



PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN THE UNITED PROVINCES (UTTAR PRADESH) DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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Abstract

This paper examines the major peasant movements of the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh) during the colonial period, with particular attention to the agrarian unrest that erupted in the Awadh (Oudh) region between 1918 and 1922 and its later reconfiguration under the organised Kisan Sabha movement of the 1930s. It traces the structural roots of peasant grievance in the taluqdari settlement restored to Awadh's landlords after 1858, the practices of illegal exaction, forced labour (begar), high rents, renewal fees (nazrana), and summary eviction (bedakhali) that characterised landlord-tenant relations, and the catalytic effect of wartime inflation after 1914. The paper discusses the United Provinces Kisan Sabha founded in 1918, the Oudh/Awadh Kisan Sabha established in October 1920 under Baba Ramchandra with the involvement of Jawaharlal Nehru, the movement's entanglement with and eventual divergence from Congress-led Non-Cooperation, and the more radical Eka (Unity) movement of 1921–22 in the northern districts. It further considers the subsequent institutionalisation of peasant politics through the All India Kisan Sabha (1936) and the Congress Socialist Party, culminating in the United Provinces Tenancy Act of 1939. The paper argues that peasant mobilisation in the United Provinces developed a distinctive dynamic, oscillating between alignment with, and autonomy from, the mainstream nationalist movement, driven fundamentally by agrarian grievances that predated and would outlast the immediate goals of Congress politics.

Keywords: peasant movements; United Provinces; Awadh; Kisan Sabha; Baba Ramchandra; Eka movement; taluqdars; begar; colonial agrarian relations; Uttar Pradesh; Non-Cooperation Movement

1. Introduction

The United Provinces of Agra and Oudh occupied a distinctive place in the agrarian history of colonial India. Unlike Bengal, where the Permanent Settlement of 1793 had fixed revenue obligations and produced a rentier zamindari class, and unlike Bombay and Madras, where variants of the ryotwari system placed the state in direct relation with cultivators, the United Provinces combined a mahalwari revenue settlement in much of its territory with, in the former kingdom of Awadh, an unusually powerful class of taluqdars whose landed authority had been deliberately restored and reinforced by the colonial state after the Revolt of 1857 as a matter of political expediency. This settlement produced, by the early twentieth century, an agrarian order marked by acute tenant insecurity, heavy and often illegal exaction, and a widening gap between rising agricultural prices and the share of that value retained by the cultivator. This paper surveys the resulting peasant movements from their late-nineteenth-century antecedents through the major mobilisations of 1918–22 and the subsequent Kisan Sabha politics of the 1930s, up to the reformist legislation of 1939.

2. The Agrarian Structure of Colonial Awadh

Following the annexation of Awadh in 1856 and the widespread taluqdar participation in the 1857 Revolt, the colonial government, anxious to secure a loyal landed intermediary class, restored and legally entrenched the taluqdars' proprietary rights over vast estates through the Oudh Talukdars Act and related settlements, in exchange for their political loyalty. This arrangement left the actual cultivators — occupancy and, more precariously, non-occupancy tenants — subject to the taluqdars' extensive discretionary powers over rent enhancement, renewal fees (*nazrana*) exacted at each transfer or renewal of tenancy, forced and unpaid labour obligations (variously termed *begar* and *hari*), and summary eviction (*bedakhali*) from land, often without effective legal recourse. These structural grievances were compounded after 1914 by the inflationary pressures of the First World War, which raised the cost of living sharply while tenant incomes remained suppressed by rent and exaction, creating the immediate conditions for organised unrest by the war's end.

3. Early Organisation: The United Provinces Kisan Sabha, 1918

Organised peasant politics in the province began with the founding of the United Provinces Kisan Sabha (UPKS) in Lucknow in February 1918, led by the Home Rule–influenced lawyer and activist Gauri Shankar Mishra together with Indra Narayan Dwivedi, and supported by the

prominent Congress leader Madan Mohan Malaviya. The UPKS sought to articulate peasant grievances over high rents, illegal levies, and forced labour within a broadly constitutional and reformist framework, and expanded rapidly, claiming some 450 branches across the province by June 1919. This early phase established peasant organisation as a recognised, if still moderate, strand within provincial nationalist politics, laying institutional groundwork for the more radical mobilisation that followed in Awadh from 1920.

4. Baba Ramchandra and the Oudh Kisan Sabha, 1920–21

The movement's most consequential phase began with the arrival in Awadh of Baba Ramchandra, a wandering preacher and former indentured labourer in Fiji, who from 1920 began organising peasants in Pratapgarh district around grievances of rent, eviction, and forced labour, framing his appeal partly through devotional and moral idioms accessible to a largely illiterate peasantry. His organisational success — with reports of hundreds of village panchayats and, at points, over 100,000 registered peasants in Pratapgarh alone — drew the attention of the wider nationalist movement. In June 1920, at Ramchandra's urging, Jawaharlal Nehru began touring Awadh villages, an experience that deepened Nehru's own engagement with agrarian questions and connected the peasant movement, for a time, closely with the Indian National Congress. Differences among nationalist leaders over how directly to associate the Congress organisation with peasant militancy led, in October 1920, to the formation of the Oudh (Awadh) Kisan Sabha under Ramchandra, Nehru, and associates including Jhinguri Singh, Durgapal Singh, Kedar Nath, and Mata Badal Koeri, who separately organised the Rae Bareli Kisan Sabha in the same month. The Awadh Kisan Sabha's manifesto called on peasants to refuse to cultivate bedakhali land taken from evicted tenants, to withhold hari and begar, and to resolve disputes through peasant-run panchayats rather than colonial courts or landlord authority — demands that combined direct economic resistance with an assertion of peasant self-governance. Through late 1920 the movement grew rapidly, culminating in a large Awadh Kisan Congress at Ayodhya in December 1920. From January 1921, however, the character of mobilisation shifted: mass meetings and panchayat organisation increasingly gave way to the looting of bazaars, granaries, and landlord houses, and to direct clashes with police, developments that alarmed the Congress leadership, which was simultaneously attempting to sustain the disciplined, non-violent Non-Cooperation Movement launched nationally in 1920. The colonial government responded with repression and the Awadh Rent (Amendment) Act of 1921, which offered limited concessions on rent and tenancy

security while reasserting order, and the movement's momentum declined through the course of 1921 amid arrests, including that of Ramchandra himself, and the winding down of Non-Cooperation after the Chauri Chaura incident in February 1922.

5. The Eka (Unity) Movement, 1921–22

A related but organisationally distinct and more radical mobilisation, the Eka (Unity) Movement, emerged in the northern United Provinces districts of Hardoi, Bahraich, and Sitapur from late 1921, drawing initial impetus from local Congress and Khilafat activists but developing its own leadership and demands. Eka peasants, inspired by the wider Non-Cooperation and Khilafat agitation, added an explicitly nationalist dimension to agrarian demands, pledging support for self-rule (swaraj), the adoption of swadeshi, and abstention from crimes that might invite police repression, alongside core Awadh Kisan Sabha grievances. A distinctive feature of the Eka movement was the prominent role played by peasant leaders from lower and formerly untouchable castes, most notably Madari Pasi, who organised extensively in the Hardoi region despite intense police pursuit before his eventual capture. Like the Awadh movement, Eka was suppressed through a combination of concession and coercion by early 1922, but it left an important legacy in demonstrating the capacity of peasant mobilisation to develop leadership and organisational forms substantially independent of formal Congress control.

6. Peasant Politics and the Congress: Tension and Divergence

The Awadh and Eka movements together illustrate a recurring tension in the relationship between peasant agrarian militancy and the Congress-led nationalist movement during this period. While Congress and Khilafat activists provided important early impetus and figures such as Nehru lent the movement visibility and legitimacy, the Congress leadership's commitment to non-violent discipline, and its reluctance to alienate propertied and landlord constituencies whose support it also sought, placed real limits on how far it was willing to associate itself with direct agrarian confrontation. Gandhi's suspension of Non-Cooperation after Chauri Chaura in February 1922 removed the movement's principal national umbrella just as agrarian unrest in the United Provinces was at its most intense, contributing to the movement's decline through demoralisation as much as through direct repression.

7. Reorganisation and Radicalisation in the 1930s

Peasant politics in the United Provinces re-emerged on a more organised and ideologically defined basis during the 1930s, paralleling the rise of left-wing currents within and around the Congress.

The formation of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 and the founding of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) in 1936, under the presidency of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, provided a national framework within which United Provinces kisan sabhas re-organised on more explicitly class-based lines, linking local agrarian demands to a broader socialist critique of both landlordism and colonial rule. This period saw renewed agitation over rent reduction, debt relief, and tenancy security, conducted in closer, if still often uneasy, coordination with the Congress, which by the mid-1930s held provincial office in the United Provinces following the elections of 1937 under the Government of India Act of 1935.

8. Legislative Outcomes: The United Provinces Tenancy Act, 1939

The culmination of this second wave of organised peasant pressure was the United Provinces Tenancy Act of 1939, enacted by the Congress provincial ministry under Premier Govind Ballabh Pant. The Act consolidated and extended tenant protections developed piecemeal since the 1921 amendments, restricting landlords' powers of ejectment, regulating rent enhancement, and strengthening occupancy rights for a wider category of tenants, representing the most substantial legislative concession to the province's peasant movement achieved under colonial rule, short of the far more sweeping zamindari abolition that would follow only after Independence, under the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act of 1950–51.

9. Conclusion

Peasant movements in the United Provinces during the colonial period developed through two principal waves — the Awadh and Eka mobilisations of 1918–22, driven by immediate grievances over rent, forced labour, and eviction under an entrenched taluqdari order, and the more ideologically organised Kisan Sabha politics of the 1930s, conducted in closer alliance with Congress socialism and culminating in the Tenancy Act of 1939. Across both phases, the movement's relationship to the wider nationalist struggle was one of productive but unstable alliance: peasant grievance supplied energy and numbers that nationalist leaders such as Nehru readily drew upon, while the Congress's broader political strategy repeatedly constrained how far it was prepared to follow peasant militancy toward direct confrontation with landlord authority. The United Provinces experience thus offers a clear case study in the more general historiographical debate over whether agrarian unrest in colonial India is best understood as an integral part of the nationalist movement or as an autonomous struggle with its own distinct social

logic and leadership, most visibly embodied in figures such as Baba Ramchandra and Madari Pasi, who emerged from, and remained rooted in, the peasantry itself.

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