

# Role of Peasant Organisations in Peasant Movement Since 1991

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Punjab has a strong tradition of organised peasant movements. Peasants have successfully fought many agitations and produced many mature leaders at various times. The peasant movement in Punjab has had strong links with the peasant movement at the national level on one hand and the democratic movement on the other. Historically the peasant movement developed as a part of the national independence struggle. In the canal colonies agitation of 1907, Punjab peasantry was mobilised by Sardar Ajit Singh, an uncle of Sardar Bhagat Singh. Again in 1924 Punjab peasants successfully fought an agitation against the water rate. The 'Kisan Sabha Movement' in 1930s mobilized the peasantry on the issue of water rate as well as land revenue. Many freedom fighters found it useful to work among peasants, mobilize them on their problems and integrate peasant struggles with the 'National Independence Movement'. Going by the numerical strength and militant tradition, diverse elements came to be active among the peasants, some working with a nationalist perspective and others with a narrow perspective of attaining political power.<sup>1</sup>

The second movement was the Ghadar Party Struggle which influenced the Indian Peasants strongly. The Sikhs of Punjab were the first to migrate to the North American countries like United States and Canada in the 19th Century. They financed and helped the formation of Ghadar party which gave a call to Indians abroad to return home and fight against British imperialism. The majority of those who did return, 8000 of them comprised Punjab's Sikhs. But the revolt of Ghadar remained failure. But in spite of its perceptible failure, the Ghadar Movement was to have a powerful impact on Punjab politics and especially on the peasant struggle. It established a tradition of militant and secular anti-imperialism, enriched in subsequent years by social radicalism, which was to continue to inspire subsequent generations. A number of peasant conferences were held in Lahore, Faislabad, Lyallpur and other places of West Punjab the most famous of them being 1938-39, long protest in Lahore when peasants from all over Punjab courted arrests for nine months before the assembly building.<sup>2</sup>

Punjab has seen several rounds of mass mobilization of farmers in the post-independence period. The first such mobilization was the PEPSU tenants' struggle during 1948-52 which resulted in the mass mobilization of tenants spread over mainly Patiala, Sangrur and Bathinda districts. The movement was built around the issue of land to the tillers (tenants) and it mobilized those who were converted into tenants from peasant owners through fraud and manipulation of records by Patiala rulers during pre-independence period when land settlements were made. The movement led to the abolition of the biswedari system in 1952 and tenants became landowners without payment of compensation to the landlords. This movement was led by Lal (Red) Communist Party of legendary comrade Teja Singh Swatantr.<sup>3</sup>

The second massive mobilization took place during 1958-59. This was known as Anti Betterment Levy agitation. This was in response to the imposition of a betterment levy by the Punjab government after the opening of the Bhakhra canal. This movement was led by Kisan Sabha of United CPI. This movement succeeded in the withdrawal of the betterment levy after a great struggle.<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of the Green Revolution, the political structure of Punjab underwent tremendous change. Rural population of Punjab had already started participating in political activities of the state after independence when the adult franchise was introduced in the country. Spread of education among the peasantry was another contributory factor. It created social awareness and enhanced greater participation in the political process. But a major change in the political structure of Punjab came after the coming of the Green Revolution. Farmers started dominating in the political scene. The politics of farmers no longer remained limited to village Panchayat elections. They were the dominate factor both at state and at all India level.

The next round of mass mobilization occurred during 1978-84 under the flag of the Baratiya Kisan Union. It was run by the rich farmers and landlords without the direct command of any established political party. This movement was for higher procurement prices of wheat and paddy and subsidized input prices of electricity, diesel, fertilizers, etc. This phase of movement received several concessions for the farmers after several agitations on the issue of prices of agricultural input and output.<sup>5</sup>

With the initiation of the 'Green Revolution' the political structures of Punjab undergo remarkable change. Rural population of Punjab had already started participating in political activities of the state after independence when the adult franchise was introduced in the country. Spread of education among the peasantry was another contributory factor. It created social awareness and enhanced greater participation in the political process. But a major change in the political structure of Punjab came after the coming of the Green Revolution.

### **Increased political Consciousness among the Peasantry:**

Under the new agricultural strategy, the increased production in agriculture led to a demand for investment and consumption. Consequently, the farmers became more dependent on the market and financial agencies for arranging the required loans. Political pressure began to play a great role incurring the required inputs such as diesel, chemical fertilizers and seeds of the new high yielding varieties. The farmers became more dependent not only in the procurement of inputs but also in the disposal of their production in the Green Revolution period. They had to sell a part of their produce to purchase agricultural inputs and other requirements of life. In the early phase of the Green Revolution, agriculture did become a paying business. But after sometimes prices of agricultural produce and inputs became a matter of serious concern to all the categories of the peasantry. It was not easy to get remunerative prices for the farm produce in the market until the farmers were politically conscious of their rights.<sup>6</sup>

The process of economic developments has in fact brought about a deep crisis in agriculture sector and as a result increased the vulnerable and insecure condition of peasants and agricultural labour in rural India.<sup>7</sup> New Economic Policy 1991 and the formation of WTO have brought structural transformations in the Indian agricultural sector.<sup>8</sup>

India signed the GATT treaty on the date of 15th April, 1994 at Marrakesh and is a founder member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which is entrusted with the implementation of various provisions of GATT. This commits the country to adjusting its domestic and international trade policies to meet WTO obligations. The new treaty has included for the first time an agreement on agriculture under which the members are required to adjust their policies and to undertake reforms in four areas, mainly

- i. Market access
- ii. Domestic support
- iii. Export competition/subsidy, and iv. Sanitary and Phyto-sanitary measures.<sup>9</sup>

New agricultural policy increased production in agriculture and led to a demand for investment and utilization. As a result, the Peasants turned out to be more dependent on the market and financial organizations for arranging the required credits. Political pressure started to assume an incredible part in bringing about the required inputs, for example, diesel, synthetic manures and seeds of the new high yielding varieties. The Peasants became more reliant not only in the procurement of inputs, but also at the removal of their production in the Green Revolution era. They had started to sell a big part of their agriculture produce to buy agricultural inputs and other requirements of their life. In the very early period of the Green Revolution, peasantry did become a disbursing business. But very soon the costs of agricultural produce and inputs became a very serious issue concern to all the categories of the peasantry. It was not easy to get remunerative prices for the agricultural produce in the market until the peasants were politically socialized and conscious of their rights.<sup>10</sup>

With the changed political conditions, a great strength of agricultural labour was a big attraction for the political parties. They were the most important vote banks of the political parties, who gave them a big support to win their votes. Some political parties have taken a deep interest in organizing the small agriculturists, and landless labourers. The emergence of different organizations such as the Punjab Khetibari Zamindar Union, Khet Mazdoor Sabha, the Kisan Sabha, Dehati Mazdoor Sabha and Zimindara Union is the proof of increasing political consciousness among the farmers and landless labour. These Kisan organizations have been continuing fights on behalf of small agriculturists, and landless labourers on different issues in different areas of the state.<sup>11</sup>

After the restoration of the democratic process in the state in 1992, the process revived. The BKU that was the main peasant's organisation had split in 1989 into two major factions; one was led by Bhupinder Singh Mann and Balbir Singh Rajewal and another by Ajmer Singh Lakhawal. This split apparently was triggered by nomination of Mann to Rajya Sabha by V.P. Singh government. The faction of BKU led by Ajmer Singh Lakhawal subsequently got involved in Akali Dal politics, causing a further split in 1994 when its third

faction, BKU (Ekta) led by Pishoura Singh Sidhupur, was born from BKU (Lakhowal). BKU (Ekta) was further split into two factions in 2003 due to ideological differences. One faction is led by Pishaura Singh Sidhupur and the other by Joginder Singh Ugrahan.<sup>12</sup>

In 2004, BKU (Krantikari) separated from BKU (Ekta) led by Sidhupur.<sup>13</sup> Another faction led by Ruldu Singh Mansa formed the Punjab Kisan Union in 2006 with different flag. The last split came in December 2006 when BKU (Ekta) was formed by Balkar Singh Dakaunda out of the BKU (Ekta) of Sidhupur. Similarly, in 2006, Rajewal and Mann factions formed their separate BKUs.<sup>14</sup>

One more BKU (Mianpur) faction is also working in district Ludhiana area. Thus, the original BKU at present is split into nine organizations where, with the exception of one, all are carrying the tag of BKU. In addition to these all BKU organizations, there are three Kisan Sabhas, one Kirti Kisan Union (KKU) and one Kisan Sangrash Committee (KSC). Thus, the farmers' movement is split into thirteen organizations all claiming to represent the farmers in the state. The split in the organization and fragmentation of the movement has generated a lot of betterment and rivalry among the different factions. Attempts to build a united front of these organizations to protect the farmers' interests have often been tried, but all of these could not be brought under one umbrella. This makes the movement physically and morally very weak.<sup>15</sup>

Three Groups of Kisan Sangharash Committee are working for peasants in Majha region. They all have some ideological differences from other Kisan Sangharash committee Goups.

The latter period is also synchronized with the process of opening up of Indian agriculture to global trading system under the WTO. The 1990s saw stagnating or declining agricultural productivity of all crops except wheat in the face of rising cost of production. The incomes of the small and marginal farmers have declined unevenly in the cotton belt of Sangrur, Mansa and Bathinda districts of Punjab. Faced with increasing debts, falling yields and increasing cost of production, the poor farmers' fate became miserable. Organized with the movement of farmers becoming weak, the farmers in distress have received little attention/protection from the state. This has given birth to the phenomenon of farmer suicides since mid-1980s. Though cases of suicides are largely concentrated in Sangrur, Mansa and Bathinda, yet stray cases of suicides of farmers are reported from all over the state. Several villagers under debt committed suicide, many died for want of medical treatment due to lack of money (income), nearly half the land of the village has been confiscated by the lenders of money. The average debt per farmer ranges from Rs 4-6 lakh.

In the absence of an organized farmers' movement, the farmers became alienated, frustrated and started committing suicides and the state government is well informed about it. The governments faced with financial crises have been a silent spectator to the whole tragedy. The farmers' organizations being weak, fragmented and mutually hostile are unable to intervene effectively.

There are signs of revival of the movement of farmers. This revival can be understood in terms of continuity as well as change. In terms of continuity, the existing organization of farmers are realizing and developing more awareness of their responsibilities and role. The process began towards the close of the 20th century, when some farmers' organizations joined hands to struggle for the timely intervention of FCI for market

clearance of paddy and did not allow any minister of Akali-BJP coalition in Punjab to visit rural areas for nearly a week during paddy procurement. After this the confidence of farmers' organizations improved considerably. Five farmers' organizations BKU (Ekta), the Kisan Sabha of CPI, Democratic Kisan Sabha of Pasla group separated from CPI (M), Kirti Kisan Union and Kisan Vikas Munch; these organizations have their areas of influence in different parts of Punjab. The agenda includes remunerative prices of agricultural produce, assured market clearance, compensation of Rs 15,000 per acre for crop failure, restoration of power for tubewells, etc. On these issues, other farmers' organizations (not part of this alliance) have been extending support to the struggles organized by these five organizations. There have been several rounds of mobilization of farmers for united action including railroad blockades. There is an effort by the farmers' organizations to extend the agenda of the farmers' movement for abrogation of the GATT agreements leading to the formation of the WTO.<sup>16</sup>

The experience of struggles and working of new economic policy has brought farmers' organizations ideologically closer to each other. Those who supported the formation of the WTO and welcomed liberalization and globalization of trade of agricultural products have been completely disillusioned, marginalized and their organizations have become operationally defunct. In fact, they are falling in line and also demand the continuation of procurement under FCI and maintenance of MSP system of wheat, paddy and other crops. There seems to be near unanimity on the farmers' issue. After many years, the initiative is again in the hands of different shades of Left parties and groups. There is clear understanding within the core (Group) of five organizations that the only way to stop the phenomenon of suicides in the rural areas is two channels the energy of rural people in the struggles of their own and pressure governments to reverse pro-capital and globalization policies.<sup>17</sup>

The perception regarding the objectives of the union leaders vary depending upon the level at which they operate. The leadership at the higher levels view union as an instrument of revolution and the grassroots leadership considering it as an agency which helps them in solving their problems. A problem really arises when parties with conflicting ideologies operate in the same area and fight to destroy each other to the neglect of common social and economic objectives.

### **Organization:**

Majority of the studies on the peasant upsurge ignore the organizational aspects of the movements; the organization which formulates programmes and take decisions, brings about the effective coordination between the units. Most of the studies give an impression that the farmers' movements were spontaneous and did not have any organized structure. Even though this statement is true, in such revolts, an informal organizational structure is essentially required to be formed for mobilizing the peasants, communicating messages and planning strategies and programmes. Till today different political parties have been mobilizing the farmers and launching their struggle. In order to have a mass based party the Congress started involving peasants in nationalist movements from the early 1920's. The Congress mobilized the peasants and linked some localized peasant movements. However the Congress discouraged any movement which sharpened the conflict between landlords and tenants. The reason was that it was the aim of Congress to form an alliance of

all classes of rural society for the purpose of conducting a united struggle to achieve Swarajya. The Congress did not allow the poor peasants to participate in direct action beyond a point so that they remained under the control of rich and middle peasants.<sup>18</sup>

Hanningham finds that the Bihar Congress managed to keep the nationalist struggle distinct from agrarian conflicts and to discourage agrarian reform movements. The Congress did not support Swami Vidyanand when he led the movement against Darbhanga Raj. The leaders of the Congress were of the opinion that the sectional struggles led by tenants and peasants against landlords were hindering the larger struggle which called for national unity. The Congress which was responsible for mobilizing peasants in mass movements was equally responsible for holding them down. T.K. Oommen observes that the strategy of class collaboration was a natural corollary and a logical necessity of a peasant movement which operated within the orbit of nationalist liberation movement.<sup>19</sup>

The role of leftist parties in farmers' movement is significant. The Telengana movement, the Tebhaga movement, the Naxalite movement, land grab movement and the agricultural struggle in Kerala reveal the predominant role of leftist parties in the mobilization of the peasants. The Telengana movement became extensive and continued for a long time because of the political intervention of the leftist parties. At the same time, many studies point out that like the Congress, the leftist parties also obstructed peasant struggles in many parts of the country. It is a proved fact that though the left parties organized agricultural labourers, they did not pay much attention to these for strategic reasons. According to them agricultural labourers do not have the potential to lead the revolutionary movement.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, the non-party groups organized agricultural labourers in different parts of the country and launched their struggles though these struggles remained localized and led to limited gains.<sup>21</sup> Peasant organisations from Punjab and Haryana held a 'Kisan Mukti Sammelan' at Bhakna Bhawan, in Chandigarh on February 4, 2018 under the banner of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) to discuss farm suicides and find out ways to help the peasants in distress. Convener of the AIKSCC, VM Singh demanded that the government should fulfill its promise of implementing the Swaminathan Commission's report which has been submitted to the government in 2006 and was to be implemented in 2007. Hannan Mollah, general secretary of All India Kisan Sabha said that the government has waived off loans of the corporate running into several lakh crores which affected only a few hundred rich people but it was not willing to waive small loans of the peasants. He disclosed that the 'Farmers Freedom from Debt Bill 2017' and 'The Farmers Right to Assured Remunerative Price for Agriculture Produce Bill 2017' which were passed by the Kisan Sansad in November 2017 would be debated in public and introduced in parliament as a private member's bill. Yogendra Yadav, president of Swaraj Abhiyan said that union finance minister; Mr. Arun Jaitley announced to raise the 'Minimum Support Price (MSP) of all crops to at least 1.5 times the production cost was nothing but a farce. He further said that the BJP government was trying to cheat farmers by shifting the goal posts.<sup>22</sup>

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