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The Role of Peasant and Labour Movements in the History of Bihar

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Abstract

Peasant and labour movements have played a significant role in shaping the social, economic, and political history of Bihar. These movements emerged as collective responses to exploitation, oppressive agrarian systems, unequal land distribution, low wages, poor working conditions, and social inequalities. The present study, entitled "The Role of Peasant and Labour Movements in the History of Bihar," examines the historical evolution, major characteristics, and contributions of peasant and labour movements in transforming Bihar's society and political landscape.

The study focuses on important agrarian struggles, including the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917, the Kisan Sabha movement, the Bakasht movement, and other peasant agitations that challenged zamindari exploitation, excessive rent, forced cultivation, and agricultural inequalities. It also highlights the development of organised labour movements, workers' participation in industrial activities, and their struggles for fair wages, better working conditions, social security, and labour rights. Special attention is given to the contributions of prominent leaders, social reformers, peasant organisations, and trade unions in mobilising rural and industrial workers.

Keywords: *Peasant Movements, Labour Movements, History of Bihar, Champaran Satyagraha, Kisan Sabha, Bakasht Movement, Agrarian Struggles, Zamindari System, Trade Union Movement, Agricultural Labourers, Workers' Rights, Land Reforms, Social Justice, Freedom Struggle, Rural Transformation.*

Introduction:-

The history of Bihar is not merely the history of kings, rulers, and political leaders. It is also the history of peasants, agricultural labourers, industrial workers, and ordinary people who struggled for their rights and dignity. Peasant and labour movements played a significant role in shaping Bihar's social, economic, and political development, particularly during British colonial rule and the decades following independence. Bihar was primarily an agricultural province under British rule. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 strengthened the position of zamindars and placed a heavy burden on cultivators. Peasants frequently faced high rents, illegal cesses, forced labour, indebtedness, and eviction. At the same time, plantation workers, railway employees, miners, and industrial labourers experienced poor working conditions and low wages. These hardships encouraged collective resistance. Peasant movements challenged exploitative agrarian structures, while labour movements demanded fair wages, better working conditions, and the right to organise. Together, these movements contributed to the growth of nationalism, democratic consciousness, social justice, and political mobilisation in Bihar.

(A) Historical Background of Peasant Exploitation :-

The Permanent Settlement introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 established a system of revenue collection through zamindars in Bengal, including territories that later formed much of Bihar. Under this system, zamindars were recognised as proprietors responsible for paying fixed land revenue to the colonial government. However, cultivators often faced insecurity and excessive rent demands. Major problems experienced by peasants included high rents and illegal collections forced labour and traditional obligations indebtedness to moneylenders insecurity of tenancy and fear of eviction exploitation by landlords and intermediaries and dependence on monsoon rainfall and agricultural uncertainty.

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The colonial economy also encouraged commercial agriculture. Certain crops, especially indigo, became symbols of coercion and exploitation. These conditions created the foundation for organised peasant resistance.

(B) The Indigo Revolt and Early Peasant Resistance :-

The Indigo Revolt of 1859-1860 was an important early example of peasant resistance in eastern India. Although its principal centres were in Bengal, the Indigo system and related agrarian exploitation also affected parts of Bihar. European planters often compelled cultivators to grow indigo under unfavourable contracts. Peasants received inadequate returns and faced pressure from planters and their agents. The revolt demonstrated that peasants could collectively resist oppressive agricultural arrangements. It inspired wider awareness of agrarian injustice and exposed the exploitative character of colonial commercial agriculture. The significance of this resistance lay in its methods, including collective refusal, petitions, protest, and public mobilisation. It helped establish a tradition of rural resistance that influenced subsequent agrarian struggles.

(C) The Champaran Satyagraha 1917 :-

The Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 was one of the most important events in Bihar's modern history. It marked Mahatma Gandhi's first major satyagraha in India. Indigo cultivators in Champaran suffered under the Tinkathia system, under which tenants were required to cultivate indigo on a portion of their land, traditionally three Kathas out of every twenty Kathas. The peasants experienced coercive contracts, exploitation, and various illegal demands. Raj kumar Shukla, a local cultivator, played a crucial role in persuading Gandhi to investigate their grievances. Gandhi arrived in Champaran and collected evidence from peasants. Despite official resistance, he continued his inquiry and mobilised public opinion. The colonial government eventually appointed an inquiry committee in which Gandhi participated. The subsequent Champaran Agrarian Act of 1918 helped secure relief for cultivators and addressed important grievances associated with indigo cultivation.

Importance of Champaran Satyagraha :-

(i) It brought peasant grievances into national politics.

(ii) It demonstrated the effectiveness of non-violent resistance.

(iii) It strengthened Gandhi's leadership in the Indian national movement.

(iv) It exposed the oppressive nature of colonial agrarian relations.

(v) It encouraged peasants to express their demands collectively.

Champaran established Bihar as an important centre of India's freedom struggle.

(D) The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha and Peasant Organisation :-

The establishment of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) in 1929 marked a turning point in Bihar's peasant movement. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati emerged as its most influential leader. Other important leaders included Jadunandan Sharma, Karyanand Sharma, Yamuna Karjee, and later several socialist and communist activists. The Kisan Sabha organised peasants around demands such as rent reduction, cancellation of arrears, protection of tenancy rights, relief from debt, and abolition of the zamindari system. The movement expanded during the 1930s, particularly because of the Great Depression. Falling agricultural prices and continuing revenue demands intensified rural distress. At its 1934 Gaya session, the Kisan Sabha highlighted rent reduction and cancellation of arrears. Its campaigns contributed to the development of organised agrarian politics across Bihar. The movement gradually developed a more radical outlook. Sahajanand increasingly criticised landlord domination and supported structural changes in agriculture. The formation of the Ali India Kisan Sabha in 1936 at Lucknow connected Bihar's peasant struggles with a wider national movement agrarian reform. The Kisan Sabha was important because it transformed scattered local grievances into a broader political programme.

(E) The Bakasht Movement, 1936-1938 :-

The Bakasht movement was among the most significant agrarian struggles in Bihar during the 1930s. The term Bakasht referred to land cultivated or claimed as the landlord's private holding. In several disputes, landlords took over tenants cultivated lands, frequently following rent arrears or other conflicts. The Barahiya Taal region of Munger district became an important centre of resistance. The movement also spread to places such as Gaya, Darbhanga, Patna and other districts. Peasants organised meetings, demonstrations and satyagraha campaigns to defend their cultivation rights. They resisted eviction and demanded the restoration of their lands. The movement achieved partial successes in protecting tenancy rights and securing settlements Nevertheless, it did not eliminate the fundamental inequalities of the agrarian system. The Bakasht struggle demonstrated that land ownership and tenancy were central questions in Bihar's social history. It also strengthened the influence of socialist and communist ideas in rural politics and encouraged

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the participation of peasants from different social backgrounds.

(F) The Role of Agricultural Labourers :-

Agricultural labourers occupied a particularly disadvantaged position in Bihar's rural society. Unlike tenant farmers, many labourers possessed no land or secure tenancy rights. They depended upon landlords and cultivators for employment and wages. Their problems included low remuneration, irregular employment, caste discrimination, social exclusion and in some areas forms of bonded or forced labour. Peasant organisations sometimes included agricultural labourers, but their interests were not always identical to those of tenant farmers and prosperous peasants. The demand for rent reduction, for example benefited tenants directly, while landless labourers needed higher wages, employment security, land rights and social equality. This difference exposed an important limitation of the early peasant movement the movement's broad agricultural identity did not always overcome differences of class and caste. Nevertheless, agrarian mobilisation created a political environment in which the demands of landless workers gradually became more prominent.

(G) The Growth of the Labour Movement in Bihar :-

The labour movement developed alongside industrialisation, mining, transport and plantation-related economic activities. Important industrial centres included Jharia, Dhanbad, Jamalpur, Patna and industrial areas of northern and southern Bihar including regions now located in Jharkhand. Coal mining expanded considerably in the Jharia coal field. Railway workshops, engineering establishments, sugar factories and other industries also employed growing numbers of workers. Workers frequently faced low wages and insecure employment long working hours dangerous working environments, especially in mines poor housing and sanitation limited medical and social protection and harsh treatment by employers and supervisors. These conditions encouraged the emergence of worker's associations, trade unions, strikes and collective bargaining. Labour organisation was influenced by the growth of trade unionism in India, socialist ideas, nationalist politics and the wider international workers movement. The formation of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920 provided and important national platform for workers demands. In Bihar labour activism developed through industrial disputes and organised campaigns, although its strength varied across industries and regions.

(H) Industrial Workers and Trade Union Activities :-

Coal miners formed an important section of Bihar's industrial working class. The Jharia coal field and neighbouring mining areas experienced problems relating to wages, safety, housing and employment conditions. Railway workers and industrial employees also contributed to the growth of collective labour action. Strikes became an important method for demanding better wages, shorter working hours, improved working conditions and recognition of workers organisations. Trade Unions helped workers understand that individual complaints could be transformed into collective demands. The labour movement also encouraged working-class solidarity. Workers belonging to different linguistic, regional and caste backgrounds sometimes united around common economic grievances. However, labour unity was not automatic. Differences in occupation, political ideology, employment status and access to union leadership sometimes weakened collective action. Employers and colonial authorities frequently viewed strikes and union organisation as threats to economic stability and administrative authority. Despite these challenges, workers organisations gradually established labour rights as a significant public issue.

(I) Cooperation Between Peasants and Workers :-

One notable development in Bihar's political history was the occasional cooperation between peasant and labour movements. Both groups experienced exploitation, economic insecurity and unequal power relations, although their immediate demands differed. An important example was the joint peasant-worker action associated with the Dalmia Sugar Factory at Bihta in 1938-39. The episode illustrated how agrarian and industrial grievances could intersect. The Kisan Sabha's activities were not confined to rent and land disputes. Its political approach increasingly recognised the importance of workers and agricultural labourers. Such cooperation demonstrated the possibility of a broader movement against economic exploitation. The peasant-worker connection also encouraged socialist and left-wing political groups to mobilise different sections of society. Nevertheless, peasant and industrial labour movements did not merge into a single unified organisation. Their cooperation remained uneven and depended upon local circumstances, leadership and political objectives.

(J) Contribution to the Indian National Movement :-

Peasant and labour movements made important contributions to India's struggle for independence. The Champaran Satyagraha demonstrated that

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rural grievances could become a national political issue. Subsequent peasant mobilisation brought large sections of the rural population into organised politics. The Kisan Sabha challenged colonial economic policies and the social power of landlords. Workers strikes and union campaigns questioned exploitative industrial relations. These movements contributed to mass political participation, national consciousness, political education, organisational development and social reform. Meetings, demonstrations, publications and campaigns encouraged awareness of rights. Peasant associations and trade unions created structures for collective action. Movements also challenged traditional hierarchies and economic inequalities. However, not every labour or peasant protest was primarily nationalist. Many were concerned with immediate wages, rents, working conditions and land rights. Their historical importance lies partly in the way economic struggles expanded the scope of political participation.

(K) Peasant and Labour Movements After Independence :-

Independence in 1947 created new opportunities for agrarian and labour reforms. The abolition of zamindari became a major objective of the Bihar government. The Bihar Land Reforms Act 1950 was an important legislative measure intended to abolish intermediary interests in land. It represented a significant change in the agrarian structure. The historical pressure created by peasant movements contributed to the political environment in which land reforms became possible. However, the benefits of reform were uneven. Land concentration, tenancy insecurity, landlessness and rural poverty continued in many areas. Some influential cultivators benefited more than the poorest peasants and agricultural labourers. Implementation difficulties, litigation and social inequalities limited the transformative impact of land reform. Labour legislation and trade union organisation also expanded after independence. Workers gained greater opportunities for collective bargaining and legal protection, although industrial employment remained insecure for many.

(L) Later Agrarian Struggles and Social Justice :-

From the late 1960 onward, Bihar witnessed new forms of agrarian conflict. These movements increasingly highlighted land redistribution, minimum wages, caste oppression and the rights of landless labourers. In parts of central and southern Bihar, radical peasant organisations mobilised disadvantaged rural communities. Bhojpur became a significant centre of agrarian resistance. These struggles revealed the limitations of earlier reforms and the continuing inequalities of rural society. The later movements also demonstrated that the history of peasant resistance was not completed with independence. Questions of land ownership, social dignity, wages and political representation remained central to Bihar's development. Similarly, workers in mines, factories, transport and other sectors continued to demand employment security, safety, fair remuneration and social protection. Thus, the historical legacy of peasant and labour movements continued to influence democratic politics and social reform.

(M) Historical Significance and Limitations :-

The important of these movements can be understood through several dimensions.

Political significance: They broadened in politics and strengthened popular mobilisation.

Social significance: They questioned landlord domination, caste discrimination and unequal social relationships.

Organisational significance: They contributed to the development of peasant associations, trade unions and political networks.

Despite these achievements, the movements also faced considerable limitations. Leadership was sometimes concentrated among influential social groups. Women participated in rural and political struggles, but their contributions were not always adequately represented in formal leadership. Landless labourers did not consistently receive the same attention as tenant farmers. Political divisions between Congress, socialist, communist and other organisations sometimes weakened unity. Colonial repression and landlord resistance also obstructed mobilisation. A balanced historical assessment must recognise both the achievements and the limitations of these struggles.

Conclusion:-

Peasant and labour movements occupy a central place in the history of Bihar. They emerged from the exploitation of cultivators, agricultural labourers, miners, factory workers and other economically disadvantaged groups. From early agrarian resistance and the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 to the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha. The Bakasht movement, industrial labour struggles, and later movements for land rights and social justice, these struggles transformed Bihar's political and social landscape. The Champaran movement brought peasant grievance into the national movement, while Swami Sahajanand Saraswati and the Kisan Sabha provided organised leadership to agrarian struggles. Workers organisations and trade unions similarly helped establish labour rights as an important political and economic concern. Although these movements did not eliminate poverty, inequality and exploitation, they helped

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weaken the legitimacy of oppressive institutions and contributed to the development of democratic consciousness. Ultimately, the history of Bihar's peasant and labour movements is the history of ordinary people seeking justice, dignity, equality and freedom. Their struggles remain essential to understanding modern Bihar and the wider history of India.

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Conflicts of interest
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