

Date: 22-09-2025

1. Discuss the major peasant movements during India's national movement. Analyze their nature, demands, and their contribution to the broader freedom struggle.

Peasant uprisings constituted a vital strand in India's anti-colonial narrative, reflecting the agrarian crisis engendered by exploitative colonial policies. These agitations evolved from isolated local disturbances into organized political expressions of rural resistance. Their trajectory mirrored the transition from economic assertion to political participation within the freedom movement.

Key Peasant Movements and Features

1. Indigo Revolt (1859–60, Bengal):

Sparked by coercive practices of European planters who compelled ryots to cultivate indigo under the ruinous **Tinkathia system**, this movement was marked by non-cooperation, social boycott, and mass refusal to sow indigo. It garnered support from zamindars and intelligentsia, culminating in the formation of the **Indigo Commission (1860)**, which upheld peasant grievances.

2. Deccan Riots (1875, Pune and Ahmednagar):

Rooted in widespread rural indebtedness, this movement saw peasants attack moneylenders, destroy bond papers, and assert their economic autonomy. Its culmination in the **Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act (1879)** reflected the state's reluctant recognition of agrarian unrest.

3. Champaran Satyagraha (1917, Bihar):

Led by **Mahatma Gandhi**, this was the first experiment with **Satyagraha**. It protested the oppressive **Tinkathia system**, where tenants had to grow indigo on a fixed portion of land. Gandhi's intervention secured the abolition of the system and highlighted the power of peaceful civil resistance.

4. Kheda Satyagraha (1918, Gujarat):

Amidst crop failure and famine, the colonial government insisted on full tax payment. Led by Gandhi and **Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel**, peasants refused to pay revenue, resulting in partial remission—a landmark in tax resistance.

5. Bardoli Movement (1928, Gujarat):

When revenue rates were hiked by 22% despite poor harvests, villagers launched a structured protest under Patel's leadership. The state was compelled to annul the hike, and Patel emerged as the "Sardar" of peasants.

6. Tebhaga Movement (1946–47, Bengal):

Sharecroppers demanded a **two-thirds share** of the produce instead of the existing one-third. Organized by the **Kisan Sabha**, the movement reflected a matured class-consciousness and directly influenced post-independence land reforms.

7. Telangana Rebellion (1946–51, Hyderabad):

A culmination of years of exploitation by landlords under the Nizam's rule, this movement, led by **Communist Party of India**, involved armed resistance and aimed to redistribute land to the tiller. Though suppressed militarily, it reshaped land tenure debates in independent India.

Nature and Demands of the Movements

- **Organic and Localized Origins:** Many began as spontaneous protests rooted in local economic injustices, later acquiring political dimensions.
- **Economic over Ideological Drivers:** Core issues included oppressive rent, exploitative land tenure, usurious debt, and forced cash crop cultivation. Political articulation followed the material concerns.
- **Leadership Transformation:** Initial absence of structured leadership evolved into movements guided by national leaders like Gandhi, Patel, and later, organized leftist formations.
- **Tactics and Strategies:** Methods ranged from non-violent resistance (Champaran, Kheda) to militant mobilizations (Telangana). Mass participation and civil disobedience became recurring themes.

Contribution to the National Movement

- **Rural Mobilization:** Peasant struggles integrated the agrarian majority into the nationalist movement, breaking the urban-elitist character of early Congress politics.
- **Highlighting Agrarian Distress:** These uprisings forced the Indian National Congress to address rural economic issues, integrating **land reforms** and **tax relief** into its larger platform.
- **Social Awakening:** These movements catalyzed **class consciousness** and **anti-feudal sentiments**, contributing to the ideological broadening of the freedom struggle.
- **Institutional Legacy:** The experiences and outcomes of these struggles informed the post-independence land reform agenda, tenancy laws, and rural development schemes.

Conclusion

Peasant movements were not mere footnotes in India's freedom saga; they were intrinsic to its evolution. By voicing the economic and social anguish of the rural masses, they transformed agrarian discontent into political assertion. Their legacy lies in the democratization of the freedom movement and the ideological emphasis on justice, equity, and land rights in independent India.

2. Explain how internal disunity among Indian princely states and local rulers enabled the success of British 'Divide and Rule' strategies. Assess its impact on the consolidation of British colonial power.

The success of British colonial rule in India did not solely stem from military superiority or administrative acumen. A significant enabler was the **fragmented political landscape** of India, marked by inter-dynastic rivalries, opportunistic alliances, and the absence of pan-Indian political cohesion. This internal disunity proved fertile ground for the British policy of '**Divide et Impera**' (**Divide and Rule**), which systematically weakened indigenous resistance and facilitated imperial expansion.

Genesis and Evolution of 'Divide and Rule'

Though the phrase is closely associated with British imperialism, its roots can be traced to French interventions in Indian politics, particularly during the **Carnatic succession crisis (1740s–50s)**. Learning from their French counterparts, the British East India Company increasingly adopted a **policy of calculated interference** in regional conflicts to further its commercial and territorial objectives.

Key episodes where internal divisions were exploited:

- **Battle of Plassey (1757):**
 - Robert Clive allied with **Mir Jafar**, a discontented noble, to overthrow Nawab **Siraj-ud-Daulah**.

- The betrayal facilitated British control over Bengal, marking the inception of colonial governance.
- **Battle of Buxar (1764):**
 - Although the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II, Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah of Awadh, and Mir Qasim formed a confederacy, their lack of cohesion and strategic unity led to defeat.
 - The battle cemented the Company's **Diwani rights** over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.
- **Third Battle of Panipat (1761):**
 - Indian regional powers, including the Nizam of Hyderabad and Shuja-ud-Daulah, allied with Afghan invader **Ahmad Shah Abdali** against the Marathas.
 - The Maratha loss weakened one of the few pan-Indian political forces, allowing British advance into the Deccan.

Colonial Exploitation of Rivalries (1770s–1800s)

British governors like **Warren Hastings** and **Lord Wellesley** institutionalized divide and rule through alliances, annexations, and diplomatic stratagems.

- **Nizam of Hyderabad vs. Mysore:**
 - In 1766 and 1780, Hyderabad allied with the British against **Haidar Ali** and **Tipu Sultan**. This weakened Mysore and removed a formidable military challenger.
- **Maratha Confederacy Infighting:**
 - **Peshwa-Raghunath Rao's** civil war (First Anglo-Maratha War, 1775–82) invited British mediation.
 - Later, **Holkar's victory over the Peshwa (1802)** led the latter to seek British assistance, resulting in the **Treaty of Bassein**, enabling direct British interference in Maratha affairs.
- **Subsidiary Alliance System:**
 - Initiated by Wellesley, this treaty-bound Indian rulers to host British forces and cede control over foreign affairs.
 - The **Nizam (1798, 1800)** and **Peshwa (1802)** capitulated, leading to progressive erosion of sovereignty.

Impact on Colonial Consolidation

- **Progressive Elimination of Opposition:**
 - By turning erstwhile allies against each other, the British avoided multi-front resistance and picked off rivals individually.
- **Control without Conquest:**
 - Through diplomacy and alliances, the British avoided costly wars while extracting economic and political concessions.
- **Manipulation of Fragmented Authority:**
 - The subcontinent's **560-odd princely states** were kept politically divided, with differential treatment ensuring loyalty through **subsidiary treaties, titles, and pensions**.
- **Suppression of Nationalist Unity:**
 - Even during the Revolt of 1857, regional rulers like the **Scindias of Gwalior** and the **Nizam of Hyderabad** remained loyal to the British, aiding suppression.

Conclusion

The British did not conquer a united India; they managed to **control a divided polity**. By converting regional rivalries into imperial advantages, they embedded themselves deeply into the Indian power structure. The **lack of a collective political identity** among Indian rulers and their **short-sighted alliances** with the colonial power delayed the emergence of unified resistance. The policy of divide and rule not only facilitated colonial expansion but also left a legacy of political fragmentation that echoed into post-independence statecraft.