

Genesis of Agrarian Unrest in Karnataka: An Analysis of Field Data

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The state of Karnataka which was otherwise unknown for visible agrarian unrest witnessed unprecedented peasant movements during 1980's. All these peasant movements were spearheaded by the Karnataka Rajya Raith Sangha (KRRS). In fact, the peasant movements in Karnataka took a new turn with the emergence of this Rathai Sangha.

In Dharwad taluk, the sample area of the study, most of the villages have identified themselves with Sangha by putting up green boards and small green flags. The green towels and turbans have become commonly noticeable and most popular in villages. The peasants have participated in large numbers in most of the agitations led by the KRRS. This taluka which constituted the rural assembly constituency elected KRRS candidates for legislative assembly twice. Thus a surprising amount of consciousness among the peasants was noticed particularly in this taluka.

Aims and Objectives

There are many theories which explain the genesis of social movements. The most important among them are the strain theory and the theory of relative deprivation. The strain theory was put forth by Smelser treats the structural strain as an important cause of social movement. The widespread dissatisfaction in a society is the result of structural strain within the system itself. According to him the structural strain may arise at different levels like norms, values, mobilization and situational facilities. On the contrary, the relative deprivation theory contends that the most likely groups to launch a social movement is not the most disadvantaged sections of the society but those who are rather better off, but still not satisfied. This theory argues that people become discontented not because of the absolute conditions of their situation but because they compare their actual condition with what they believe it could and should be. (Rao M.S.A, 1979:46). In this paper an attempt is made to understand the roots and genesis of peasant movements in the light of these theories.

The main thrust of this paper is to understand the evident agrarian discontent in the study area and to examine the role of the KRRS in triggering off this discontent into a movement. While analyzing the roots of the peasant

movements the paper attempts to find an answer to the question as to why the simmering discontent was not transformed into a movement.

Methodology

The sample study area chosen was the Dharwad taluka which witnessed the growth of an unprecedented consciousness among the peasants with the rise of KRRS. The study has been based on the formal interviews with 360 peasants belonging to 12 villages of Dharwad taluka. In each village 30 samples belonging to different classes, castes, religions, landholdings etc. were taken for the purpose of study. These samples were drawn on the basis of simple random techniques. In the selection of villages for the purpose of geographical stratification, the Dharwad taluka was sub-divided into four zones by drawing a vertical and horizontal line intersecting approximately at the centre of the Dharwad taluka. On the basis of simple random method four clusters consisting of three villages each were selected from each one of these zones.

Agrarian Discontent

Here an attempt is made to understand as to whether the discontent existed among the peasants even quite before the emergence of KRRS in 1980 and to trace the cause of discontent. The data clearly indicates the prevalence of discontent among the peasants for a quite long time before it took the form of a movement. The peasants were facing varied and countless agricultural problems. The problems of the peasants are viewed in a wider context as both the agricultural and other related problems of the peasants are studied. To ascertain the problems of the peasants a number of statements and questions were included in the interview schedule and answers were sought to them by the peasants.

Table-1. Opinion of the respondents about seeds and Pesticides

Sr. No.	Do you get seeds and pesticides	Yes %	No %	Not applicable %	Total percent
1.	Of good Quality	8.8	43.1	28.1	100.00
2.	Required quantity	53.8	18.1	28.1	100.00
3.	At right time	50.5	21.4	28.1	100.00
4.	At fixed price	29.4	42.5	28.1	100.00

The total analysis of data suggests that most of the peasants got seeds and pesticides at required time and of sufficient quantity but did not get good quality seeds and pesticides and at fixed price. They opined that the seeds supplied both by the government and private agencies were spurious and of low quality. Same type of complaint was heard about the pesticides. They felt that seeds and pesticides were not only of poor quality but were also of prohibitive price. The respondents (42.8%) had incurred loss between Rs. 1000 to Rs. 5000 due to bad quality of seeds and pesticides.

The views of the respondents regarding chemical fertilizers, another important input of agriculture, were also ascertained.

Table-2. Opinion of the respondents regarding fertilizer

Sr. No.	Fertilizer of good quality, required quantity, fixed rate received	Frequency	Percent
1.	Yes	87	24.2
2.	No	169	46.9
3.	Do not use	8	2.2
4.	Not applicable	96	26.7
	Total	360	100.00

Table no. 2 reveals that majority of the peasants did not get fertilizer of good quality, required quantity and at fixed price. It is interesting to know that 2.2 per cent of the respondents did not use at all chemical fertilizer. They preferred compost fertilizer than the chemical fertilizer. The peasants are facing many problems with regard to fertilizer.

Table-3. Problems with regard to fertilizer

Sr. No	Problems	Frequency	Percent
1.	No shops in villages	42	11.7
2.	Variation in price	18	5.0
3.	Prohibitive price	44	12.2
4.	Do not get required quantity & required fertilizer at required time	26	7.2
5.	Adulteration	22	6.1
6.	No effects on crops	15	4.2
7.	Less weight	2	0.6
8.	Do not use fertilizer	8	2.2
9.	Do not have any problem	87	24.2
10.	Not applicable	96	26.7
	Total	360	100.00

The number of fertilizer shops in rural areas was very meager compared to number of villages. The fertilizer supplied through co-operative societies was either insufficient or did not get on time. The peasants questioned the rationale behind establishing fertilizer shops in cities and towns. They stated that agricultural inputs should be available in the villages itself.

The prohibitive price had put the peasants in difficulty. It should be recalled that the government in 1992 withdrew the subsidy given to the fertilizer and raised the prices more or less ranging from Rs. 25 to Rs. 35 per bag. Even before the increase in prices the peasants particularly, marginal, small and medium had found the earlier prices beyond their purchasing capacity. The peasants were put in critical situation as they could neither stop the use of fertilizer nor could afford to buy it.

To elicit the information on agricultural problems of the peasants not

only relevant questions were asked but also discussion and observation methods were used.

Table-4. Agriculture Problems of the Peasants

Sr. No.	Problems	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Lack of irrigation & heavy dependence on monsoon	36	10.0
2.	No remunerative price	62	17.2
3.	No approach roads to fields	15	4.2
4.	Costly agricultural inputs	46	12.8
5.	Labour problem	15	4.2
6.	Problem of agricultural tools and implements	17	4.7
7.	Market problems	45	12.5
8.	Govt. Provisional facilities do not reach	28	7.7
9.	Not applicable	96	26.7
	Total	360	100.00

Non – remunerative prices for agricultural products seemed to be an important problem of cultivation as an occupational activity. There was no fixed and dependable price for any agricultural product. The prices varied frequently beyond the imagination of common man. The respondents were very critical about the fact every industrial commodity has fixed price and prices of these commodities normally have a tendency to go upward and very rarely come down. They stated that in the market they have to blindly pay the price written on the commodity without any bargain. If so, why agricultural commodities should not have remunerative fixed prices, they questioned. The violent revolt of the peasants over the sudden slump in groundnut prices in the Tumkur district of Karnataka was a clear index of the grave discontent existing among the peasants over the agricultural prices.

Costly agricultural inputs appeared to be another deep concern of the peasants. The agricultural inputs were too costly for them to use for the better agricultural production. They stated that they could buy agricultural inputs only by borrowing loan from the financial institutions and money lenders. The costly agricultural inputs had affected the agricultural produce adversely since they could not afford to use all the necessary agricultural inputs. Thus, the peasants were put to loss in two ways as they had to buy agricultural inputs at prohibitive prices and sell their produce at non-remunerative prices.

The malpractices and ill functioning of the agricultural market was yet another significant cause of discontent among the peasants. A sizable number of respondents stated that they were the victims of exploitation of merchants. Nonpayment of money due for peasants in one installment, heavy interest on advances taken by the peasants' illegal collection of commission from the peasants, malpractices in weighing the commodities were some of the important

different forms in which farmers were exploited by the merchants.

Lack of irrigation facilities and uncertain monsoon were considered by the peasants as the root cause for all their miseries. In case of both scanty and heavy rains, the peasants will not only be devoid of income from land but also all the investment made in the form of agricultural inputs, preparation of land etc. goes waste. Thus it makes the peasants economically poor even more.

The inadequate agricultural tools and implements, the scarcity of agricultural labourers, lack of storage facilities etc. were some other agricultural problems as stated by the peasants.

As the problems of the landless agricultural labourers differ from the land owning peasant an effort was made to ascertain their problems.

Table-5. Problems of agricultural labourers

Sr. No.	Problems	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Low Wages	46	12.8
2.	Exploitation by land owners	9	2.5
3.	No work during rainy and summer	12	3.3
4.	season	12	3.3
5.	Financial Problem	13	3.6
6.	Housing Problems	4	1.1
7.	Old age Problems	264	73.4
	Not applicable		
	Total	360	100

Low wages were the major problems of the agricultural labourers. The wages that they got were too low to meet the basic necessities of life. The low wages and lack of income from other sources had made them to lead a hand to mouth life. The rich farmers exploited them not only by giving fewer wage but also by extracting more work. The finance, the old age and housing are the other important problems of the agricultural labourers.

Table-6. Loan taken by the peasants

Sr. No.	Loan taken	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Yes	276	76.7
2.	No	84	23.3
	Total	360	100.00

The indebtedness was widespread in the study area. A large number of peasants had taken loan in order to overcome their economic problems. The proportion of those who had taken loan was more than those who had not done so.

Table-7. Purpose for loan borrowed

Sr. No.	Purpose	Frequency	Percentage
1.	For agriculture	120	33.3
2.	For marriage and other	85	23.7
3.	ceremonies	71	19.7

4.	For food and clothes Not taken loan	84	23.3
	Total	360	100.00

The peasants had taken loan for various purposes. The most important among them was the agriculture. The peasants had taken loan to buy agricultural tools and implements, pesticides, fertilizer, seeds and to dig wells and the like. However, the peasants had also borrowed loan for the marriage of the family members and to meet expenses of necessities of life. They had taken loan from both institutional and non-institutional agencies.

The peasants spoke of a number of problems which they face in getting loan particularly from financial institutions.

Table-8. Problems faced in getting loan

Sr. No.	Problems	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Do not get loan at required time, require amount and at one installment	32	8.9
2.	Procedure too complex	102	28.3
3.	Bank officials non-co-operative and	34	9.4
4.	corrupt	9	2.5
5.	No Bank in villages	11	3.1
6.	Influence is required	10	2.8
7.	Poor do not get loan	32	8.9
8.	Never gone to any financial institution to seek loan	130	36.1
	Do not have any problem		
	Total	360	100.00

The complex procedure seemed to be the greatest hindrance in getting loan. The documents to be produced were too many and the peasants had to spend a lot of money, time and energy in collecting them. The non-co-operative and corrupt practice of bank officials was another major difficulty in getting loan.

The peasants were very critical about the growth of only towns and cities. The peasants were extremely unhappy about the concentration of all facilities in cities and towns and about the lack of even basic necessities in villages.

Table-9. Opinion of the respondents about whether Urban India is biased towards Rural India

Sr. No.	Urban India is biased towards rural India	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Yes	240	66.6
2.	No	119	33.1
3.	Do not know	1	0.3
	Total	360	100.00

Two-thirds of the respondents have agreed with the statement that urban India was biased towards rural India. They have given many reasons for this.

Table-10. Reasons

Sr. No.	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Step motherly treatment to villages	55	15.3
2.	No change & development in villages	61	16.9
3.	More money spent on cities & towns	49	13.6
4.	Dearth of necessities of life	54	15.0
5.	Govt. has done nothing for poor in villages	21	5.8
6.	Do not know	1	0.3
7.	Do not agree with the statement	119	33.1
	Total	360	100.00

The peasants felt that the cities and towns were growing at the cost of villages. They were of the opinion that no drastic and significant change had taken place in the socio-economic structure of the villages. They brought out the scarcity of basic necessities like hospitals, schools, roads, drinking water, and drainage and so on. They opined that there was not only lack of all these basic facilities but the existing once were in a bad condition.

Thus, the total analysis of data suggests that there was an element of discontentment among the peasants since quite long time but this discontentment was not transformed into a movement probably, due to lack of leadership and organization. The simmering discontent was silently tolerated due to the prevalence of widespread illiteracy and resultant ignorance probably, the unhappy peasants merely brood passively on the side lines in the absence of enlightened leadership to show them the path of solving their problems.

The role of the KRRS

The unhappy peasants saw a ray of hope with the rise of the Malaprabha peasants' agitation in the neighboring Naragund and Navalgund taluks in 1980. The hopes and aspirations of the peasants of this area got a further fillip with the establishment of KRRS in August, 1980. Once it was formally established in 1980, the KRRS started to build up its organisation throughout the state. As a part of its efforts to build up a strong organization of the peasants, the KRRS established Raitha Sanghas at village, taluka and district levels. The Dharwad taluka which was simmering with discontent and unhappiness responded very quickly to this and Raitha Sanghas were established in almost all the villages. As noted earlier the conditions like widespread debt, unremunerative prices, malpractices in the agricultural market, costly agricultural inputs, ill treatment by the police and other government employees and above all uncertain monsoon had sown the seed of discontent among the peasantry. But the conditions necessary for launching the movement like enlightened peasants and leadership,

organization, ideology etc. did not exist in this area. The peasants caught in the vicious circle of poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, tradition, unemployment, exploitation and so on were incapable to act on the grievances.

The emergence of KRRS created the necessary conditions for transforming this discontent into a movement. The KRRS created awareness among the peasantry, it motivated, educated and activated the peasantry. The farmers became conscious of their rights and dignity. They were no more docile and submissive as they used to be earlier. More importantly the nineteen point charter of demands submitted by the KRRS to the government included most appealing and attractive demands like loan waiver, remunerative prices, cheap agricultural inputs, reduction in electricity charges, old age pension, treating agriculture as an industry, and reservation of 50 percent of seeds in educational institutions and so on. This was exactly what the peasants of this area wanted. Hence they quickly reacted to the call of peasant leaders. The very strong, appealing and convincing speeches of the leaders made their own impact on the peasants. Thus the KRRS was successful in the mobilization of the peasants in movements and in motivating them towards action. The discontentment was provided an opportunity to express itself in the form of an agitation with the entry of the KRRS into this taluka. The KRRS provided leadership, organization, appropriate programs and demands and consequently, the discontentment emerged as peasant movements.

Conclusion

On the basis of analysis of the data and information it can be safely concluded that the unhappiness and unrest was evident among the peasants quite before the decade 1980 – 1990. The roots of the movement were found much before the occurrence of collective mobilization. The peasants faced innumerable agricultural and allied problems. They were the victims of draught quite often. Consequently poverty was deeply rooted, illiteracy was widespread and ignorance was seen in all aspects of their life. Obviously, the peasants were docile, conservative and value bounded. Neither had they the necessary knowledge nor political and economic power to launch a struggle for the redressal of their grievances. The organization and leadership which are the pillars of any movement did not exist. The result of all this was that the feeling of unhappiness or dissatisfaction remained dormant in individual hearts of the peasants for years together without a motivating force for action.

The peasants wanted to remove the structural barriers which were the sources for their discontentment. The exploitative and profitless agricultural market system, exploitative and anti peasant (as expressed by peasants) government departments, expensive, time consuming and complex procedures of getting loan etc. were some of the important structural barriers for the socio-economic progress.

There was also a feeling of relative deprivation among the peasants. They felt that they were deprived of the facilities and development enjoyed by the people in urban areas. They felt that the rural India should get preference

over the Urban India as majority of the people live in villages. Thus all these factors were the genesis of peasant movements in Karnataka.

Notes:

- 1) This paper is based on the unpublished Ph.D thesis entitled “Agrarian Unrest-A Sociological Study” submitted to Karnatak University, Dharwad by the author.
- 2) Ryota – The Kannada word meaning Farmer or Peasant
- 3) Sangha – The Kannada word which can roughly be translated into English as organization.
- 4) Rajya – The Kannada word meaning State.
- 5) The terms “Peasant” and “Farmer” are used interchangeably as both possess some similar characteristics. Therefore it is difficult to say that certain characteristics of a peasant are not possessed by a farmer or vice-versa. Normally the life of both peasant and farmer revolves round the land.

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