

# **The Question of Peasantry-Mahatma Gandhi versus Communist Party**

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## **Abstract**

The foundation of British colonial rule in India proved to be a disaster for Indian agriculture. It not only destroyed social structure of rural society but also ruined entire handicraft industries. As a result, a series of famines started in the country, which resulted in peasant movements. More recently social scientists in India have drawn attention to the study of peasant movements and they have analysed the question of peasant movements on the basis of various parameters. This research paper is focus on issues of peasantry and also the emphasis on the nature of communist and Gandhian ideology regarding the peasant movement in India. Various primary and secondary sources have been used to prepare this research paper.

Key words- Peasant movements, land-revenue, non-violence, Satyagraha

## **Introduction**

In 1757, the British Government established its control over Bengal after the Battle of Plessey and succeeded in establishing control over India after the Battle of Buxar. The British East India Company implemented three types of land revenue policies to increase its revenue, which resulted of the exploitation of the farmers on a large scale and also developed the series of such landlords, moneylenders and zamidars. These moneylenders, landlords, and zamidars started to exploit the peasant on large scale, which caused agrarian tensions as well as sporadic disciplined peasant revolt in different parts of India.<sup>1</sup> When the organised agitation started, congress became the voice the people in India. In the early days the Congress paid less attention to the problems of the farmers. However, later on in some places the Congress took note of the major farmer-related issues and problems and sometimes raised them from different forums. The issues raised by Congress were land revenue assessment and increasing burden of taxation on the poor. The Congress resolution of 1888 drew attention to the difficulties faced by the farmers through periodic revision of revenue appraisers.<sup>2</sup> Apart from this, the Congress credited the British land revenue policy to the pathetic plight of the farmer and demanded for relief measures.<sup>3</sup>The Indian extremist leader Bal Ganga Dhār Tilak organised no rent movement in Maharashtra among the farmer during the 1896-97 famine .this is another example of congress showing concern for peasants.<sup>4</sup> Initially, the Congress failed to do anything for farmer uplift because it was against the interests of landlords, moneylenders and traders. But the problems of the farmers were first brought to the national

table by Gandhi on the basis of his leadership ability.<sup>5</sup> Gandhiji started listing them to raise the issues of farmers. At the same time, he had great faith in the self-sacrifice of the people, on which his entire politics was based and started to establish the farmers prominently in the national movement. This is clear from his observation in 1916: "Our salvation can be through peasants alone. Neither lawyers, nor are neither doctors, nor wealthy landowners going to receive me."<sup>6</sup> He further observed, "Swaraj depends on the agriculturists. If they do not help, then Swaraj cannot be attained. If they co-operate with the Government, then all your virtues will not help in winning Swaraj."<sup>7</sup> Gandhi prepared a program to bring the rural masses into the Indian national movement. Through which the demands were prepared so that their socio-economic reconstruction is possible.<sup>8</sup> The Gandhian political idiom of village upliftment, Swaraj, Swadeshi, Satyagraha, Ahimsa etc. undoubtedly endured the Indian rural masses - farmers and village artisans and also gave farmers confidence to struggle.<sup>9</sup> Peasant movements of that order was a movement Bardoli Satyagraha

### **Gandhi versus Communist**

The issue of peasants were not raised by the Indian National Congress till 1919. When Gandhi came into Indian Politics that compelled the Indian National Congress to think about peasants issues. The congress was more or less remained to an organization for the upper and middle classes of the society and their activities were confined to the urban centers only. In spite of having major share in India population they were completely ignorant about the nation-wide struggle organized by the Congress. Gandhi showed remarkable experience in South Africa for mobilizing people with new ideology and technique welcomed by Indian. The core ideology of Gandhian style was non-violence and Satyagraha.<sup>10</sup> Gandhi said about Satyagraha "Satyagraha is soul force, pure and simple"<sup>11</sup>. For Gandhi, Satyagraha is free from the use of any kind of force. A Satyagrahi should not use the physical force but he or she should use the force of their soul. Gandhi has drawn distinction between Satyagraha and Passive resistance. According to Gandhi, "we are weak and helpless and therefore offer passive resistance, our resistance would never make us strong". He saw "passive resistance" as a "weapon of the weak". He writes, "We are Satyagrahis and offer Satyagraha believing ourselves to be strong. Gandhi also considered non-violence as his God. He wrote in Young India in 1925 that, "Ahimsa is my God, and Truth is my God. "When I look for Ahimsa, Truth says, "Find it through me".<sup>12</sup> Gandhian ideology was more concerned about the means. For Gandhi end depends on means therefore, means should be focused more. If our mean is clear then our end will also be clear. He was of the view that we do not have control on the end but we have control on means<sup>13</sup>. Gandhi recognised the existence of social conflicts in Indian society and felt alarmed at the threat to national unity and suggested to work for harmonise the conflicting interests in society.<sup>14</sup> The central theme of his entire theory was to voluntary conversion of the exploiting classes to the cause of socio-economic justice. The objective of Gandhi was to eliminate class conflict not class divisions.<sup>15</sup> The Bardoli Satyagraha was essentially a rich and middle class movement against the imperialist British regime. The rich, middle and poor peasantry got success in movement through the constructive programme started by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhian methods of passive resistance and non-violence suited the class interests of the rich and middle peasantry.<sup>16</sup>

Being a very significant ideology of the world which have communist played very important role in the theory of economic system, which not only satisfy the needs of the

society but also destroyed the all exploitation from the society.<sup>17</sup> This ideology entered in India during 1920 and its organisational structure was developed later on. Their main focus to adhere to Marxism theory of class struggle, initiated movements against the capitalist powers, raised the peasant problems and also tried to resolve them by armed struggle.<sup>18</sup> The first left wing peasant organisation which was concerned for peasant's questions was workers and peasants party. Workers' and Peasants' Parties represented by the communists lacked any inclination towards organisation of peasants. In its annual conferences radical programme of agrarian reforms including land to the peasant was promised. But action failed to keep pace with words and due to that reality Workers' and Peasants' Parties evoked little response from the peasantry.<sup>19</sup> Workers' and Peasants' parties leaders couldn't maintain consistency of aim and tactics. The confusion and the conflicting opinions in the Workers' and Peasants' Party was largely due to the over emphasis on mindless acceptance or interpretation of the Marxist line. The failure to grasp the concrete reality crippled their efforts and responses to the peasantry.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it showed the ambivalent attitude of Workers' and Peasants' Party towards the agrarian issue. The Communists seemed to have been unaware of the great potential in uniting the entire peasantry in an anti-imperialist front potential which the Indian National Congress recognised and fully utilised. Nor were the communists able to single out and utilise other immediate demands which could arouse broad sections of the peasantry. The workers and peasants party was unable to decide its exact attitude in Bardoli Satyagrah. According to the workers and peasants party the Bardoli satyagrah was done by the rich and prosperous Patidars.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, WPP have given very brief, vague and half-hearted statement of the sympathy for them. The Bombay unit of WPP criticized the Bardoli satyagrah on the ground as it was not the typical peasants' movement directed against landlords exploitation but was only an anti-imperialist agitation.<sup>22</sup> The Workers' and Peasants' parties' leaders couldn't maintain consistency of aim and tactics. Earlier they defined peasant as 'One who does agricultural work with his own hands and whose land does not exceed two bighas. This group of peasants was largely their catchment area. Consequently, the landless agriculturists were side-lined.'<sup>23</sup>

## **Conclusion-**

The Communists seemed to have been unaware of the great potential in uniting the entire peasantry in an anti-imperialist front potential which the Indian National Congress recognised and fully utilised. Nor were the communists able to single out and utilise other immediate demands which could arouse broad sections of the peasantry into political activity. On the other hand, Gandhi recognised the existence of social conflicts in Indian society and felt alarmed at the threat to national unity as a result of those conflicts. He, thus, sought to harmonise those mutually conflicting interests. The Gandhian strategy to unite agrarian classes through constructive programme was quite successful. The programme was so implemented as not to disturb the traditional caste structure and the dominant position Patidars enjoyed in it. Rather on the contrary, it helped in reinforcing the solidarity of the castes. Thus, Gandhi and the Indian Nation Congress got success to organise peasants' movements totally stealing the show from the communists who were left raising premature radical slogans such as 'land to the tiller', 'abolition of landlordism without compensation' etc.

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