
The Revolutionary History of Peasant Movements in India

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■ COLLECTIVE ■



We are seeing history being made.

Farmers have surrounded the national capital from different directions, at Tikri, Singhu, Ghazipur and Shahjahanpur borders, to repeal three Farm Laws that the Narendra Modi-led government is hell-bent on imposing. These laws are a part of the blueprint from *International Monetary Fund* and *World Trade Organization*, two of the international financial institutions through which the US-backed imperialist world order is kept in check. They advocate that developing countries like India should stop subsidizing agriculture for our own food security and hand over control of what we grow, where and how to corporations. This imperialist design has, rightly, been identified in the RSS-BJP's actions by the protesting farmers as 'anti-people', that is, representing the interests and of the imperialists and their desi collaborators like Ambani-Adani.

As a revolutionary student organisation, we are happy to bring out this booklet which revisits the anti-imperialist legacy of peasant struggles. Many of these revolutionary movements opposed British imperialism and played a pivotal part in our freedom struggle. Even after we achieved independence from the British on August 15, 1947, our collective destiny still remained in the hands of the foreign and domestic capitalists. But as *Shaheed-e-Azam* Bhagat Singh presciently wrote, in his last petition before martyrdom, 'Let us declare that the state of war does exist and shall exist so long as the Indian toiling masses and the natural resources are being exploited by a handful of parasites.' The struggle for achieving independence, in its fullest sense, and creating an India of our own continues even after Independence.

This Kisan Andolan is another example of a movement which reflects those dreams which people of India once dreamt, of achieving complete independence in every sphere of our lives. The revolutionary peasants and farm workers have shown tremendous tenacity in this uncompromising struggle, declaring that no resolution will be possible till these anti-people laws are withdrawn. Despite the ruling regime's barricades, tear gas shells, fake news and false criminal charges, the struggling peasants have reached Delhi and are placing their rightful demand. This struggle has shown us once again that the war against neoliberal fascism remains incomplete without a mass movement by those who build this country, its peasants and the workers. Thus, we hold the present Kisan Andolan in continuity of the revolutionary tendency described in the following pages. We hope our effort can contribute positively to this movement and make it successful towards building an India of our shared dreams.

Inquilab Zindabad!

COLLECTIVE

New Delhi, January 2021

Battle of Sobraon (Anglo-Sikh War, 1845)

Sher-e-Punjab Ranjit Singh led an army in present-day Himachal Pradesh to fight the British colonisers tooth and nail in the *Anglo-Sikh War of 1845*. Tribes residing in the hilly regions of Kangra, Guler, Jaswan, Datarpur, Nurpur, Suket, Kullu and Lahaul-Spiti fought bravely in this decisive battle to halt imperialism on its forward march.

Santhal and Bundelkhand Hool (1855-57)

The Santhal Hool, which set off the first *War of Indian Independence* on June 30, 1855, was a rebellion in present-day Jharkhand, in eastern India, against both the British colonial authority and zamindari system. Martial law was proclaimed on November 10, which lasted until January 3, 1856, when the uprising was brutally crushed by troops loyal to the British. The rebellion was led by the martyrs Sidho, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav Murmu.

Tribal peasants of present-day Bundelkhand in the Chotanagpur region had rose against the nexus of local landlords, money lenders and the colonial authority in 1857, around the time of this historic Sepoy Mutiny. The rebellion began by targeting government officials, bankers and *mahajans* and the burning of official papers.





Neel Bidroho (1859)

Neel Bidroho, or Indigo Revolt, in Bengal province was directed against East India Company planters who forced peasants to take advances and sign fraudulent contracts for indigo cultivation on exploitative terms—an instance of the contract farming model being championed by the neoliberal regime today. The revolt began in Gobindapur village in Bengal's Nadia district, where peasants organised a counter offensive to deal with the planters' *lathiyals* (armed bouncers). This was vividly portrayed by Dinabandhu Mitra in his play, *Neel Darpan*. The British Indigo Commission, appointed in 1860, curtailed some of the abuses but the issue of contract farming to suit British interests would continue to remain a burning issue in the national movement.

Pagri Sambhal Jatta Movement (1907)

In 1879, the British Government constructed the Upper Bari Doab canal, to draw water from the Chenab river to Lyallpur, in present-day Pakistan. It set up settlements in the uninhabited area and promised free land to the peasants. Many moved to settle here. But, in a remarkable coincidence with today's times, the British Government brought in three laws to deny ownership rights of the peasants, reducing them to sharecroppers. The new laws also prohibited the farmers from building houses or felling trees and stated that if the eldest heir died before adulthood, the land would be seized by the British government. Pagri Sambhal Jatta movement was the farmers' agitation against these three British laws. Sardar Ajit Singh, Bhagat Singh's uncle, rose to lead this movement.

Champanan Satyagraha (1917)

Indigo farmers of Bihar's Champaran district rose up against exploitative practices of indigo farming. The Gandhian movement challenged British contract farming. Champaran remains an instance of fierce peasant resistance in the history of the struggle for independence.

Eka Movement (1921-22)

The Eka, or unification, Movement surfaced in Hardoi, Bahraich and Sitapur, in present-day Uttar Pradesh. Initially started by Congress and Khilafat leaders, later, Madari Pasi came to head the agitations against high rents extorted by feudal *thekedars*. The casteist oppression of the landless and farm workers also came to be challenged as a result of this militant movement. People's journalists like Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi played an important role in mobilising national sentiment in favour of the movement.

Malabar Rebellion (1921)

The Malabar Rebellion was an armed uprising by Mappila peasants against the repressive British Raj and the ruthless tenancy practices of *jenmis*, or landlords, who had collaborated with them in Kerala. Looting, destruction of official records and burning down of government buildings were some of the methods used by the agitators.



Hindustani Ghadar Party

Wanted:

Brave soldiers to stir up revolution in India

Pay: Death

Prize: Martyrdom

Pension: Liberty

Field of Battle: India

— Innaugural issue of *Hindustan Ghadar* (USA, 1913)

Launched in San Francisco in 1913, the colonial government saw their confrontation with the Ghadar Party as a war to keep India. Ghadarites sought to unite emigrant Indian workers, peasants and soldiers to mutiny against imperialism and carry out armed rebellion for self-rule.

Many Indians carried experiences of popular struggles against land capture and colonial agrarian policies to their new homes in North America and Europe, where Ghadar took shape. Prominent among them was Ajit Singh, who had escaped prison in Myanmar to organise the diaspora in Europe and, later, in British colonies in Latin America. Sohan Singh Bhakna became its founding president and Lala Hardyal its secretary. *Shaheed* Kartar Singh Sarabha quit his university education to help run their banned newspaper Ghadar, or revolt. Bhagat Singh would go on to carry Sarabha's photo in his pocket at all times, even when he was finally arrested.

From its inception, the Ghadar Party was truly internationalist in its orientation, bringing anti-colonial movements in the Indian subcontinent in contact with the Irish, Egyptian and Chinese liberation struggles. The winds of change blowing in Russia, the first toiling people's state in the world, produced a socialist churning within the Ghadarites, as it did among many other anti-colonial movements world over. It demonstrated the roots of colonialism in the capitalist system itself and demonstrated that a better world is possible. The former USSR would go on to equip Ghadarites and other anti-colonial revolutionaries, both materially and ideologically.

Shaheed-e-Aazam Bhagat Singh and the Hindustani Socialist Republican Association

The foundation of the Communist Party of India, Workers and Peasants Parties across the country and the Congress Socialist Party were important milestones in the growth of the organised working class movement in the Indian national struggle. But chief among these was the role of Bhagat Singh and his comrades in the Hindustani Socialist Republican Association which carried forward the legacy of Ghadar. They undertook the *Kakori Mail* robbery to secure resources for arms as well as distributing socialist propaganda. They bombed the Parliament, not to take lives but to ‘make the deaf hear’ the cries of toiling people. The heroic acts of HSRA martyrs grew apace with the entry of India’s toiling masses into the freedom struggle. Since the 1930’s, farmers-peasants-soldiers began to realise the political significance of freedom from British rule and started active mass movements to unshackle our destiny from capitalism-imperialism.



Mahaan Tebhaga Andolan (1946)

The historic struggle of Bengal's sharecroppers for two-third of the crop started under British rule but was put down shortly before Independence. After widespread famine during Second World War, the peasantry picked up whatever they had to strike against the *zamindari* - colonial nexus. It left a lasting imprint on the psyche of its participants, particularly among women, and strengthened class struggle instead of communal hatred, at a time when Partition had set off bloody riot in India's border states.

Telangana Armed Struggle (1946-51)

Landless and small peasants in the Telangana region took up arms against the feudal rule of the Muslim *Nizam*, caste-Hindu landlords and the British colonial land-taxation systems. Dalits and adivasis formed the majority of those who organised themselves into bands for liberating villages from the clutches of the *Nizam's* brutal *razakars* and distributed land among the farmers. The Indian Army, sent in to eliminate the ruler and establish constitutional democracy, soon trained its weapons on the struggling peasants to defeat the land redistribution programme. 'Land to the tiller' emerged as a central slogan of the struggle against the capitalist-landlord ruling elite, whether of the monarchical or democratic variety.

Naxalbari Uprising (1967)

Many Indians associated with the revolutionary freedom movement found that a mere transfer of power took place on August 15, 1947. Radical land redistribution and the democratization of society, two leading demands raised by the crores of Indians who had joined the freedom movement, were only implemented through half-hearted measures. Twenty years after Independence, during the Naxalbari uprising in 1967, peasants occupied *zamindari* land for distribution in a West Bengal village and took up arms in the face of brutal governmental repression. This spark spread to Bihar, Punjab and Telangana, with young people across the country soon standing with the peasant struggles. Beyond just a peasant struggle, Naxalbari marked a political milestone, throwing up several buried questions about the reality of what Independence has meant for the majority of Indian toiling people.

Indian agriculture underwent a series of transformations since the 1960's. The shift from a multipolar world to one where US-led imperialism has become nearly unchallenged, the opening up to foreign corporate intervention into agriculture in India since the so-called Green Revolution of the 80's and, presently, the rise of fascist or authoritarian regimes across the world has also changed the questions confronted by toiling people and the demands of agrarian struggles. A series of struggles confronting monopolies and corporate finance in agriculture have surged again since the previous decade.



Anti-POSCO Struggle (2005-10)

The Anti-POSCO movement began after the Odisha state government signed an agreement with Korea's *Pohang Steel* (POSCO), proposing to establish a large industrial township in Jagatsinghpur district. Indigenous forestry and betel vine cultivation by adivasi populations were threatened by this move. Militant protests, combined with massive public demonstrations, forced the government to return the land written off to the multinational corporation.

Plachimada Coca-Cola Struggle (2002-04)

The Plachimada *Coca-Cola* Struggle refers to a series of protests to close the bottled beverages factory in the village of Plachimada, in Palakka, Kerala. Farmers noted that soon after the factory opened, their wells started to run dry and the water turned contaminated and toxic. Soon, waste from the factory was passed off to farmers in the area as fertiliser. Such irrational allotment of scarce water by submissive governments to international giants like *Coca-Cola* have been seen the world over. On April 22, 2002, the villagers, most of whom were Adivasis, began to protest in front of the factory by blocking its entrance. The multinational company had to bow out of Plachimada in March 2004.

Niyamgiri Struggle (mid 2000's - 2014)

Dongria Kondh adivasis residing in Niyamgiri, Odisha put up strong resistance against *Vedanta*, a UK-based company, which the Indian government had allowed to mine bauxite from the region. Investigations found that proper environmental studies were not done before licensing the company to extract bauxite. The residents of Niyamgiri put up brave resistance against the company and the government to protect their land, livelihood and ecology.

Singur-Nandigram-Lalgarh Struggles (2006-09)

A series of people's struggles against forced displacement from agricultural and forest land took place in West Bengal in the previous decade. In 2006, the West Bengal government allowed Tata Motors to set up its automobile manufacturing plant in Singur district, forcibly snatching fertile agricultural land and destroying thousands of rural livelihoods. Despite massive police and militia repression, Singur became the first major mass movement against corporate takeover the state had seen in decades, with state-wide political mobilizations in solidarity with the protesting peasants. Just after the victory of the Singur peasants, Nandigram also saw spirited resistance against the handover of land to the Indonesian chemical giant, the Salem Group, despite popular discontentment. Lalgarh was the third in this series of mass movements which exposed the imperialist design of selling people's land to big corporates, threatening the lives of indigenous people and the environment. The Lalgarh movement stalled the proposed Jindal steel plant for several years through active popular resistance. The mass movements in Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh were significant for their lasting political repercussions for the state.

Una Azadi Kooch (2016)

In July 2016, a RSS-backed cow vigilante group assaulted a Dalit family in Una, Gujarat because they were skinning a dead cow. Dalits who had traditionally been involved in scavenging responded by boycotting this form of work, as well as the cleaning of sewers. They sought to earn their livelihoods by demanding control over public land from the state government. The state government had formally allotted over 160,000 acres of land to Dalits three decades earlier, but the land was never actually handed over. The Una land struggle's significance lies in its new forms of organising and creative combination of the struggle for land and dignity for the oppressed castes in the heart of Gujarat, India's model neoliberal fascist state, even after the ascendance of the RSS-BJP regime at the centre.

Kisan Long March (2018)

Lakhs of farmers in Maharashtra marched to Mumbai, the finance capital of the country, to demand a special session of Parliament to discuss the agrarian crisis. It brought the kisan back into public imagination as a politically significant category. Though issues such as MSP and Loan Waivers were the immediate demands, it threw open several questions about the feasibility of a capitalist agriculture, marked by high input costs, ecologically disastrous chemical inputs, forced indebtedness and market-driven cropping patterns.

The Kisan Andolan is a historic chapter in the struggle against neoliberalism and fascism in the contemporary world.

We learn from our past, draw inspiration from our martyrs and chalk out the direction for the struggles ahead.

COLLECTIVE invites the active participation of India's student-youth in the struggles of toiling people.

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Towards a free society!



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