UNIT 14 WORKERS AND PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Structure

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an enormous increase in the studies on social movements in India. The growth of interest is largely a result of the increasing number of movements surfacing in the post- colonial India. The movements are commonly and broadly classified as 'new' movements such as environmental movements, or 'old' movements such as the peasant or the working class movements. So far as approaches are concerned, these studies either follow the Marxian or the non-Marxian frameworks. The studies focus on the nature of the grievances that throw up the movements, the support base of the movements, the strategy the leaders of the movements adopt and the response of the authorities to the movements and related issues. In this unit, we shall briefly analyse two of the social movements, the peasant movements and the working class movements in the country.

14.2 WORKING CLASS MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

In this section of the Unit, we focus on the working class movement in the country. According to the labour historians, the span of working class activities in India is divided into four distinct phases. The first phase spans from 1850 to 1890; the second phase from 1890 to 1918; the third phase from 1918 to 1947 and finally the post-independence period. A treatment of the working class movement will follow a brief discussion of some of the essential aspects of the class in colonial and post colonial India. We shall however restrict our discussion to the industrial working class in India since it is this class, which, to a large extent, is organised whereas workers engaged in the unorganised sector largely remain out of the fold of organised working class activity.

14.2.1 Emergence and Some Aspects of the Early and Contemporary Working Class in India

The modern Indian working class arose in consequence to the development and growth of factory industries in India from the second half of the nineteenth century. It is however about the turn of the twentieth century, it took the shape of working class .An exact estimate of the total population of the working class is difficult to arrive at but N. M. Joshi, on the basis of the 1931 census, calculated 'the labouring class at 50 million out of which roughly 10 percent were working in the organised industry'. So far as the major industries were concerned, the cotton textile industry in 1914 employed 2.6 lakh workers, the jute industry employed 2 lakh workers in 1912 the railways employed around 6 lakh workers. The number swell further and on the eve of World War II, in which, about 2 million were employed in manufacturing industry, 1.5 million in railways and 1.2 million in the British owned plantations.

The number increased significantly after independence and this was largely due to the expansion of the modern manufacturing industries in various sectors and also because of the growth of the public sector utilities, corporations and government offices. According to the 1981 census, the total number of workers in the modern manufacturing industries alone in India numbered around 2.5 million. In 1993 the average daily employment in factories was 8.95 million, in the mines it was 7.79 lakhs and in the plantations, it was 10.84 lakhs. Apart from this a large workforce was employed in the plantations, mining, construction, utilities, transportation etc. (GOI, Labour Bureau, 1997). In recent years owing to a number of reasons the rate in increase in employment has gone down and this had affected the employment potential and the condition of the working class proper.

A few interesting observations on the nature of the early and post independence working class may be made. Firstly, so far as the early working class is concerned it was divided into organised and unorganised sections and this distinction lies even today. Secondly, there was an insufficient class demarcation between a working class and a peasant. Labour historians have found that for a given period of time in a year the worker migrated to his village and worked as a peasant. Thirdly, the working class in the early years and to some extent even today is divided between class, caste, language, community, etc. Fourthly, today there is a distinction between the workers employed in the private sector and the public sector and within these sectors there are several categories like the workers in the MNCs and the domestic companies etc. Generally the workers employed in the public sector enjoy a better working condition than those who are employed in the private sector.

Working Class Movements in the Pre-Independence Period

As already noted, the labour historians classify the movement of the workers in the country into four distinct phases. In this part of the section, we deal with the labour movement in the country till independence.

The first phase :1850s till 1918

The actions of the working class in the earliest stage were sporadic and unorganised in nature and hence were mostly ineffective. It is only from the late 19th century in Madras, and from the second decade of the twentieth century in Bombay that serious attempts were made for the formation of associations that could lead organised form of protests. Prior to that some

philanthropists in the 1880s sought to improve working conditions by urging the British authorities in India to introduce legislations for improving its condition. S. S. Bengalee in Bombay, Sasipada Banerjee in Bengal and Narayan Lokhandya in Maharashtra were prominent among them.

Nationalist historians often argue that the organised working class movement in the country was associated with the Indian national movement but this is only partially correct. Several movements took place even before the Congress took a serious note of the interests of the working class questions. Though the Congress was formed in 1885, it seriously thought of organising the working class only in the early 1920s. The Working class in the country was organising struggles against capital much before the 1920s. In the last decades of the 19th century, Lieten informs us, there occurred strikes at Bombay, Kurla, Surat, Wardha, Ahmedabad and in other places. According to official sources there were two strikes per year in every factory. The strikes however were only sporadic, spontaneous, localised and short-lived and were caused by factors such as reduction in wages, imposition of fines, dismissal or reprimand of the worker. These actions and militancy, which they showed, helped in the development of class solidarity and consciousness, which was missing earlier. The resistance was mediated by outsiders or outside leaders. Agitations grew and they were not on individual issues but on broader economic questions, thus leading to a gradual improvement later on.

The Second Phase: 1918 till Independence

It was after World War I that the working class struggle in the country entered into a different phase. The unorganised movement of the workers took an organised form; trade unions were formed on modern lines. In several ways the decade of the 1920s is crucial in this regard. Firstly in the 1920s serious attempts were made by the Congress and the Communists to mobilise the working class and hence from then onwards the national movement established a connection with the working class. Secondly, it was in 1920 that the first attempt to form an all India organisation was made. Lokmanya Tilak, a Congressman from Bombay was instrumental in the formation of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) with Chaman Lal and others as office bearers of the organisation. Thirdly, in this decade, India witnessed a large number of strikes; the strikes were prolonged and well participated by the workers. The number of strikes and the number of workers involved in these strikes went on increasing in the subsequent decades. We shall return to this later after a brief discussion of the Congress and the Communist party's approach to labour.

The Indian National Congress started thinking of mobilising the working class from the 1920s. There were at least two reasons behind that: firstly, it felt that if it failed to bring the working class into their fold and control, India might face a people's revolution and secondly, because it realised that to launch an effective struggle against imperialism all the sections of the Indian society were to be mobilised. Though some Congressmen formed the AITUC in 1920 and resolutions were passed in 1920, 1922, 1924 and in 1930 in the all India conferences, the clearest policy of the Congress came only in 1936 when it appointed a committee to look after labour matters. Thus it was from the late 1930s that the Congress established deep links with the working class in the country. The Congress, however, believed in the Gandhian strategy of class harmony and as a result it did not lead any radical working class agitations. In fact two different strategies were to be found in operation, one was a radical one to be seen in

industries owned by foreign capital and the other, a mild one that was in operation in the Indian owned industries. All this was because the Congress, from the very beginning, attempted to become a political party of all the sections of the Indian society including the capitalists. Therefore, the Congress controlled and disciplined labour and was not seriously interested in radical working class movements.

The Communists who arrived in the 1920s seriously became interested in working class questions and therefore they sought to mobilise the working class through the Workers and Peasant Parties (WPPs) in which they were active throughout the country. It was because of the seriousness of the Communists, the WPPs were able to organise the working class considerably. The WPPs were most successful in Bombay where it organised a strike in 1928 than in other cities of India. In the period from 1930-35, the Communists however played no meaningful role in mobilising the workers but from the second half of the 1930s by following a policy of 'United National Front', it was able to secure a foothold among the working class.

Now let us turn once again to the organised working class movement in the country that is usually dated from the end of World War I. The twenties, in fact, was a decade when a large number of strikes took place. According to official sources there were 396 strikes in 1921 involving 600,000 workers. In the period between 1921-1925, on an average 400,000 workers in a year were involved in strikes. Similarly the year 1928 saw protracted strikes throughout the country. Apart from the strikes in Bombay there were strikes in the jute mills in Calcutta and in the Eastern Railways; in the latter, the strike continued for four months. On the whole, there was a radicalisation of working class activity by the end of the 1920s but what is also crucial is that there also grew differences between the Moderates and the Communists; as a result, the AITUC split and the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) was formed by the moderate leaders such as N.M. Joshi, V.V. Giri, B. Shivarao etc. Differences also cropped up among the Leftists due to which the extreme Leftists under the leadership of S.K. Deshpande and B.T. Ranadive broke away from the AITUC in 1930 and formed the All India Red Trade Union Congress (RTUC).

After a period of high activism, working class in the 1920s, there was a marked decline in the early 1930s between 1930-34, which were in fact the years of Great Depression. To Chamanlal Revri it was a period of setback to the entire trade union movement and that was due to the Meerut Conspiracy case in which many prominent Communist leaders were arrested and secondly, due to the successive splits that took place in the Trade Union Congress earlier. Though unions became weak, as a result of the depression and the effect, which it had on the living condition of the working class, workers continued their economic struggles in the years between 1931-1934. The number of industrial disputes increased from 141 in 1929 to 148 in 1930 and 166 in 1931, involving more than one lakh workers every year. Between 1931 and 1934, there were 589 disputes out of which around 52 percent of the disputes were in the cotton textile industry. Concerns regarding wage were the main questions that precipitated the disputes.

The Left led the unions that had become weaker in the early 1930s, but were able to reassert their influence by the year 1934. India was to witness a new strike wave and the issues that precipitated the strikes were the demand for the restoration of wage cuts, wage increases and the stopping of new forms of offensives against labour. In the year 1935 there were 135

disputes in which there was a heavy loss. In the following year 12 more disputes took place than that of 1935 but the number of workers involved during disputes was much higher than that of the previous year. The important strikes that took place were the strikes in cotton textile industry, jute industry and the strike in the railways. The number of registered trade unions also increased in these two years. In 1935 there were 213 registered unions in the country with a membership figure of 284,918. The number of unions increased to 241 by 1936.

The RTUC merged with the AITUC in 1935 and the NTUF affiliated itself with the AITUC in 1938. As a result of this, there was a growth of trade unions and trade union activity throughout the 1930s and the 1940s. The number of strikes went up by the end of the 1930s. During the period 1937-1939 the frequency of strikes and the number of strikes increased. In 1937 there were 379 strikes and in 1938 there were 399 strikes. In 1939, 406 disputes took place. The involvement of workers in these strikes was also higher. Two developments of critical importance in this period were: firstly, the strikes spread to several smaller industrial towns in the country and secondly, the working class during these struggles were not only defensive but were also offensive in the sense that they demanded among other things restoration of wage cuts, recognition of their union rights and resisted new forms of oppression of labour. It has also been found that an increasing number of women workers came to the forefront of the workers struggle.

The movement entered into a decisive phase in the 1940s and this phase coincided with the final phase of the National Movement, when the latter entered into its last phase beginning with the Quit India Movement of 1942. On the industrial front, from 1939 onwards the working condition of the workers was affected seriously. There was an increase in the working hours, multiple shift systems were introduced, wages were significantly reduced, and workers, on the whole, were subjected to great hardships. As a result, strikes erupted throughout the country and probably the most important demand of the workers was the demand for a Dearness Allowance against rising prices and cost of living. In 1942 there were 694 disputes, this increased to 820 in 1945. The number of workers involved in these disputes also increased to 7.47 lakhs in 1945. Between 1945-1947, after the end of the war, the working class confronted two distinct problems. First, was the problem of large- scale retrenchments and second, the problem of decline in earnings. As a result, the number of strikes reached a peak in 1947; there were 1811 strikes involving 1840 thousand workers.

Movements since Independence

The transfer of power and Independence in 1947 meant a different atmosphere for the entire working class in the country. The movement entered into a different phase. In the initial years after independence between 1947-1960 due to the coming of several new industries whether in the private sector or in the public sector under the Five- year plans, the working class in the country as a whole was in a better condition; therefore organised action was not resorted to very frequently. As a result the number of conflicts including strikes declined between 1947 and 1960. The situation however changed in the 1960s and 1970s. The inflation years of the mid-1960s saw the real wages of the working class declining; as a result, disputes in the industrial front increased. In 1964 there were 2,151 disputes involving 1,002 thousand workers in which 7,725 man-days were lost. The number of man-days lost probably points out to the

severity of the movements.

One of the important features in the trade union front was the establishment of trade unions that were to be dominated by the parties. As a result of this, most of the unions that came up functioned as an organ (mass organisations) of their parent parties. It is because of this control of the parties over the unions, the latter lost all autonomy and the programmes and policies of the parties, in every important way, became the programmes and policies of the unions. The number of national unions in the country multiplied. By the end of World War II there were two all India organisations, the Indian Federation of Labour (IFL) and the largest union, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). By 1949 there were four unions and all these unions were linked or affiliated to and controlled by political parties. The Communists dominated the AITUC, IFL was affiliated to the Radical Democratic Party of M.N.Roy, the Indian National Congress controlled the INTUC and the Socialist Party members dominated the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). The HMS splitted further and the UTUC was formed. The AITUC also split in 1970 and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) was born and affiliated to the CPI (M).

For the country as a whole, the period between the late 1960s to the imposition of the emergency was a period of political turmoil and this significantly affected and shaped the working class movement in the country. Indira Gandhi started centralising and concentrating power in her hands after the elections of 1971. Taking advantage the capitalist class resorted to new forms of offensives, lockouts being the main, due to which large number of man-days was lost. For example, in the period 1971-75 the average annual workdays lost through lockouts was as high as 60.23 thousand. The figure rose to 105.46 thousand in the period 1976-80. So far as the working class in the public sector undertakings were concerned, they were hit directly by the centralised bureaucratic state apparatus. As a result of this the working class in both the sectors responded with strikes due to which the number of disputes in the country increased significantly. Rudolph and Rudolph (1998) found that in the period between 1965 and 1975 the number of workdays lost (from strikes or lockouts) increased by almost 500 percent. The most important strike that took place was the Railway strike of 1974, which till date remains the most serious of all the direct working class actions in the country. The strike was important because it was the only strike that was able to challenge the might of the Indian state.

In the country as a whole, since the emergency, the working class had to face a number of offensives from the employers. Lockouts in the private sector increased as a result, of which a large percentage of workdays were lost. During the years 1980-1987, lockouts made up from 29 to 65 percent of workdays lost in industrial disputes. The loss of workdays in the 1980s went on increasing. To one estimate during 1985, 1987 and 1988, workdays lost in lockouts actually exceeded those lost in strikes by as much as 55, 52, and 71 percent respectively. This growth in lockouts has adversely affected the industrial working class in the country since it throws the working class to a condition of unemployment. Along with other kind of problems, industrial sickness also affected the working class in the 1980s. In 1976, 241 large industrial units were sick. In 1986, the figure had risen to 714. Among the medium scale industrial units, in 1986, 1,250 units were closed due to sickness. The number of sick small units also increased in the 1980s. For example, in 1988, 217,436 small units were lying sick. Thus the working class was hit hard in the 1980s by lockouts, closures and sickness.

The problem of Lockout continues even today and has assumed a serious proportion. In 1999, according to the Labour Bureau, there were 387 lockouts; in 2000, there were 345 and in the year 2001, there were 302 lockouts (GOI, Labour Bureau, 2002).

Since the late 1980s and 1990s, the working class is confronted with two different forms of offensives that it has not faced earlier. The first problem that it faces is the growth of *Hindutva* based political parties, namely the BJP and the Shiv Sena and the consequent growth of their labour organisations i.e., Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) and Bharatiya Kamgar Sena (BKS) respectively that has in turn fragmented the working class among communal lines. Secondly, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) since 1991 and the consequent globalisation of the Indian economy, labour in the country has been facing the might of capital in a different form. The first problem is divisive in nature since it had divided the working class in the country among communal lines whereas the second development has affected the working class significantly and has thrown challenges to the organised working class movement in the country. The second problem is much more severe at this juncture and it is to this we now turn.

The introduction of the New Economic Policy since 1991 had severely affected the working class in the country. There are different components of this New Economic Policy but the core emphasis is on Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation. Liberalisation has meant reduction of government control over the private sector; as a result, the bargaining position of the workers vis-a- vis capital has declined. The policies of privatisation under which several important public sector units in the country is being sold to private companies had opened up new challenges for the workers and the trade unions in the country. As a result of the overall policies, the likely problem will be, there will be no statutory minimum wages for labour, no obstructions to retrenchment giving the employers the complete right to hire and fire. The developments in the Indian economy in the last one decade or more have created fundamental problems for the working class and the unions are finding it difficult to resist the encroachment of capital on the rights of the workers.

Before we conclude this section, it will be useful for us to note some of the weaknesses of the movement. Firstly, within the working class in the country a large section of the workforce, the unorganised ones even today remain outside the fold of trade unions. On the whole, the unions in this country have neglected the problems of the unorganised sector and Rudolph and Rudolph are correct when they conclude that almost all the unions including the Left led unions has taken the 'relatively easy path of organising and pressing demands on behalf of those who are easily organised and whose employer-government–responds readily. In absolute terms the unorganised workers are poor and vulnerable to exploitation than the workers in the organised sector.

The second major problem, which confronts the working class movement, is the multiplicity of trade unions. We have noted earlier that after independence trade unions representing workers in the country have multiplied. By the end of the Second World War there were only two All India organisations, by 1949 there were four all India organisations and today there are more than ten national level organisations affiliated to the major parties in the country.

Ideological problems are often cited as the reason for this state of affairs though in actual practice unions are less ideological and are striving for organising the workers principally on economic issues. Multiplicity of political parties may be accepted as a norm in a democracy but multiplicity of Unions in a capitalist system keeps the working class fragmented and vulnerable to all forms of pressures.

Trade unions in the country, as a whole, have not been responsive to the problems of the working class in the country. Unions lie fragmented from the factory to the national level that has produced bitter rivalry among unions and hence very often they have failed to respond to the issues of the working class. Due to the reasons cited above and also because of the fact that political parties control Unions, the latter have failed to become militant for addressing the grievances of the workers. The growing number of closures, suspensions of work and other forms of offensives in the country in recent years after the introduction of the New Economic Policy indicates the weakness of the movement. Various studies have also found that the industrial working class in the country has not 'allied with the peasants and other sections of the society in collective direct action on political issues'. This reflects the low level of political consciousness of the working class.

To sum up, the movement of the organised workers in the country dates back to the period when industrialisation started and the first working class in the country appeared. The movements however took an organised form after the First World War with the emergence of trade unions. Movement of the workers, since then, continues to surface even today but the organised movements in the country face a number of problems. The most important of all the problems include fragmentation of unions, affiliation of the unions with political parties, lack of militancy by the established unions and a general apathy towards organising workers employed in the unorganised sector of the economy. All these problems have affected the working class movement in the country adversely.

14.3 PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Agrarian movements in contemporary India may be broadly classified into two main categories. The first type of movements is those of the poor, the marginal or small peasants. These movements voice the demands related to their economic condition, for example, demand of the agricultural labourers for higher wages and better working condition. The second type of movements is of the more prosperous peasants, those who produce a considerable surplus within the rural economy. These movements are often in social science literature referred to as 'Farmers' Movement' or 'New Agrarianism' or 'New Peasant Movements'.

The first category of movements date back to the colonial period. Kathleen Gough in 1974 found that in India 77 peasant uprisings took place since the British period (Gough 1974). In the initial years the sporadic movements were directed against the extraction of the Zamindars and other forms of intermediaries. We shall see later that these movements were and are around the grievances of the rural poor and in the pre independence years they developed in close connection with the national movement. The second category of movement has arisen in recent years in the Green revolution areas such as in western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana,

Punjab or south- western Maharashtra or in the far south such as Karnataka or Tamil Nadu and it is the rich and the middle peasants, the prosperous within the rural economy that organise and lead it. These movements have become much more prominent in recent years. The movements target the state, the bureaucratic apparatus and demand among other things concessions from the state like, rise in the remunerative prices for crops, decrease in the prices of agricultural inputs, providing electricity at a cheap rate etc. By focussing on the decline in the terms of trade over the years they also have created and highlighted a distinction between the 'town' and the 'country' and some of the leaders (for example, Sharad Joshi of the Shetkari Sangathana) emphasises that 'Bharat' is being exploited by 'India'.

In this section of the Unit, we concentrate on the origins and the nature of the movement of different kinds, the demands raised, issues involved and the problems with the movements. In the first part of this section, we look at the nature of agrarian mobilisation and the peasant movements in the colonial period by focussing on the mobilisation and movements led by the Congress and the others led by the Communist Party of India. We shall focus on the relation of the peasant movement with that of the national movement and also the two most prominent movements, Tebhaga and Telengana that were led by the Communists. In the second part we look at the agrarian mobilisation and movements after independence. In the last part of our discussion we look briefly at the 'Farmers' movements that had acquired prominence in contemporary India.

14.3.1 The Congress, Communists and Peasant Movements in Colonial India

The peasants had been the worst sufferers of the British Raj in colonial India. Even before the Congress decided to mobilise the peasants, the latter had already developed their organisations and were in fact protesting against the local Zamindars who, to them, were the main enemies. Thus there has been much peasant unrest and occasional uprisings in the pre nationalist era. The two most important uprisings in the pre nationalist period were the movement of the Indigo planters of 1860 and the Moplah uprising of 1921 in Malabar.

In the initial years the Congress ignored the urgency of improving the agrarian situation. It was only in the 1920s that Gandhi sought to convert the Congress organisation into a mass organisation and hence thought of bringing the peasants into the fold of the Congress. Two important developments were in fact responsible for the establishment of contact between the peasants and the Congress in the late 1920s. The first was the constant banging of the Congress doors by the peasants on the one hand and second was the need by the Congress to enlist peasant support for the national movement.

Despite the fact that the Congress took a late initiative in reaching the peasants in the countryside, it became a strong force to reckon with very soon. Since the Congress wanted to become a political party of all the classes in the Indian society, it attracted even the landed rich to enter the organisation and once the later entered, it is the latter who in fact dominated the organisation and decided the rural strategies of the party and hence the Congress could not pursue any radical peasant agitation. The Congress was more interested in enlisting the support of the bulk of the peasants for the purpose of national agitation but never went for and encouraged class

war with the upper strata in rural society. In a nutshell, it can be said that because of Gandhi's and Congress' emphasis on class harmony and because of its primary emphasis on socio-cultural revival of the rural community that the Congress could never launch serious agitations in the countryside, though it was able to draw the support of a part of the rural community during its anti imperialist agitations.

Apart from the Congress, the Communists were the other major force that mobilised the peasants. Though the CPI was formed in 1920, (to some in 1925), its serious engagement with the peasantry started with the formation of the All India Kisan Congress later renamed as the Kisan Sabha and the primary purpose of the Sabha was to mobilise the peasants. It is after this pursuing broadly a tactics of 'United Front' in cooperation with the national movement the CPI increased its membership in the peasant front and set the stage for the most revolutionary struggles in the countryside, though most of the struggles, as we shall see later, were local in their spread.

The tactics that the Communists adopted were to work at the grass root level and this tactics paid them rich dividends. In the countryside they worked through the Kisan Sabhas. In the beginning it was not a class based organisation, it represented even the well to do peasants, though, in this period, the Communists ensured that the Kisan Sabha would take up at least some of the issues of the rural poor. The rural rich were well represented in the Sabha because of the Congress Socialists' emphasis on a multi- class organisation. It was only in the years 1941-43 that the AIKS passed into the hands of the Communists and it Swami Shajanand who tried to build the Kisan Sabha as an organisation of the rural poor and this alienated the rich and the middle peasants. The control of the CPI over the Kisan Sabha was complete by the year 1944-45. The membership of the Kisan Sabha kept on increasing and by 1944 it increased to 553,427 (Dhanagare, 1980). After completely capturing it the CPI and the Kisan Sabha could in fact make the Sabha an organisation of the poor peasants, tenants-at will, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers. It is with this base that it could, in the later years, launch and lead agrarian struggles, in the pre-independence period. The Tebhaga movement in Bengal (1946-47) and the Telengana movement (1946-51) in the former Hyderabad state were led by the Communists and it is these movements that we now turn to.

The Tebhaga Movement

The Tebhaga movement is one of the two great movements, which arose in India in the mid-forties immediately after World War II. The movement arose in North Bengal and included the districts of Dinajpur and Rangpur in East Bengal and Jalpaiguri and Malda in West Bengal. The movement was for the reduction in the share of the produce from one-half to one-third, that is the rent, which they used to pay to the *jotedars* who possessed superior rights on land. It was revolutionary in character in terms of the demands raised and was consciously organised by the Kisan Sabha. Hence it marked a departure from the pattern of movements noticed in the country under the leadership of the Congress and influenced by the Gandhian ideology.

In Bengal where the revolt took place the permanent settlement had been introduced in 1793 and this had inaugurated a new arrangement in the pattern of landholding in the region. Between the *Zamindars* and the direct peasant producers there came into being a number

of intermediaries such as the *Jotedars*. These *Jotedars* in turn used to sublet their land to the *bargadars* or the share- croppers who cultivated the land and used to pay a part (one half) of the produce known as *adhi* or *bhag* to the jote*dars*. The rights of the *Bargadars* in the piece of land, which they cultivated, were only temporary and existed only for a fixed period usually for a period of five years. The *Jotedars* were not the only exploiters in the rural economy but there also existed the *Mahajans* or moneylenders (often the landlords themselves) who used to provide credit to the *Bargadars*. Thus the exploitation of the *Bargadars* by the *Jotedars* and the *Mahajan*s was complete. There were a few peasant owners (middle peasants) who owned and cultivated on their pieces of land but were always under pressure and very often lost their land and joined the category of landless peasants and turned *Bargadars* often on their own pieces of land.

Though the *Bargadars* constituted around one fifth and quarter of the rural population, the movement encompassed the entire rural population. The condition of the rural landless and the peasants became horrible with the Bengal Famine of 1943,when, according to conservative estimates, 3.5 million peasants perished in the Great Bengal Famine. The movement began as a movement of the middle peasants on their own behalf but later on drew on the sharecroppers or the *Bargadars*. Bhowani Sen points out that the history of the Tebhaga movement can be traced back to 1939 when small peasants revolted against the *Jotedars*. Officially, however, it started in 1946 though it gathered momentum in the years since 1945.

It was only in 1946, when the Communist Party of India threw its weight behind the movement, it took a revolutionary turn. The main struggles were fought during the time of the harvest season when the sharecroppers refused to provide the amount of paddy to the *Jotedars*. Refusing to pay to the *Jotedars*, the *Bargadars* took away the paddy to their houses or *Khamars* (threshing place) and that precipitated the struggles in the countryside. The *Jotedars* got the support of the police to protect their interests. It was the peasant committees, which became a power in the villages and led the peasants. These committees carried out the administration of the villages. The Muslim League and the Congress supported the *Jotedars* and eventually were successful in suppressing the movement. The movement eventually collapsed and was officially called off in the summer of 1947. Though the movement failed, it had important implications for the entire history of agrarian struggles in India.

The Telengana Peasant Uprising

The Telengana peasant movement started in mid-1946 and continued till the October of 1951. The movement engulfed the whole of the Telengana region of the Hyderabad state and the adjoining districts of the Andhra delta. It has been regarded as the most revolutionary of all the movements in India, in its character and political objectives. The CPI through its peasant wing, the Kisan Sabha, launched the movement. It appears that the CPI could launch the movement after it eschewed the strategy of 'United Front' and adopted a strategy of initiating insurrectionary struggles.

In the whole of Hyderabad state to which the Telengana region belonged, there were two main types of land tenure. The first was the *Khalsa* or *Diwani* tenure, which was similar to the *raiyatwari* system that is the peasant-proprietary system. Under this system the landowners were not called actual owners but were called *pattadars* (registered occupants) and under

this system lay around 60 percent of the land of Hyderabad. The actual occupants were the *shikmidars*, who had full rights of occupancy but were not registered. When the pressure on land grew the *shikmidars* also leased out their land to the tenants but the later were not the real owners, neither had they any protection against eviction. The second kind of tenure, which existed, was under the *jagirdari* system. *Sarf –e-khas* was the special land assigned to the Nizam himself. These were the crown lands and the Nizam's noblemen, who were granted land in return of military services during emergency administered these lands. The peasants, under the *jagirdari* system, were the most oppressed. In the whole of Hyderabd state, the peasantry in the Telengana region suffered the most oppressive system of exploitation.

The movement led by the Communists began in Nalgonda district in 1946 and then spread to the neighbouring Warangal and Bidar districts and finally engulfed the whole of the Telengana region. The objective of the movement, from the very beginning, was a broad one and was concerned with the whole of the peasantry against illegal and excessive extraction by the rural feudal aristocracy. The most powerful demand was that all peasant debt should be written off. The second stage of the movement began when in order to counter the oppression let loose by the aristocracy the peasantry launched the armed struggle. Thus, with this, the movement entered into its revolutionary phase.

It entered the revolutionary phase when over 2,000 villages set up their own 'Peoples Committees'; these 'Committees' took over land, maintained their own army and own administration (Mehta, 1979). This rule of the peasants in a large part of the region and the armed resistance continued until 1950 and was finally crushed by the Indian army. It was ultimately called off in 1951. It was an agrarian struggle in which many peasants were killed by the army of the landed gentry and later by the Indian army after the takeover of the Hyderabad state by the Indian army. The demands raised were broad ones and the nature of the struggle itself makes this movement one of the most revolutionary agrarian struggles of India unmatched so far in the Indian history.

14.3.2 The Movements of the Rural Poor in the Post-Colonial India

In Independent India it has been the Left, parliamentary as well as non- parliamentary who have been the main organisers of the peasants. Mobilisation has taken place on different issues like increase in agricultural wages, land to the tiller, etc. and the principal target has been the rural rich on whose mercy the landless labourers and the marginal peasants depend. Since the established Communists accepted the parliamentary form of struggle and almost eschewed armed revolt as a form of struggle, the Independent India has not witnessed any major armed uprising in the countryside except in Naxalbari. The CPI, in the initial years, pinned its hope on the Congress government for bringing about radical programmes to alter the landholding pattern in the countryside. As the Congress governments adopted land reforms in various states, the CPI focussed its attention on the implementation part of the programme.

The CPI diluted its programme and moved further away from its radical strategy when, in its Congress in 1958 at Amritsar, it officially adopted a programme of peaceful transition to socialism. It split in 1964 on the primary question of strategy to be adopted but the CPI (M), that was formed as a result of the split, in the future years accepted and adopted almost a

similar strategy. Therefore, it is due to this, the two mainstream Communist parties have not taken recourse to non- parliamentary method for the purpose of addressing the agrarian question in the Indian countryside. Direct struggles in the countryside have been eschewed by the mainstream Left that has accepted parliamentary form of mobilisation and movements through its mass organisations. The parties have been organising and mobilising the peasants and the agricultural workers on different issues but its areas of strength lies in only a few regions of the country.

Both the mainstream Communist parties, the CPI and the CPI (M) have formed peasant organisations like the Kisan Sabhas and organisation of agricultural labourers for mobilising the concerned sections and have achieved limited success in Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura and in some other states. Similarly the CPI (M-L) is active in Bihar and has formed its peasant front, the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS) which is active in many of the districts of Bihar including those districts which are now in the new state of Jharkhand, organising the rural poor and also the middle peasants by taking up issues which affect them. The non-parliamentary Left, for example the Marxist Coordination Committee (MCC) or the Peoples War Group (PWG), has been mobilising the rural poor in states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and Punjab and using violence as a strategy to address the question of the rural poor. Hence the Communists in the country had met with limited success in the countryside. In the next part of the section, we turn to the Naxalbari peasant uprising led by a faction of the CPI (M) that took place in the country after Independence.

The Naxalbari Peasant Uprising

The Naxalbari peasant uprising that occurred in the northern part of West Bengal is the last of the major uprisings India has witnessed. It took place in post-colonial India and was led by a faction of the CPI (M). The two most prominent leaders of the CPI (M) who disagreed with the official position of the party and led the movement were Kanu Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar. It erupted in the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in West Bengal, in a place called Naxalbari falling within the subdivision of Siliguri in Darjeeling district. It is in Naxalbari, Kharibari and Phansidewa, the three police station areas where the movement took a militant turn. The region is different from that of the whole of West Bengal because within it, there exists numerous tea plantations and a large proportion of tribal population. Tea plantations have developed along the lines of a plantation economy whereas the tribal population in this region include the Santhals, Rajbansis, Oraons, Mundas and a small number of Terrai Gurkhas. It is because of the combination of these two factors that the whole region has a history of land disputes in West Bengal. The landless peasants in this region had since long claimed that their land were being encroached by the tea estates and also by the rich peasants. Thus it is because of this peculiarity, the Naxalbari area had witnessed a number of peasant disputes led mainly by an indigenous peasant leadership and not by the outside middle class leaders.

The agrarian revolt arose in the month of April 1967 after the formation of the new government in West Bengal in which the CPI (M) was a major partner. The movement continued till June in full swing in the whole Siliguri subdivision. Kanu Sanyal, the leader of the movement specified ten great tasks, which included *inter alia*, land which was not owned and tilled by peasant themselves was to be redistributed, peasants were to burn all legal deeds and documents, unequal agreements between the moneylenders and the peasants were to be

declared null and void, hoarded rice were to be confiscated by the peasants and distributed among the peasants, all *jotedars* to be tried and sentenced to death etc. He urged the peasants to arm themselves with traditional weapons.

The high point of the movement was reached in the month of May. Forcible occupations by the peasants took place and according to government sources there were around 60 cases of forcible occupations, looting of rice and paddy and intimidation and assaults. The leaders of the movement claimed that around 90 percent of the peasants in the Siliguri subdivision supported the movement. The movement came to a halt, when, under central government pressure, the West Bengal police entered the region and swept the area. Cases of killing of landlords were carried on later as a part of the annihilation strategy. The movement spread to other areas of the state and elsewhere in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh later in the form of the Naxalite movement .Thus, the Naxalbari peasant uprising had far reaching consequences in the Independent India.

14.3.3 The Movements of the Rural Rich: Farmers' Movements in Contemporary India

In this part of the section, we shall focus on two of the prominent movements of the rural rich, one led by the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in western Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and the Shetkari Sangathan (SS) which represents primarily the interests of the sugarcane, cotton, tobacco, grape and onion growers in south-west Maharashtra though it also has its base in Gujarat. There are other organisations and movements in the country as well like the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha movement led by Nanjundaswamy in Karnataka and Vivasayigal Sangam movement led by Narayanswamy Naidu in Tamil Nadu, the Khedut movement in south of Gujarat; but in recent years, the BKU movement led by Mahendra Singh Tikait and the movement by the SS led by Sharad Joshi has drawn more national attention because of their militancy and spread. We would begin with the BKU and then come to a discussion of the SS and end up with a comparison of the two movements.

Before we look at the BKU, let us look at the nature of the rural economy in the west Uttar Pradesh and in the states of Punjab and Haryana that forms the backbone of the movement. This region is highly prosperous because of the massive capitalist investment in agriculture. Apart from foodgrains, sugarcane is the principal crop that is produced. A section of the peasantry having land in these states has been transformed into a class of capitalist farmers who produce much more than what their family consumes and hence the surplus is sold in the market. They own capital assets like tractors, thrashers, pump sets etc. and hire agricultural labourers for the purpose of cultivation since their family labour is not sufficient.

The BKU was originally formed on August 13, 1978 in Haryana under the guidance of Charan Singh, the undisputed peasant leader of North India. The death of Charan Singh in 1987 created a political vacuum among the peasants in North India and this was filled up by Mahendra Singh Tikait. After the death of Charan Singh, Tikait attempted to convert the organisation into a militant one after the Shamli agitation in April, 1987 in Muzzafarnagar district. In this agitation the BKU raised demands against rise in power tariff and erratic supply of electricity that was so crucial for the farmers of western Uttar Pradesh. The concessions

which the BKU was able to secure (a reduction in the power tariff by one sixth) increased the prestige of the BKU and its leader, Mahendra Singh Tikait and soon after that a large number of rich peasants from several districts joined the organisation. After the Shamli agitation, two more agitations solidified the support base of the BKU and brought the BKU into national prominence. The two agitations were the Dharna in Meerut and Delhi in 1988. The agitations were long and militant in nature and received widespread support. The Meerut dharna continued for 25 days and was impressive and peaceful. The main demands of the movements were similar to the demands of the other agitations of the prosperous farmers in the country. The demands centred around, electricity, remunerative prices, low import costs and the inclusion of BKU representatives on various committess appointed by the government for fixation of prices. Since then the BKU has successfully spearheaded the farmers' movement in north India under the leadership of Mahendra Singh Tikait.

A few important points regarding the BKU should be noted at this juncture. It began as an organisation of all the rich farmers of western Uttar Pradesh but today it has essentially become the organisations of the well to do *Jat* peasant. The membership is primarily made up of the Jats. The Rajputs, the Gujars, the Tyagis and the Muslims (the other farmers) after participating enthusiastically in the BKU led movements in its early years had deserted the organisation. Thus the BKU has lost its multi-caste peasant alliance character. The second fundamental point regarding the BKU is its apolitical character. The constitution of the BKU states very clearly that it is an apolitical organisation. The leadership of the BKU has zealously guarded the apolitical character of the organisation. Mahendra Singh Tikait detests politics and argues that all parties are parties of India and not of Bharat.

Sharad Joshi's Shetkari Sangathana has its origin in the late 1970s when, in October 1979, it opened an office in Chakan, Maharashtra. It primarily represents the interests of the farmers who cultivate cotton, onions, tobacco, grapes and sugarcane in rural Maharashtra. The SS and Sharad Joshi rose to national prominence with the rasta roko (block roads) agitation in 1980 when tens and thousands of farmers in the state of Maharashtra blocked important roads connecting Bombay and other cities and the most important issue, which the SS raised, was the issue of low prices of sugarcane and cotton and demanded that the prices of these products be raised. The movement was successful because it was able to secure some rise in the prices of the commodities and also because it was able to bring the farmers' movement in the state to prominence.

Sharad Joshi again sought to address the plight of the Farmers with the Nipani agitation in April 1981. The movement's support, however, started declining till the mid, 1980s due to the fact that though the leadership announced a number of agitations, it did not launch any serious one. In the early 1980s, Sharad Joshi entered the Gujarat scene. Since then the SS is associated with the farmers' movement in Gujarat. His novel contribution in Gujarat lay in his emphasis that the Farmers' movement cannot succeed unless and until the agricultural labours and poor peasants are associated with the movement. With this emphasis, he was able to entice the rural poor within the Kheduts' movement or farmers' movement. In 1985 the SS took a very pragmatic decision in Maharashtra of supporting opposition political parties and started closely working with the other organisations and people who were associated with the rural sector. This paid some dividends and it is due to this its support base broadened. The next agitation that it organised was of January 1987 over cotton prices. Since then the farmers'

movement in Maharashtra has matured and gained prominence; but in recent years, there has been a considerable decline in the support base of the SS largely due to the fact that it has failed to launch any serious agitation in the 1990s and also because of Joshi's blatant support to the liberalisation of the economy.

A few points regarding the SS movement of Sharad Joshi must be made before we attempt to compare it with the BKU movement of Mahendra Singh Tikait in north India. The SS movement of Maharashtra and Gujarat is the movement of the rich farmers like that of the BKU movement in north India though it also voices the demands and interests of the rural poor. Another crucial point regarding the SS is that the movement aims at reducing the role of the state; the state is considered as the greatest enemy of the farmers. It is because of this position that it has embraced liberalisation, open market and even the Dunkel draft partially.

Though the similarities between the BKU and the SS are striking, there are dissimilarities as well. Gupta (1997) has noted six differences between the two. We shall however discuss only three briefly. The BKU is largely concerned with the owner cultivators, primarily *jats* of the region whereas the SS has tried to mobilise the rural poor though essentially it is a movement of the rural rich. Secondly, the SS movement is a movement, which has been joined and led by a few intellectuals, making it an ideologically organised movement in contrast to the BKU which posseses only an informal organisational set up. Lastly, the BKU now mainly represents the egalitarian *Jat* owner cultivators whereas the SS represents primarily the Marathas but it is not an organisation of a single caste. The Dhangars, Malis and Banjaras are equally involved in the organisation.

14.4 SUMMARY

In this unit you have studied about the working class and peasant movements in India. The working class movement has passed through the four phases. In the contemporary phase it is faced with the problemes of communal division and the new economic policies. An analysis of the peasants and farmers' movements in the contemporary India reveals that although both forms of mobilisation and movements are prevalent, the first is mainly led by the mass organisations of the Left and other political parties and the second is being led by the well to do prosperous peasant organisations though it attracts even the marginal and poor peasants in different regions. The movements of the rich, however, have acquired more prominence because of its militancy and prolonged agitations in recent years whereas the first one suffers from the lack of militancy. In fact the Left, that had led agrarian agitations till the late 1960s has not led any serious movement since the last thirty years. This is largely due to the fact that serious class struggle is not in the immediate agenda of the established Left parties. The non-parliamentary Left, however, is exceptional in this regard but it enjoys only a limited rural base. The increase in militancy of the rich farmers has been mainly because of their location in the social structure, which gives them the ability to sustain movements more than the poor or the small peasants.

14.5 EXERCISES

1) Trace the history of the working class movements in the pre-independent era.