

HISTORICAL STUDY OF FARMER MOVEMENTS IN KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT

India has an agricultural economy, with the agriculture sector providing jobs for almost half of the country's workforce and accounting for approximately 16 percent of the GDP in the fiscal year 2019-20. India has experienced numerous farmer movements rooted in various issues, with the demands of these movements reflecting both spatial and temporal aspects. Indeed, the farmers' movement in India has deep-rooted origins, tracing back to the colonial era when agriculturalists across various regions of India protested against Zamindars, landlords, British colonial authorities, and feudal lords. These movements arose due to intense exploitation, oppression, deprivation of land rights, introduction of new taxes, and altered agrarian relationships between farmers and the Colonial government or feudal lords. Many of the challenges that the farmers engaged in were either linked to the nationalist struggle or separate from it. All these challenges led the farmers to join the nationalist movement. A notable leader who mobilized the farmers within a political party was Chaudhury Charan Singh, India's former Prime Minister. He arranged several rallies addressing topics like price equality between industrial and agricultural goods; permitting the import of agricultural inputs from overseas, decreasing industry protection, ensuring farmers are adequately represented in various boards and committees, providing subsidies for electricity, water, fertilizer, seeds, lessening the income gap between urban and rural populations, creating Kisan Banks, and setting up agricultural polytechnics, among others.

In the 1980s, India witnessed the start of the 'New Farmers' Movement' across various regions. The causes included unfavorable trade conditions for agriculture, decreasing purchasing power, unsatisfactory prices, many farmers leaving the agricultural field, rising input costs, and dropping per capita income from farming, among others. It all started in Maharashtra when 'Shetkari Sanghathana,' led by Sharad Joshi, a former UN employee who became a farmer, began protests in the village of Chakan in Pune demanding fair prices for agricultural products, especially onions. Farmers in other states of India started to implement this sole agenda of profitable prices. In Karnataka, farmers from Navalgund initiated a movement to demand the removal of the 'betterment levy' in the Command Area. This contributed to the establishment of a group named Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha. Prof. Nanjundaswamy, a Law Professor, emerged as its visionary and unquestioned leader. The set of demands would encompass all concerns of farmers. Frequently, the farmers' movement would address concerns like securing fair prices, waiving agricultural loans, opposing government procurement policies, levy policies, and advocating for the liberalization of agricultural policy, among others.

Keywords: Agitation, Exploitation, Fair price, Farmers, Rajya Raitha Sangha, Welfare

INTRODUCTION

Evolving in the 1970s and gaining further traction in the 1980s, the farmers' movement in India has revealed new contradictions within Indian agrarian society. Largely involving middle and wealthy

farmers from various Indian states, the farmers' movement signifies a unique stage in the history and customs of agrarian discontent in India. In contrast to the previous actions of small and marginal farmers alongside landless agricultural workers against zaminders and landlords, the farmers' movement, primarily focused on the needs of the upper tier of rural society, raises intriguing questions regarding the extended history of peasant mobilization. Questions emerge regarding whether the farmers' movement is a consequence or a further evolution of the peasant movements in India, or if it represents a denial or rejection of the fundamental dynamics that define the peasant mobilization against the landowners in rural society.

Farmers' movements in India, opposing landlordism and exploitation in the rural sector, are quite a longstanding occurrence. These actions played a significant role in dismantling the traditional feudal system and promoting agricultural advancement in contemporary ways. Nonetheless, the agricultural framework that emerged was far from being equal. At this point, farmers' associations and public movements regarding prices and related matters have taken center stage in India. In contrast to the latter, the farmers' movements are not opposing oppression in the rural sector, but rather contest what they perceive to be the causes of ongoing rural underdevelopment and a decline in farmers' income.

Starting in 2000, the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), a movement supporting peasant farmers, pastoralists, and breeders, has held annual seed festivals to promote exchanges of seeds and knowledge among farmers, sales of seeds, and to conduct sessions for sharing insights and experiences, such as discussions on seed regulations. The goal is to enhance the trading and distribution of seeds among farmers while safeguarding the farmers' seed systems to facilitate the execution of Article 9 of the ITPGRFA. The organization additionally operates seed banks, allowing farmers to obtain seeds of native varieties, along with processing facilities for products derived from peasant seeds, like textiles produced from local ('indigenous') cotton varieties. KRRS also offers details to farmers and the public about Indian laws concerning Farmers' Rights, which encompass seed legislation, plant variety protection, patents, and regulations regarding genetically modified organisms (GMO).

The farmers' movement in Karnataka also encompasses the protests of beedi tobacco growers from Nipani in the 1980s. The farmers relied solely on the domestic market for sales and were at the mercy of greedy traders. Common trade practices included offering advance payments before harvest, collecting the harvest at prices below market rates, manipulating prices, under-weighting, and fraudulent grading. Market prices could also be manipulated with comparatively more ease. The prices dropped significantly in 1980. It was discovered that 'producers earned under six rupees per kilo, while the production expenses exceeded Rs. Sure, please provide the text you'd like me to paraphrase. What's even worse is that the traders marketed the goods at twice the production cost. The disturbance in Nipani began in March 1981, manifesting as a traffic blockade (Rasta Roko). Nipani is located on the Bangalore-Pune Highway. For 24 days, farmers obstructed the highway, compelling traffic to take a detour. The Karnataka police swiftly intervened to make arrests and clear the road by resorting to gunfire. It is claimed that the tobacco traders orchestrated a provocation by throwing stones with the assistance of hired thugs, compelling the police to take action against the farmers. Approximately 10 individuals were reported dead due to gunfire, with hundreds wounded. Ultimately, the revolt was triggered by government intervention and active involvement in determining the minimum support price for tobacco growers. The open auction system for tobacco commenced in October 1984 and is anticipated to yield improved prices for farmers.

FARMER'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

N. G. Ranga was an Indian freedom activist, a member of parliament, and a proponent of peasant ideology. He was born on 7 November 1900, in the district of Guntur, located in the state of Andhra Pradesh. N.G. Ranga is considered the father of the Indian Peasant movement and significantly linked peasants to the national freedom struggle. Ranga established the Andhra Provincial Ryot's Association in 1928 to lead the unrest among the peasants. In 1933, he spearheaded the significant ryot protest. He persistently coordinated local farmers and discovered numerous organizations committed to the farmers' cause. In 1936, he was appointed the inaugural General Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha.

FARMER MOVEMENTS IN INDIA BEFORE THE 1900s

Before the 1900s, farmer movements in the country were disorganized and intermittent. A major movement during this time was the Indigo movement. Farmers were compelled by the British to cultivate indigo instead of food grains to enhance profits. This led to numerous issues for farmers. They received low prices for indigo, leading to a decline in soil fertility. It also failed to ensure food security since farmers could consume food crops but not indigo. In 1860, the government established the Indigo commission, which declared it illegal to compel farmers to cultivate indigo. Farmers triumphed.

The 1875 Deccan Riots occurred as a protest against the excessive financial demands of Marwadi and Gujarati lenders. Farmers faced increased duties, and land revenue rose by 50%. An Indian farmer's limited earnings could not cover such high taxes. Therefore, a social boycott initiative was established in 1874, where they resolved to avoid buying from their stores and to not provide any services to them. The movement was widespread in western India, yet it failed to achieve complete success. The government enacted the Deccan Agriculturists Relief Act in 1879.

FARMER MOVEMENTS IN INDIA AFTER THE 1900s

Mahatma Gandhi became a prominent national figure in the early 20th century. He spearheaded the struggle for the advancement of Indian farmers. The Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 stands as a significant movement directed by him. Champaran Satyagraha: Farmers in Bihar's Champaran faced severe exploitation. They did not receive appropriate compensation for their labor. They had to cultivate indigo on at least 3/20th of their agricultural land, earning very little profit in return. In 1917, Mahatma Gandhi arrived after coming back from South Africa and insisted on staying in the village until the farmers' demands were satisfied. The Champaran Agrarian Act was enacted in May 1918, which relieved farmers from the burden of excessive taxes. The movement became violent in the end, contradicting Gandhiji's principle of non-violence. Still, it is deemed a significant agricultural movement in the quest for freedom.

In Kheda, Gujarat, farmers' crops were unsuccessful because of drought-like circumstances. Despite that, they still had to pay taxes. Leaders such as Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel united to advocate for farmers' rights. The government met the main demands put forth by the farmers. Despite a crop failure, the British government declined to suspend tax collections and even increased land revenue by 30%. Irritated farmers united, and every effort by the British troops to quell the movement was unsuccessful. Ultimately, the tax payment was bypassed for that year, and the increase in Inland Revenue was reduced to just 6%.

FARMER'S MOVEMENT IN KARNATAKA

In Karnataka, Mahantha Devaru Nanjundaswamy (13 February 1936 – 3 February 2004) was a prominent Gandhian leader, scholar, and a significant activist in India who championed the rights of farmers. He is among the founders of Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) established in 1980. He was a notable leader in the anti-globalization movement. The KRRS resisted the aggressive recovery of loans and the resulting seizure of property, rejected the imposition of sugarcane levy prices, and called for free electricity, fertilizer subsidies, and increased support prices, among other demands. These requests were focused on strengthening the achievements of the green revolution.

Prof Nanjundaswamy, a lawyer and dedicated Lohiaite, not only spearheaded the struggle against the negative effects of the government's neo-liberal policies but also instilled self-respect and pride in the farmers of Karnataka. The KRRS consistently fought against the introduction of GM crops and biotechnology, opposed seed patenting, and resisted multinational corporations like Cargill and Monsanto that advocated for these technologies in India. In articulating its anti-globalisation viewpoint, the KRRS adopted a firm stance — Western capitalism aimed not just at seizing the markets of the Third World, but also at exploiting the natural resources and biological diversity of nations such as India. In this context, the KRRS promoted the idea of food sovereignty, worked to preserve traditional crop varieties, and began conversations around sustainable development, although this effort did not fully take off.

LIMITATIONS OBSERVED IN THE MOVEMENT

The farmers movement, from the very beginning, were identified with rich or market-oriented farmers, the other categories received scant focus in their politics. This is the reason why they have been losing their social bases. Further, their operational areas are confined to those localities wherein the classes of rich or market-oriented farmers have come to stay. This has further reduced their areas of operation.

Farmers' movement did not believe in single ideology, because of the fundamental differences among different farmer associations about addressing the issues of farmers. The Karnataka farmers' movement claimed itself as Gandhian but few of its arguments come closer to the argument of dependency theory. It argues that the present day retarded development of the third world is largely due to the colonisation of the third world by the former colonial countries. This colonisation is once again being pursued, even after the independence, by way of cheap goods, dumping secretive technology, patent regimes, imposing restrictions on the agricultural production, developing weak capitalism, urban biased policies etc. In fact, the division within the farmer's movement was not a new one; there were many issues that divided the farmer's movement, when it was at its peak at the all India level. One such issue was retaining the "non – political" character of the movement. This non-political stance had a different meaning: disassociating from the electoral politics, keeping distance from parties upholding agitation politics etc. However this process of remaining non-political underwent transformation, for the reason that the farmers' movement increasingly began to believe that remaining non-political would not benefit the farmers nor the movement. The agrarian structure shows some basic weaknesses. The proportion of households which generate marketable surplus is very small in the total. The medium households which form the bulk of the surplus households and also of area, are not secure in terms of marketable surplus and probably even viability. Whereas the richer households may be able to diversify their economic activities, investing in trade and even to some extent in industry and having good urban contacts, the medium households are mostly tied to agriculture having a tremendous stake in it.

Indian agriculture has caught up with several contradictions. The long-term decline in the relative income per worker in agriculture, which is a reflection of these contradictions, was further compounded by adverse relative prices. In such circumstances it should be a surprise if farmers do not protest, not necessarily because they are the most vulnerable or the most to suffer in agriculture, but because they feel, that, unless they protest, they too would join the ranks of the most vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

The farmers' movement in Karnataka, epitomised by leaders like Prof. Nanjundaswamy, represents a significant assertion of peasant identity and political agency. Drawing parallels to Paulo Freire's philosophy, the movement emphasized that the oppressed must cultivate social and political awareness through active participation in unions and associations as a prerequisite for true democracy. This collective identity emerged as a counter-narrative to rising communalism, inequality, and populist rhetoric.

Ultimately, while the means of the movement often align with Gandhian non-violence, the goals remain contested as the movement strives to move beyond narrow agrarian interests toward a holistic improvement of rural life.

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