" compensation – the making up of the landlords' loss of land, or refusing to do so to even up their age-old malpractices – the fate of the landlords seemed to have been sealed on the eve of the country's independence and in its aftermath. It could not have been otherwise in the light of the explosive situation that had rapidly been developing in the Indian countryside. Peasant militancy against the landlord-Government alliance started taking violent forms, notably in Mannargudi (Tanjore), 1944-45; in the peasants' clashing with the landlords over the tilling of lands in Shovana *Zamindari* (Khulna), 1945; in the peasants' forcibly cultivating and harvesting

*Bakasht* lands in many parts of Bihar, 1945-46; in the Worli peasants' fighting the joint front of moneylenders, landlords and police in Thana, 1945-46; in the *Punam* cultivators' arming themselves against the landlord-friendly Malabar Special Police in North Malabar, 1946-47.

A very high level of peasant militancy was making its distinctive presence felt even in 1946 when the landless went the proletarian insurrectionary way in Travancore (Punnapra-Vayalar). It was followed in the *Tebhaga* movement (Bengal) in 1947 by the *Bargadars'* seizing the crop-shares of the *Jotedars*, breaking open the landlords' granaries and snatching away their stocks of grains. The rebellious peasants' seizing of the landlords' crops soon graduated to their seizure of the landlords' lands in Telengana in 1947-48 and to the highest stage of peasant struggle – the distribution of the seized lands among the landless. Time in fact was running out for the Congress leaders who were to monopolise governance in the newly independent India, and who had either to take urgent steps for the abolition of landlordism or to confront widespread peasant risings all over the country – to the utter detriment of its independence and development. Although the Bihar *Zamindari* legislation was introduced in the provincial legislature as early as 1947, the model piece of anti-*Zamindari* legislation was fashioned only after the U.P. *Zamindari* Abolition Committee Report of 1948. A number of provincial Governments (including Bihar who redrafted its Bill) such as those of Madras, Assam, Bombay and the C.P. and Berar, over and above Bihar and the U.P., adopted a similar pattern in their respective legislative exercise in 1949. The landlords in all parts of the country in response waged a last-ditch battle for their very existence in the courts of law, harping on the Government's violation of their fundamental right to property, and on the authorities' incumbency to provide them with "adequate" compensation. Since they were not doing too badly on the legal front (the Patna High Court apparently upheld their position in 1950), the Congress Government at the centre had to pass consecutive constitutional amendments in 1951 and 1954, by which the charge of flouting any fundamental right or of offering "insufficient" compensation (in respect of the *Zamindari* abolition) were not permitted to be brought before the courts. This enabled most of the states to circumvent the arduous legal proceedings and to carry out the *Zamindari* abolition with compensation (as recommended by the state legislatures) by 1956. With the abolition of *Zamindari*, certainly on the surface, a very prolonged phase of history had ended which had meant the unearned profiteering and parasitic prodigality, and exploitation, repression and injustice. The landlords thus seemed dramatically to have exited from the agrarian scene of the country, but landlordism somehow surreptitiously survived, squeezed out its own sustenance and continued to remain a debilitating burden on the Indian people.

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## 28.8 SUMMARY

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The landlords were a force to be reckoned with until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, despite the attempts by the colonial administration to undermine their powers. The failure of the revolt of 1857, however, dramatically changed their position. Although no longer independently powerful vis-à-vis the state, the landlords gained enormously as the colonial government decided to prop them as a bulwark against peasant rebellions. Over the period, the landlords served as one of the most important support of the colonial state.

The nationalist movement maintained an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the landlords. On the one hand, it opposed their exploitation and oppression of the peasants. On the other hand, it did not wish to antagonise them in supposedly larger interests of the nation. Nevertheless, some of its leaders led significant peasant movements in various parts of the country. The intensifying peasant movements all over the country against the landlords were being led by the left, the nationalists and independent peasant leaders. This seriously undermined their position and convinced all the concerned forces that landlordism should be abolished with or without compensation.

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## **28.9 EXERCISES**

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- 1) How did the failure of the Revolt of 1857 transform the position of the landlords?
- 2) Discuss the relationship between the nationalists and the landlords during the 1920s and 1930s.
- 3) In what ways did the militant peasant movements help in undermining the position of the landlords?

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