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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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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 *bakasht* 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?