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Q5(a)

Explain briefly the role of Peasant Movements after 1857 and before independence

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 10 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- Periodise peasant movements between 1857 and 1947
- Show causes, forms, and relation to the national movement
- Name major struggles and leaders
- State their political meaning, not a list of dates only

Revision summary

After 1857 the colonial property and revenue order produced Deccan, Pabna, indigo, and Malabar-type agrarian unrest.

Gandhi's Champaran and Kheda campaigns nationalised peasant grievances without making Congress a class party of the poor.

Kisan Sabhas, Bardoli, Awadh, Tebhaga, and communist agrarian work pushed rent, occupancy, and landlordism onto the political agenda.

Guha's subaltern reading and **Ambedkar's** caste caution both warn against treating 'the peasantry' as one subject.

These movements expanded the national struggle and left land reform as a founding task of the republic.

Introduction

Between the Revolt of 1857 and Independence, Indian peasants were not a silent backdrop to elite nationalism. They fought rent, debt, plantation discipline, and the colonial state's revenue. Their movements were local and often caste- or region-specific, yet they repeatedly forced the Indian National Congress and the left to take the agrarian question seriously.

Body

After 1857: revenue, rent, and the new property order

1857 itself had a large peasant and taluqdar face in Awadh. After its defeat, British rule tightened the legal order of zamindari, ryotwari, and money-lending. Deccan riots of 1875 against Marwari and Gujarati sahuksars, the Pabna agrarian leagues of the 1870s in Bengal, and the Mappila outbreaks in Malabar showed a pattern: cash revenue, collapsing prices, and insecure occupancy. **Ranajit Guha** later read such episodes as peasant insurgency with its own political grammar, not as a mere appendix to Congress.

Indigo in 1859-60 and later plantation belts tied peasants to export agriculture. Punjab's canal colonies created a different proprietary peasantry.

Twentieth-century mass agrarian politics

Champaran (1917) and **Kheda (1918)** brought **Gandhi** into peasant India. The 1920s-30s saw Awadh's Kisan Sabha, **Sahajanand Saraswati**, Bardoli under **Patel**, and the 1921 Moplah rising. Tebhaga (1946-47) demanded a two-thirds crop share. Congress wanted a united front; the left wanted landlordism abolished. **Ambedkar** reminded that the peasant is caste-divided. The All India Kisan Sabha (1936) institutionalised the agrarian left. These struggles widened nationalism beyond the town and left land reform as an unfinished founding task.

Flow diagram

Peasants 1857-1947 -> Revenue rent debt
Peasants 1857-1947 -> National movement
National movement -> Gandhian satyagraha
National movement -> Kisan Sabha / left
Peasants 1857-1947 -> Land question at 1947

Conclusion

Peasant movements from 1857 to 1947 were struggles over revenue, rent, debt, and dignity. They entered the national movement on **Gandhi**'s terms and on the Kisan Sabha's terms, never fully on one script. Independence inherited both their energy and their unfinished demand for land.

Facts & figures

Champaran, 1917

Gandhi's first major Indian satyagraha against the tinkathia indigo system in Bihar.

All India Kisan Sabha, 1936

The principal all-India peasant organisation of the left-nationalist stream, with Sahajanand Saraswati among its leading figures.

Tebhaga, 1946-47

Bengal sharecroppers demanded a two-thirds share of the crop, a climax of late-colonial agrarian radicalism.