

Unit 31

Peasants Movements

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31.1 Introduction

The central concern of this unit is to examine the various dimensions of the peasant movements. This unit is presented within the conceptual framework of social movements and collective identity formation. It begins with a conceptual discussion on peasants and peasant movements. It also briefly deals with the social background of the emergence and the processes of manifestations of the radical peasant movements. The transformation of peasant movements from the phase of the radical to the reformative of these peasant movements and the various dimension of this transformation are also discussed in this unit.

31.2 Conceptualizing Peasants and Peasant Movements

Let us begin with some conceptual clarifications. In this section we shall be discussing the concept of peasants, peasant caste interface and peasant movements.

a) Peasants

Historically peasants have had paradoxical social identities. In social science literature they have been depicted on the one hand as reactionary, conservative, awkward, homologous, incomplete-part society and dependent, on the other as revolutionary, progressive, self-conscious, heterogeneous and self-sufficient social category with the potential for autonomous collective action. However, notwithstanding such paradoxes, social scientists have broadly underlined the subordinated, marginalized and underdog position of the peasantry in human society. In the sociological and the anthropological literature peasants have widely been described as *culturally* 'unsystematic, concrete tradition of many, unreflective, unsophisticated and the non-literati constituting the mosaic of the "little tradition" (Redfield 1956), 'incomplete' and a 'part society with part cultures' (Kroeber 1948). *Politically* they are found to occupy an 'underdog position and are subjected to the domination by outsiders (Shanin 1984), unorganized and deprived of the knowledge required for organised collective action (Wolf 1984: 264-65). In the *economic term*, they are identified to be the small producers for their own consumption (Redfield 1956), subsistence cultivators (Firth 1946) who produce predominantly for the need of the family rather than to make a profit (Chayanov 1966). *Historically*, peasants have always borne the brunt of the extreme forms of subordination and oppression in society. However the specific socio-economic conditions of their existence

have largely shaped the roles of the peasantry in social change and transformation.

In the context of the 18th century peasantry in France Karl Marx highlighted that their mode of production had isolated them from one another. To him, 'they are formed by simple addition of homologous magnitude, such as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes' (Marx 1974:231). To Lenin, however, the peasantry in late 19th- and early 20th-century Russia was differentiated by the unequal patterns of landholding, income and by their contact with the market as well. To him, there was a striking difference between the working peasant and the peasant profiteers. While the former was a faithful ally of the working class, the later was an ally of the capitalist (Lenin, 1919rpt, 1972:497-498). On the other hand Kautsky has highlighted the process of the dissolution of self-sufficient peasant households in the wake of penetration of capitalist urban industry, increasing rural and urban divide and the growing indebtedness and landlessness of the peasantry in Russia (Kautsky 1899 rpt.1988). Antonio Gramsci has seen the peasantry in the context of Italy as a part of a larger socio-political order and not a discrete entity. Having understood the nature of peasantry's subordination, Gramsci highlighted that their subordination could be broken through the alliance of workers and peasants and through the development of class-consciousness among the peasants (cf. Arnold 1984: 161-62). Frantz Fanon while studying the peasantry in the context of Algeria, points out that in colonial countries they play a revolutionary role in bringing about change in the social and political order of society. To him, peasants are posited to a situation where 'they have nothing to lose and everything to gain' by way of their participation in the change (Fanon 1971: 47). Alavi highlights the crucial roles played by the middle peasantry in the Russian and Chinese revolutions (Alavi 1965). However in his observation on the peasantry in South Asia, he points out that peasant 'finally and irrevocably takes the road to revolution only when he is shown in practice that the power of his master can be irrevocably broken; then the alternative mode of existence becomes real to him (Alavi 1973: 333-34). Barrington Moore while recognizing the revolutionary role of the peasantry in the radical movements, points out that such roles are dependent on the structure of power and the class alignments within a society. Turning to India, he mentions that because of the passive character of the Indian peasantry and the specific structural features of Indian society, which is dominated by caste, religion and ethnic considerations, peasantry has not been able to play any revolutionary role in the country (1966).

b) Peasants Caste Interface in India

Peasants in India represent a vast mass landless agricultural labourer, sharecroppers, tenants, poor artisans and small and marginal cultivators having a close social interface with the socially deprived, like the scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, other backward classes and women. The so-called 'outcastes' of the *Varna* hierarchy in the real sense of the term form the core of the peasantry in rural India. In the localized vocabulary peasants are denoted by the usage like *kisan*, *krishak*, *roytu*, *chashi*, etc. more or less indicating cultivators who cultivate land with their own labour, and also the categories, namely, *adhiar* and *bhagchashi* (sharecropper and tenant) and *majdoor*, *majur*, *collie*, *pait*, *krishi shramik*, etc. agricultural labourers. These terms signify specific cultural connotations, which are more often than not used to indicate the marginalized and inferior status of these categories in the agrarian society as against the superior categories like *bhuswami*, *malik*, *jotedar*, *bhadralok*, etc., whose major source of earning is from the land, but without getting manually involved in the process of cultivation. Thus peasants are a socially and economically marginalised, culturally subjugated and politically disempowered social groups who are attached to land to eke out a subsistence living.

The peasant societies in India have widely been affected by the broad process of social transformation caused by the introduction of land reforms, rural development initiatives and new agricultural technology and the rejuvenation of the Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, studies conducted in several parts of the country (SinghaRoy 1992, 1995; Rogaly 1999; Mukherjee and Chattopadhyay 1981; Byres 1981 and many others) show that such changes have only partially altered the core issue of livelihood security of the peasantry who have still remained economically marginalized, predominantly becoming either landless, semi-landless, marginal or small cultivators without possessing advanced means of cultivation. The age-old association between this lowest ritual status and low economic position has always provided a basis for their socio-economic marginalization, political dis-empowerment and collective mobilization in the peasant movements and in various struggles against their oppression in society

c) Peasant Movements

An important dimension of a social movement is its life history and the process of transformation it undergoes. The movement may emerge to be routinized accompanying a decline in support for the movement. The movement may also acquire a reformative character. In Indian context there has been the processes of transformation of social movements from that of the intensive phase of radical action to institutionalization (SinghaRoy 1992, Oommen 1984).

Peasant movements are important variants of social movements (Dhangare 1983). These movement can be categorized in terms of their ideological orientation, forms of grassroots mobilization, and orientation towards change as 'radical' and 'institutionalised' to analyze their dynamics. A 'radical peasant movement' is viewed as a non-institutionalized large-scale collective mobilization initiated and guided by radical ideology for rapid structural change in peasant society. A 'institutionalised' peasant movement', on the other hand, is one where institutionalized mass mobilization is initiated by recognized bodies for a gradual change in the selected institutional arrangement of society. It has been observed that peasant movements, however, are not discretely radical or reformative, rather one may be an extension of another through transition over a period of time (SinghaRoy 1992: 27), that the process of mobilization and institutionalization do coexist and that institutionalization provides the new possibilities of mobilization (Oommen 1984: 251) and that the process of transformation of these movements from 'radical' to 'institutionalised' directly affects the process of new collective identity formation of the peasantry.

31.3 Peasants Identity in Revolutionary Movements

Social isolation, cultural segregation and economic exploitation have accentuated the historical processes of marginalisation and political subordination of the peasants. The collective realizations and awareness of the peasants on these issues have resulted into the outbreak of various historical peasants' movements in the world. Wolf highlighted several historical revolutions and political upheavals, fought with peasant support, that have shaken the world of twentieth century. To him, peasants participated in the great rebellions because of the suffering caused by the demographic crisis, ecological crisis and the crisis in power and authority. As the poor peasants depend on the landlord for their livelihood they are 'unlikely to pursue the course of rebellion unless they are able to rely on some external power to challenge the power which constrains them'. To him there are two components of the peasantry, which possess sufficient internal leverage to enter into sustained rebellion: "landowning middle peasantry; a peasantry located in a peripheral area outside the domains of landlord control." He also points out that the 'peasant rebellions of the 20th century are no longer simple response to local problems, if indeed they ever were. They are but parochial reactions

to major social dislocations set in motion by overwhelming societal changes" (Wolf, 1984: 269-271).

~~What have been the nature of political identity and action of the peasantry~~ in the peasant movements? Shanin points out that in history the peasantry many time has acted politically as a "class like" social entity. 'Their common interests have driven the peasants into political conflict with large capitalist landowners, with various groups of town men and with the modern state'. To him, in a modern society its character as a social entity determines the patterns of peasant's political action and influence. He identified three main types of these actions: **independent class action** (as formulated in the Marxian class analysis; **guided political action** (in which the peasantry is moved by an external uniting power elite); and the **fully autonomous, amorphous political actions** in the form of: *local riots* and *passive resistance* of the peasant (Shanin, 1984: 256-58)

To Shanin, army and guerilla action plays a crucial role in the political life of the peasants. These actions represent the peasantry as 'class-for-itself.' Such actions according to him enhance the potential of the peasant to act politically and to think nationally. 'The professional rebels, national wide ideological and organizational cohesion, their stability and zeal and their ability to work out a long term strategy may enable them to unite the peasantry, sometimes transforming its revolt into a successful revolution (Ibid. 261).

Alavi (1971) highlights the crucial roles played by the middle peasantry in the revolutions of Russia and China. To him, it is the middle peasantry, and not the small peasantry, who gave the major stimulation to peasant rebellions. Barrington Moore (1966) while recognised the revolutionary role of the peasantry in the radical movements, points out that such roles are dependent on the structure of power and the class alignments in the society. Turning to India, he mentions that because of the passive character of the Indian peasantry and the specific structural features of India society which are dominated by caste, religion, and the ethnic considerations peasantry has not been able to play any revolutionary role.

(Revolutionary Role in India Freedom Movement)

31.4 Radical Peasant Movement in India

To highlight the diversified facets of the peasant movements we shall discuss some aspects of the peasant movements in India, since India has been the hotbed of several peasant movements. Peasant movements, however, are not episodic. These undergo a process of transformation along with the broad social, economic and political transformation of the society. Many of these peasant movements have retained their continuity with the past, by maintaining legacy of the celebrated peasant movements in one way or the other. However, the contemporary peasant movements have undergone substantial changes in the ideological orientation, leadership, organisation, and significantly in the forms of collective mobilisation and the tactical line of action. All these have affected the process of gross-root mobilization, process of new identity formation and transformation of radical peasant movements into an institutionalized one. Peasant movements, however, are not discretely radical or reformative, rather one may be an extension of another though transition over a period of time (SinghaRoy 1992: 27) The process of transformation of the peasant movement from 'radical' to 'reformative' directly affect the process of new collective identity formation of peasantry. Is the process of new identity formation of the peasantry autonomous of the issues, aims and ideology of a given social movement? Do they acquire an autonomous identity in the process of transformation of the movement from radicalization to institutionalization?

The process of transformation of the peasant has affected not only the form and extent of their participation in these movements, but also the very essence of their collective identity formation, the nature of the autonomy of these mobilizations and the new identity formed therein. However, the direction of transformation of the peasant movement and their consequent implication for the peasantry has not been the same across the country because of the diverse patterns of economic development and social and political formations in the peasant societies.

Since the middle of the last century the peasant societies of Indian experienced three vehement peasant movement. The poor peasantry of undivided Bengal revolted for the peasant societies of Indian experienced three vehement peasant movement: The poor peasantry of undivided Bengal revolted for Tebhaga (two-third of the share of the produce from land) 1946-47. Peasantry of the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh revolted against the landlords, moneylenders and the state for the abolition of forced labour, forced collection of high rate of interest and for their indignity in the society in 1948-52; and the peasantry of Naxalbari of the West Bengal revolted against the local landlords money lenders and the state in (1967-71).

Though the Tebhaga, Telangana and the Naxalite movements took place in different geographical places and in different period of time, there are some striking similarities among these movements:

- a) Increasing landlessness, poverty, under employment and various types of social and economic deprivation of the backward classes Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and their exploitation by the upper caste landowners and money lenders were the major issues involved in this movement
- b) All these movements were organised under the auspice of the organisation and leadership of the Communists(of different political establishments)
- c) All these movements were ideologically radical in nature. These movements challenged the normative and the pre-existing institutional arrangements of the society.
- d) Uninstitutionalised collective mobilization and action were sponsored in these movements.
- e) These movements were immediately directed against the traditional landlords, police administration and other apparatus of the state
- f) These movements looked for a radical change in the pre-existing agrarian arrangements of the society
- g) Though the leadership of these movements came mostly from the urban intellectuals and the higher caste groups, the poor peasantry especially from the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, were the main driving forces in these collective mobilizations
- h) All these movements experienced the phenomenal participation of women in all phases of progression of the collective mobilization; and exploitation of women by the upper caste landowners had become a prominent issue in these movements.

31.5 The Tebhaga Movement (1946-47)

The Tebhaga movement was manifested in the undivided Bengal in mid 1940s centering around a demand for *tebhaga* (two-third shares) by sharecroppers of their produce for themselves, instead of one-half traditionally given to them by the *jotedars*—a class of intermediary landowners. This movement grew against the backdrop of the flourishing interest of the intermediary class of landowners on the one hand and that of the deterioration of the economic status of the agricultural labourers, sharecroppers and poor peasants on the

other. The deteriorating economic condition of the lowest strata was reflected in the rapid expansion in the number of the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers in the Bengal agrarian society of the time. Report of the Land Revenue Commission in 1940 observed that of 8,547,004 inquired acres all over the Bengal Province undivided Bengal 592,335 acres were transferred, of which 31.7 per cent was turned over to *barga* (sharecropping) and 24.6 per cent to under-tenants (LRC 1940, Vol. 2: 120). The traders, moneylenders and intermediary landowners exploited to the hilt the poverty of the poor peasant and lent him money at usurious rates of interest. When the poor peasant was unable to repay the debt and lost his land to the creditor, he was resettled on the same land on condition that he handed over half of the produce to the creditor. The peasants who were not settled on it as sharecroppers became agricultural labourers. The Land Revenue Commission pointed out in 1940 that agricultural labourers constituted 22.5 per cent of the total number of families of Bengal (LRC 1940, Vol. 2: 117-20).

The exploitative intermediacy systems of land tenure, which was introduced through the Permanent settlement, had furthered the process of downward mobilisation of the peasantry of Bengal. The emerging patterns of exploitation and social oppression, impoverishment and pauperization of the peasantry got institutionalized during the British rule (Rasul 1974). Questions pertaining to the deteriorating economic condition of the peasantry received organised focus since early 1920s with the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI) 1921, the Workers and Peasants Party (WPP) 1922 and the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) in 1929. The Bengal Kisan Sabha (VKS), a provincial branch of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) was formed in 1936. The KPP won the provincial election with promise to abolish the intermediary system of land ownership. In alliance with the Congress it formed the first popular Ministry in Bengal and subsequently appointed the Land Revenue Commission in 1938 to look in to the agrarian issues. This commission recommended in 1940 that "All *bargadars* should be treated as tenants, that the share of the crops legally recoverable from them should be one-third, instead of half" (Vol. I, 1940: 69). However as the KPP did a volte-face on agrarian problems the government showed no urgency for implementing the recommendation of the Land Revenue Commission the AIKS began to radicalize its agrarian programme. In November 1946 the BKS passed a resolution in Calcutta for ' *Tebhaga*' (two thirds share of the produced crops) for the sharecroppers and ' *langal jar janin tar*' (land to the tiller).

North Bengal, especially the Dinajpur district became centre of the BKS activism because of the high intensity of the sharecropping system of land cultivation there. The poor peasantry of Khanpur village, who were mostly from the scheduled castes (Rajbansi, Polia, and Mali), the scheduled tribes (the Oroan, Colkamar Santal) and ex-tribes (Mahato) responded spontaneously to this movement. When the movement escalated into mass action, the sharecroppers began to harvest paddy and carry it to their own *kholan* (courtyard) under the instructions of the local leaders. In a surcharged situation of heightening tension the local (landowner filed a FIR against the sharecroppers. Early on the morning of 20 February 1947 police entered the village and arrested a few sharecroppers. This news spread like wildfire all over the village, and an alarm was raised by the beating of drums, blowing conch shells and beating gongs and utensils by the peasant women. The village and its environs reverberated to the sounds of drums, tin jars, gongs and conch shells. A vast mass of poor peasants and sharecroppers from both Khanpur and its neighbouring villages, armed with bows and arrows, *lathis* and axes, surged on the police. They demanded the release of their sharecroppers. But the police were adamant and ended up firing 119 rounds, injuring hundreds and killing 22 sharecroppers, including two women.

The episode of Khanpur triggered off the *Tebhaga* movement very quickly in

most part of Bengal. Poor peasants ignoring their conventional ties with the landowners declined to share half of their produce with the landowners. Protest, firing, killing became part of this agrarian society in 194. However the colonial rulers used all possible repressive measures to crash this movement by introducing a reign of terror in the rural areas.

31.6 The Telangana Movement (1946-52)

The Telangana Movement (1946-52) of Andhra Pradesh was fought against the feudal oppression of the rulers and local landowners. The agrarian social structure of Hyderabad emerged to be very oppressive in 1920s and thereafter. The process of the sub-infeudation in the landholding accentuated the insecurity of the tenants and the poor peasants. In rural Telangana's political economy, the *jagirdars* and *deshmukhs*, locally known as *dora*, played a dominant role. They were the intermediary landowners with higher titles cum moneylenders-cum-village officials and were mostly from the upper caste or influential Muslim community background. Because of their privileged economic and political status they could easily subject the poor peasantry to extra-economic coercion through the *vetti* (force labour) system. At the bottom of the agrarian hierarchy were the untouchable castes and tribal groups, such as the Konda, Reddy, Koyas, Chenchus, Lambodis and Banjaras. The lower strata of the agrarian hierarchy had a sub-human level of existence. The Harijans and the tribals were the worst sufferers under this system (Dhanagare, 1983). Besides the unbridled feudal exploitation, the Muslim ruler also maintained the utter isolation of from the vast masses of his Hindu subjects (Sundarayya, 1985).

The Indian National Congress, Andhra Jana Sangam and Andhra Maha Sabha (AMS) raised the issue of poor condition of the peasantry of Telengana since late 1920s. Several resolutions were passed against the *jagirdari* and the *vetti* system by the AMS. Under the auspices of the AMS the Jagir Ryotu Sangham was formed in 1940 to bring pressure upon the government to solve the problems of the *jagir* peasants working under the *jogirdars*. Significantly the Andhra Communist Party was established in 1934. After the ban on the Communists was lifted in 1942, they captured the leadership of AMS. They raised the issues of 'abolition of *vetti*', 'prevention of rack-renting and eviction of tenants', 'reduction of taxes, revenue and rents', 'confirmation of occupancy (*patta*) rights of the cultivating tenants', and so on. All these processes of mobilisation of the peasantry increased tensions in the rural areas of Telengana, which ultimately culminated into the political consciousness of the peasants, and gradually there was a new awakening (Kannabiran, V., Lalitha, K. et al. 1989.)

It was against such forced labour and illegal exaction and against eviction of the poor tenants that the peasantry of the Telangana region of Hyderabad State, waged innumerable struggles. The beginnings of the Telangana armed struggles were against the atrocities of Vishnur Ramchandra Reddy, the *deshmukh* in Jangaon tehsil of Nalgonda district, in 1946, when his goondas attacked and murdered Doddi Komarayya, the local Andhra Mahasabha worker, in Kadivendi village on July 4 (Sundarayya, 1985:13-14). This incident intensified the struggle between the landlords openly supported by the Nizam's government and the poor peasantry organized by the CPI in the disguise of the AMS.

The movement took a new turn with India attaining independence in 1947, and the subsequent refusal of the Nizam to join the Indian Union. The CPI openly called for a guerrilla struggle against the *razakars* (state paramilitary wing) and the government forces by forming village defence committees and by providing arms training to the *dalams* (armed squads). The administrative machinery of the Nizam came to a standstill in nearly 4000 villages. In its place were established *gram rajyas* (village administrative units). *Vetti* was abolished, and some 1.2 million acres of land was redistributed very quickly. Unpaid debts

were cancelled, tenants were given full tenancy rights, toddy tappers got back rights over trees, untouchability was abolished and a new social awareness became visible. Armed women defended themselves against the *razakars* (K. Lalita, V. Kannabirn et.al. 1989: 14). With the Nizam refusing to merge with the independent Indian Union, the Indian government initiated army action against the Nizam, and subsequently against the CPI in September 1948. The CPI adopted the path of a protracted struggle. They planned for a liberated area and intensified their struggle. However, it was very difficult for the communist cadres in Telangana to withstand the Indian Army. Several hundred peasant rebels were killed. Many died for lack of shelter and support. With the Nizam already overthrown by the Indian Army, the logic of the movement was re-thought by the leaders and the common peasantry of Telangana. In 1951 the politbureau of the CPI called off the struggle.

Sundarayya (1985) presents an overall balance-sheet of this peasant uprising: 'As many as 4000 communists and peasant militants were killed; more than 10,000 communist cadres and people's fighters were thrown into detention camps and jails for a period of 3-4 years; no fewer than 50,000 people were dragged into police and military camps from time to time, there to be beaten, tortured and terrorized for weeks and months together. Several lakhs of people in thousands of villages were subjected to police and military raids and to cruel lathi-charges; the people in the course of these military and police raids lost property worth millions of rupees, which were either looted or destroyed; thousands of women were molested and had to undergo all sorts of humiliations and indignities' (Sundarayya, 1985:4).

31.7 Naxalite Movement (1967-71)

The agrarian society of independent India experienced a new epoch in the history of peasant movements with the peasant uprising of May 1967 under the Naxalbari *thana* of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Immediately after the country's independence, the Govt. of West Bengal enacted the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act (1953) to abolish the *zamindari* and other intermediary systems and the West Bengal Land Reform Act (1955) to put a ceiling on landholdings, to reserve for the sharecroppers 60 per cent of the produced share, and to put a restriction on the eviction of sharecroppers. However due to the lack of the political will the progressive provisions of these acts remained in the statute book only. Moreover eviction of the tenants and the sharecroppers, sharp downward mobility of the peasants, their economic insecurity and unemployment emerged to be the integral part of the agrarian society of that period. The sharecroppers who constituted 16 per cent of the rural households in 1952-53 came down to 2.9 per cent in 1961-62. Though because of malafide land transfer proportion of the marginal and the small cultivators increased among the rural population, in real term poor peasantry was under going a desperate situation caused by their livelihood insecurity. This was clearly visible from the phenomenal increase of the agricultural labourers from 15.3% in 1961 to 26.2 in 1971 and the decline of the category of cultivators 38.5% to 32 % during the same period (Census of India 1961, 1971). Significantly the All India Credit Committee in its report of 1968 pointed out to the 'emergence of sharp polarization between classes in the rural areas' (Govt. of India: 1968)

In this backdrop while the economic condition of the poor peasantry was deteriorating, the political happenings in West Bengal took a new turn. In February 1967 the United Front (dominated by the communal parties viz. CPI, CPI (M) RSP etc.) came to with the promise like 'land to the tiller', 'proletarian rule', etc. The United Front pledged to implement the land reforms, promising land to all landless households and invited more militant initiatives from the peasantry as an organized force (Banerjee 1980: 105). The Left political parties

had initiated rigorous mobilisation of the peasantry in the Naxalbari areas since the early 1960s when the landowners of the Naxalbari region started large-scale eviction of sharecroppers. The CPI-M Darjeeling district committee started to organize the peasants on a militant footing after the United Front Government was formed.

The Naxalite movement spread rapidly in many parts of the country, protracted arm resistance, declaration of liberated area, killing and arrest became a regular phenomena in the agrarian society of West Bengal. By the end of June 1967 the CPI-M leadership came out against the Naxalbari leaders, calling them 'an organized anti-party group advocating an adventurist line of action'. Nineteen members were then expelled from the party. The rift was complete. Moving through the stages of the Naxalbari Peasant's Struggle Aid Committee and a Coordination Committee, the CPI-ML was finally formed in May 1969 by the organized militant groups (Chatterjee 1998: 89).

31.8 Emerging Agrarian Social Structure and Peasant Movements

The agrarian societies of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and West Bengal (WB) have undergone a phenomenal change since the proliferation of the radical peasant movements. Both the states have initiated the elaborated land reform programmes affecting the agrarian social structure therein. However, the story of implementation of land reform laws has not been the same in AP and WB. AP has achieved a very low rate of success in acquiring and distributing surplus vested lands among the rural poor. West Bengal, however, has achieved a phenomenal success in this regard. In Andhra, till July 1992, only 0.729 million acres of land was declared 'surplus vested', of which 0.549 million acres was taken possession of and 0.504 million acres distributed among beneficiaries. In West Bengal, 1.229 million acres of land was declared surplus vested, of which 1.201 million acres was taken possession of and 0.936 million acres distributed. A recent report shows that the Government of West Bengal had, till September 2000, distributed 1.045 million acres of land amongst 2.544 million beneficiaries. During this period the names of 1.495 million sharecroppers were recorded involving an area of 1.105 million acres of land (Government of West Bengal 2002). This process of implementation of land reforms has diversely affected the patterns of landholding and the agrarian relations prevailing in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal.

Table 1 shows that over the years the percentage of the marginal cultivators has increased in both the states. However, in WB the percentage increase of the marginal cultivators has been phenomenal with 23.84% and there has been a steady decline of all other categories all over the years including the small cultivators. On the other hand the emergence of the marginal cultivators have not been that sharper in AP with only 13.15%.

It is significant that marginal holding has been the mode of land ownership in West Bengal for the vast majority of the landowning household. That more than 40% of the marginal cultivators possess land of below 0.20-hectare size. All the small and the marginal cultivators are putting together represent a total of 70% of the land owning households in West Bengal. For Andhra

Pradesh they represent around 44% of the landowning household. However, the average size of land ownership is very low in West Bengal i.e. only 0.46 hectare while for A.P this is 0.78 hectare. The landless and the semi-landless constitute as high as 53.4% of the rural households in West Bengal and around 46% in A.P. Significantly in spite of land reform their proportion in the rural society is progressively increasing.

As against the broad scenario peasant movements have acquired new dimension in these states. Over the years the Left Parties have emerged to be the proud owners of a historical heritage of radical peasant movements. As the old issues were not resolved even after the proliferation of the radical movements poor peasants of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh was continuously mobilized on the issues of land reform and rural development especially by the communists. In West Bengal mobilization of the peasantry got a momentum since the United Left Front government has come into power in 1977. Indeed regular mobilization of the peasants has since been made to be a vehicle for the implementation of the land reform and rural development schemes. In Andhra Pradesh on the other hand the communist who are in opposition and the radical outfit of the communists mobilize the peasant on regular basis on several issues. Some of the emerging features of the agrarian social structure and mobilization of the peasants in three villages with the background radical movements are described below.

The rural society of Andhra Pradesh specially of the Telangana region have been experiencing constant mobilization of the peasants. It has experienced the vehement out burst of the celebrated Telangana movement. This area has a high concentration of the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Caste household in the category of poor peasants. It is only partially agriculturally developed and land reform has been implemented only to a limited extent. Indeed land reform has not been able to alter the pre-existing agrarian arrangement as the old landlords (who are mostly the absentee landlords now) control a vast part of the village lands through their relatives living in the neighbouring areas. In this backdrop landless and the marginal cultivators who are also associated with various non-agricultural activities form the bulk of the peasantry. Though the alternative economic activities have been an inseparable part of livelihood security of the peasantry here, these have not widened the process of economic mobility among them. Thus the peasantry of this village has remained more or less economically homogenous.

In recent years this village has been experiencing the extensive and frequent mobilizations of the poor peasantry under the auspices of the various Naxalite Groups and the other political parties. The peasants are thus exposed to various categories of political activities organised by Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committees (APCLC), Organisation for the Protection of Democratic Rights, Citizens Forum, Thudum Debba (militant organisation of the Scheduled Tribes), Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS- an organisation of Scheduled Castes) Ryto Seva Samithi, Jala Sandhana Samithi (demanding irrigation facilities for the peasants), CPI(ML) (People's War) and various other Naxalite outfits, besides the regular political parties viz., Telegu Desam Party, National Congress' Bharatiya Janata Party, Communist Party of India and the Telangana Rastriya Samiti (TRS). Various NGOs are also active in this area. Identification and distribution of surplus vested lands, speedy and impartial implementation of the development schemes, employment generation programme, irrigation, health, road, school etc facilities, harassment of the villagers by the police, suicide by the farmers, reservation for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, compensation to the rape victim, prohibition, regional autonomy etc. have been the major issues for the mobilization of the peasantry of this area. Mobilisation is by and large institutionalized even though PWG plays a crucial role in their mobilisation. Significantly, wider economic and political processes are at time explained to be the cause of localised problem of the peasantry here. For example poverty, illiteracy and unemployment etc. of these peasants are explained in terms of the Telegu domination over the Telangana. The peasants are however very secretive about their political identity and frequently use political passivity as a weapon of their political action. With the organizational support from outside, leadership has been generated from within whereby the peasants have been trained to articulate and to talk of various societal issues politically. In the process of the mobilisation of the peasantry

the historical categories of caste, gender, regional, ethnically etc. have acquired several new meaning and significance.

The Tebhaga movement infected areas of West Bengal has remained symbolically a political hot bed for the mobilization of poor peasantry. Since mid 1980s this area has emerged to be agriculturally developed and occupationally diversified. Though land reform programme has been rigorously implemented, marginal and insignificant landholding has not been able to ensure economic security of the poor peasantry. Various new issues are cropped up in the village viz, problem of unemployment of the educated youth, road, transport and education facilities etc, implementation of the state sponsored development schemes, total literacy campaign, child and health care facilities, representation of women in the statutory bodies and so on. All political parties (CPI, CPI(M), RSP, and Indian National Congress, the Trinamul Congress) cutting across the ideological and organisational barriers raise similar issues. Significantly there has been frequent defection of political party supporters from one group to another.

Mobilisation has been absolutely institutionalized in this area. As peasantry occupies diverse economic positions the form and extent of their participation to the mobilisation have been diversified in nature. A large section of peasantry does not follow the path of political mobilisation for economic gain and has developed critical attitude for the leader. However, a section of the peasants because of their persisting poverty has emerged to be dependent on the political leaders to get the benefits of the development schemes for their livelihood security. They are indeed the poorest segment of the peasantry of this village and are available for all types of mobilisation.

Similarly the Naxalbari area also has remained agriculturally backward. Though there is a trend towards occupational diversification, none of these options has emerged to be economically viable except for the jobs in the plantation. Peasantry of these villages has remained more or less economically homogenized and the bulk of the peasantry of these villages is from the Scheduled Caste and Tribal background.

There have emerged multifaceted political mobilisations spearheaded by the CPI(M), Trinamul Congress, Indian National Congress, SUCI and the various groups of the Naxalite outfits viz, COI(M-L) (Kanu Sanyal), CPI(M-L) (Mahendra Mukherjee), CPI(M-L) (New Democracy.), CPI (M-L) (Janashakti), CPI(M-L) (Liberation.), Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), CPI(ML) - 2ND Central Committee, CPI(ML) - Party Unity etc. Of late, activists of Kamtapuri movement have also started organizing peasantry of these villages. There has been large-scale participation of the peasantry in all types of political mobilisation and collective action; and over the years these have shown an increasing trend. The most important occasions for these activisms have been that of participation in the meeting, processions and in the elections campaign, and on other various localised issues.

Notwithstanding the presence of the large number of the Naxalite groups and propagation of a section of the Naxalite for non-participation in the parliamentary democracy mobilisation process has remained largely institutionalized. Peasants are however divided among themselves not as much based on economic differentiation, as on their political association to political parties. Their association to political party moreover is not based on their conviction to political ideology; rather it is part of their survival need. Peasantry is very open and vocal about their political affiliation. Due to the prevailing agricultural backwardness and poverty the peasantry have emerge to be dependent on the political leaders. These relations prevent them to be critical of their leaders. A

31.9 Change in Collective Mobilization

Over the years there have been phenomenal changes in the pattern of collective mobilisation of the peasants. The Tebhaga, Telangana and the Naxalite movements even though were fought in different places and at different points of time, ideologically and also in terms of orientation towards change and forms of mobilisation, these were radical peasant movements. In recent years peasant movements have emerged to be reformative and institutionalized both in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. The Chart II describes the major trends of mobilisation of the peasantry in these two phases.

Chart :II Trends of Mobilisations in the Radical and Contemporary Peasant Movements.

Radical Peasant Movement	Reformative Peasant Movements
a) Mobilisation was initiated for specific goal and directed against the identified class enemies - the big landowners, usurers, police and administration.	- Mobilisation is initiated for diversified goals and not always directed against the class enemies.
b) Aggressive and hostile mobilisations without immediate limit.	- Aggressiveness and hostilities are limited within given direction.
c) Mobilisations against old norms and values	- Re-informing selected old norms and values through mobilisations.
d) Mobilisation was initiated by the political party of single ideological pursuit	- Mobilisation is initiated by the political parties of diversified political pursuits.
e) Mobilisation for far reaching structural change.	- Mobilisation mostly for structural stability and reformative initiatives within the given structure.
f) Rural poor mobilised to be the "change agencies"	- Rural people mobilised to be "beneficiaries"
g) Rural poor mobilised for an egalitarian social order	- Rural poor participated in the mobilisation as survival strategy.
h) Radicalization of mass mobilisation	- Institutionalization of mass-mobilisation
i) Mobilisation for unrecognised demands and mostly by the unrecognised and secret organisations	- Mobilisation to pressurize the bureaucrats to implement recognised demands
j) Mobilisation faced opposition by the government authority	- Mobilisation planned and executed by the political parties in power.
k) Mobilisation directed against promordial dependency and extra-economic coercion of the lowest section of agrarian	- In the process of mobilisation the lowest section has become dependent on the political society. leaders to get economic benefits.

The contemporary peasant societies of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh however have experienced diverse forms of grass root mobilization. In West Bengal the

Left political parties who once sponsored radicalism and militancy for collective action are now concerned with institutionalized mass mobilization and electoral politics. In Andhra Pradesh CPI and CPI(M) the major communist parties are in opposition and have accepted the parliamentary electoral politics. The PWG (Ganpathi Faction) is a group among these Naxalite outfits which is opposed to the parliamentary democracy at present, while others have started taking part in the democratic process. At this level we may draw a comparative picture of mass mobilisation between Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal

Chart III: Facets of Commonalties and Differences between the Grass-root Mobilization in Contemporary Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal.

31.10 Conclusion

In this unit we have discussed some of the crucial features of peasant movements in Indian society. We started with a conceptual discussion on peasant and peasant movement. The role peasant on revolutionary movements has also touched upon very briefly. The causes of the emergence of radical peasant movement, the form and extent of participation of peasant in these movements, and the course of action in these movements have been discussed. The process of transformation of these, movements over period of time and their socio-political ramifications for the peasants are also analyzed.

31.11 Further Readings

- 1) Dhanagare, D.N. 1983. *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.
- 2) Mukherjee, P.N. 1979. *From Extremism to Electoral Politics: Naxalite Participation in Elections*. Manohar: New Delhi.