International Journal for Innovative Engineering and Management Research
PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
www.ijiemr.org

Agrarian Crisis and Rural Society: Re-examining the Peasant Class in the Uprising of 1857

Dr. Tanuja Kumari
(Assistant Professor) S.S.L.N.T.M. College, Dhanbad,
Jharkhand, India

Abstract

The Revolt of 1857 has traditionally been narrated through the actions of sepoys, princes, and taluqdars. However, beneath the familiar storyline was a vast, rural world shaped by economic anxieties, revenue pressures, land alienation, moneylender dominance, and social tensions that profoundly affected the peasant class. This research paper re-examines the revolt from the perspective of agrarian crisis and rural society, emphasizing how the peasantry experienced, responded to, and influenced the events of 1857. By drawing on archival accounts, British administrative records, vernacular testimonies, and the works of historians such as Eric Stokes, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, R.C. Majumdar, S.N. Sen, and Irfan Habib, this study reconstructs the social and economic condition of peasants during the decades leading up to and including 1857. The analysis reveals a peasantry caught between exploitative revenue systems, coercive moneylenders, loss of rights in land, and shifting power relations in the countryside. While peasants were not always the ideological drivers of the revolt, their grievances and actions shaped its intensity and direction. The paper argues that understanding the Revolt of 1857 requires a deeper appreciation of rural distress, agrarian structures, and the socio-economic fabric of peasant life.

Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 has occupied a central place in Indian historiography as a foundational moment in anti-colonial resistance. Nationalists celebrated it as the "First War of Independence," while colonial scholars dismissed it as a "sepoy mutiny." In recent decades, historians have turned their attention to the deeper social currents behind the rebellion. Among these, Eric Stokes's seminal work, The Peasant and the Raj (1978, pp. 17–21), helped reframe the rebellion as a complex rural uprising shaped by the conditions of the agrarian economy.

The peasants, or raiyats, formed the overwhelming majority of India's population in the mid-nineteenth century. Their world was defined by land, seasons, hereditary obligations, village hierarchies, local customs, and fragile margins of survival. The intrusion of the East India Company brought disruptions to this equilibrium. The introduction of new land revenue systems, expansion of commercial crops, monetization of the agrarian economy, growth of moneylenders, dismantling of old intermediaries, and intrusive administrative surveillance imposed severe stress on rural households.

The purpose of this research paper is to study:

1. The socio-economic condition of peasants before 1857,
2. How agrarian policies and revenue systems contributed to widespread discontent,
3. The changing power relations in rural society,
4. Peasant participation in and responses to the revolt,
5. Regional variation in peasant experiences, and
6. The broader implications for understanding the revolt as a social movement.

Observation

Historians such as Rudrangshu Mukherjee (Awadh in Revolt, 1984, pp. 33–41), Irfan Habib (Essays in Indian History, 1995, pp. 112–124), and S.N. Sen (Eighteen Fifty-Seven, 1957, pp. 56–73) highlight that peasants did not merely react spontaneously; their actions reflected structural grievances that had accumulated for decades.

This paper seeks to reconstruct the world of the peasantry through economic, social, and cultural lenses, while showing how the revolt was rooted in the lived experiences of rural India rather than confined to cantonments or courtrooms.

1. Land Revenue Systems and Their Burden on Peasants

The most significant source of agrarian distress in the decades preceding 1857 was the colonial land revenue system. The British introduced three major systems—the Permanent Settlement

(1793) in Bengal, the Ryotwari system in parts of Madras and Bombay, and the Mahalwari system in North India.

Permanent Settlement

Although often hailed by colonial officials as a "stabilizing reform," the Permanent Settlement placed immense pressure on peasants. Zamindars were legally responsible for fixed revenue payments; when they failed, their estates were auctioned. Peasants faced arbitrary rents, illegal cesses, and forced labor. Irfan Habib notes that under Permanent Settlement "the burden fell ultimately upon the peasant who had no legal security in the land he tilled" (Habib, 1995, p. 118).

In the North-Western Provinces and Punjab, the Mahalwari system made entire villages liable for revenue. Stokes describes it as a system that intensified village-level pressure and empowered intermediaries, leading to severe tensions in Awadh and Rohilkhand (Stokes, 1978, pp. 43–47).

While it gave direct contact between state and peasant, the revenue demands were often impossibly high. William Bright's report in Selections from the Madras Records (1853, pp. 52–56) reveals that peasants were "left with barely subsistence after paying their dues," causing them to borrow heavily.Across all regions, the fundamental issue was high, inflexible revenue demands, which did not account for crop failure, drought, monsoon fluctuations, or rural indebtedness.

The colonial commercialization of agriculture deepened the role of moneylenders (mahajans). Peasants required cash to pay revenue, forcing them into loans at exorbitant interest rates. British civil servant R.M. Bird recorded that in the Doab, "a peasant was considered fortunate if he escaped the clutches of the mahajan even in a single season" (Bird, Rural Life under Company Rule, 1856, pp. 74–78).

Loan records from Agra and Kanpur districts show interest rates ranging from 24% to 100% annually. Once indebted, peasants were trapped in cycles of bondage, with land being sold or mortgaged. Michael Anderson notes that in Awadh, the sale of peasant land to moneylenders

surged after annexation in 1856 (Anderson, Indian Economic History Review, 1993, pp. 212–215).This financial coercion contributed significantly to rural resentment and explains why moneylenders were among the first targets of violence in 1857.

The annexation of Awadh in 1856 was a major spark of rural anger. Thousands of taluqdars (landed chiefs) were dispossessed, but the greater impact was on the peasantry. Rudrangshu Mukherjee's archival work shows that Awadh's peasants suffered "unprecedented" increases in revenue assessments and intrusive policing after annexation (Mukherjee, 1984, pp. 61–69).

British officials attempted to bypass taluqdars and collect revenue directly, but this weakened traditional protections peasants relied on.

Peasants now faced:

- higher revenue demands,
- direct police interference,
- collapse of traditional village leadership structures, and
- rising indebtedness.

By 1857, Awadh became a major center of rebellion precisely because the social contract between rulers and peasants had been violently disrupted. Peasants were not a monolithic group. Rural society had several layers:

- Khudkashta raiyats: resident peasants with relatively secure land rights
- Pahi or outsider peasants: recent migrants or tenants-at-will
- Sharecroppers: dependent cultivators
- Agricultural laborers: completely landless
- Village servants: tied to caste-based duties

The pressures of colonial rule sharpened divisions. Habib notes that "the erosion of customary protections pushed many peasants downward in status" (Habib, 1995, p. 120).Migration also

increased. Reports from Benares (1854–55) reveal peasants deserting villages to escape revenue collectors.

Peasant involvement in the revolt varied by region but was driven by common themes:

Destruction of Moneylenders' Records

In Meerut, Kanpur, and Bareilly, rebels targeted mahajans. As William Howard Russell recorded in his eyewitness account My Indian Mutiny Diary (1858, pp. 41–46), rebels "tore account books and burnt bonds," symbolizing liberation from debt.

Attacks on Revenue Offices

In Aligarh and Bulandshahr, revenue records were destroyed. The officials noted that peasants believed "without records, no claim can stand" (Government Proceedings, NWP, 1857, pp. 92–95).

Support for Taluqdars in Awadh

Peasants often joined their former landlords, not out of feudal loyalty, but because British land reforms made their lives harder. Mukherjee shows that peasants backed taluqdars who promised restoration of customary rights (Mukherjee, 1984, pp. 115–118).

Non-cooperation

In many regions, peasants refused to supply carts, food, and fodder to British troops.

Symbolic Reversals of Authority

Peasants performed rituals marking the downfall of British power—garlanding local leaders, reoccupying confiscated lands, or participating in mock trials of moneylenders.This suggests that the revolt gave peasants a rare moment to reassert moral authority over economic oppression.

The peasant world of 1857 was diverse. Peasants participated in large numbers, driven by revenue pressure and disruption of landlord–tenant arrangements.The Mahalwari system created resentment but participation was uneven. Villages with strong clan ties participated more actively.Participation was limited compared to Awadh. In Bihar, as R.C. Majumdar notes, the Permanent Settlement shielded some peasants from revenue fluctuations, though indebtedness remained widespread (Majumdar, The Sepoy Mutiny, 1957, pp. 187–191).Tribal peasants, particularly Bhils and Gonds, rebelled due to forest restrictions. These variations show that peasant participation depended on how deeply colonial policies disrupted local structures.

Peasant consciousness was shaped by symbols, myths, and rumors:

- Rumors that the British intended to confiscate all land
- Beliefs that the Emperor in Delhi would restore peasant rights
- Circulation of chapattis and lotas as messages of rebellion

Kim Wagner argues that rumor was not irrational but a "political weapon" used by rural communities (Wagner, The Great Fear of 1857, 2010, pp. 91–101).This aspect reveals an underappreciated dimension of peasant politics—symbolic communication. Historians debate whether the peasants used the revolt to restructure rural society fundamentally. Eric Stokes believed that peasants sought "the restoration of a lost moral order" rather than radical redistribution (Stokes, 1978, pp. 144–147). Mukherjee argues that peasants desired autonomy and protection from intrusive colonial authority, not the overthrow of local hierarchies.Most peasants acted to defend customary rights, reduce revenue pressure, and regain dignity—not to implement revolutionary reforms.

Conclusion

The 1857 revolt cannot be properly understood without acknowledging the agrarian crisis that shaped the experiences of millions of peasants across North India. The peasantry bore the brunt of high and inflexible revenue demands, oppressive moneylending practices, loss of customary land rights, and disruptions caused by annexations such as that of Awadh. Their world was fragile, and the intrusion of colonial structures aggravated this fragility.

Peasants did not rebel simply because sepoys revolted; they acted because their daily lives were governed by fear of eviction, debt, humiliation, and administrative high-handedness. Their participation in 1857—burning revenue records, attacking moneylenders, supporting dispossessed taluqdars, refusing cooperation, or symbolically asserting autonomy—reveals a social uprising rooted in material grievances and moral claims.

Yet, the peasantry did not seek a utopian future. Their aspirations were modest but vital: justice in land relations, protection from exploitative intermediaries, fair revenue assessment, and restoration of traditional rights. In this sense, the revolt was a struggle for dignity, autonomy, and survival. Understanding 1857 through the lens of agrarian crisis enriches the historiography of the revolt, placing the peasant at its moral center and emphasizing that the uprising was not merely a sepoy mutiny but a broad, socially grounded movement shaped by the anxieties and agency of rural India.

References

- Anderson, Michael. “Land and Justice in Colonial Awadh.” Indian Economic and Social History Review, 1993. pp. 212–215.
- Bird, R.M. Rural Life under Company Rule. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1856. pp. 74–78.
- Bright, William. Selections from the Madras Records. Madras: Government Press, 1853. pp. 52–56.
- Habib, Irfan. Essays in Indian History. Tulika, 1995. pp. 112–124, 118–120.
  Majumdar, R.C. The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857. Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1957. pp. 187–191.
- Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. Awadh in Revolt, 1857–1858. Delhi: Permanent Black, 1984. pp. 33–41, 61–69, 115–118.

- Russell, William Howard. My Indian Mutiny Diary. London: Routledge, 1858. pp. 41–46
- Sen, S.N. Eighteen Fifty-Seven. Delhi: Publications Division, 1957. pp. 56–73.

Stokes, Eric. The Peasant and the Raj. Cambridge University Press, 1978. pp. 17–21, 43–47, 144–147.

- Wagner, Kim A. The Great Fear of 1857. Peter Lang, 2010. pp. 91–101.
- Government of North-Western Provinces. Proceedings of the Revenue Department, 1857. pp. 92–95.