

Peasant Movements and Agrarian Resistance in Colonial Karnataka: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Peasant movements constituted an important component of the social and political history of colonial India. In Karnataka, agrarian resistance developed in response to land revenue demands, indebtedness, tenancy problems, restrictions on customary rights, forest regulations, exploitation by intermediaries and the wider economic pressures created by colonial rule. The nature and intensity of peasant resistance varied across different regions because the areas that constitute present-day Karnataka were historically divided among the Bombay Presidency, Madras Presidency, princely Mysore and other administrative units. Consequently, agrarian movements developed within different revenue and administrative systems. Important forms of resistance included local opposition to revenue demands, struggles against moneylenders and landlords, forest and tribal resistance, and organised peasant mobilisation during the twentieth century. The influence of the Indian National Movement and Gandhian politics further transformed agrarian grievances into organised political action. Movements such as the Mulbagal and other local agrarian struggles, the forest-based resistance of the Western Ghats and the mobilisation associated with the freedom movement demonstrate the diversity of agrarian resistance in the region. This paper examines the major causes, forms, leaders, regions and consequences of peasant movements in colonial Karnataka. It argues that agrarian resistance played an important role in challenging colonial economic policies, strengthening rural political consciousness and contributing to the emergence of organised mass politics in Karnataka.

Keywords: Colonial Karnataka, Peasant Movements, Agrarian Resistance, Land Revenue, Farmers, Moneylenders, Forest Resistance, National Movement, Mysore, Karnataka.

Introduction

Agriculture constituted the principal foundation of the economy of Karnataka during the colonial period. A large proportion of the population depended directly or indirectly on agriculture for livelihood. The expansion of colonial administrative institutions brought significant changes in land relations, taxation, revenue collection, commercial agriculture and rural administration. These changes affected cultivators, tenants, landlords, village officials and other rural groups in different ways. The British expansion into Karnataka did not produce a uniform agrarian system. Different regions came under different administrative arrangements. Parts of present-day Karnataka were directly administered by the British, while Mysore remained a princely state under British paramountcy. South Kanara was administered under the Madras Presidency, while Kodagu became a directly administered British territory.

Mysore itself experienced indirect British control and, between 1831 and 1881, direct British administration. These regional differences shaped the character of agrarian resistance.

The early nineteenth century witnessed major rural disturbances. The Nagar Uprising of 1830–31 spread across several parts of the Mysore Kingdom and was associated with opposition to excessive revenue demands and official exactions. The South Kanara uprising of 1830–31 was similarly rooted in opposition to high land-revenue assessments and other taxes and administrative measures. Peasant resistance subsequently developed new forms. While early rebellions were often local and primarily directed against revenue officials and oppressive taxation, later rural movements increasingly interacted with nationalism, political organisations and demands for rights. Thus, the history of peasant movements in Karnataka provides an important perspective on

the transformation of rural society and political consciousness under colonial rule.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are:

1. To examines the historical development of peasant movements and agrarian resistance in Karnataka during the colonial period.
2. To examine the agrarian conditions of Karnataka during the colonial period.
3. To identify the major causes of peasant movements and agrarian resistance.

Research Methodology

The study is historical and analytical in nature. It is based mainly on secondary sources, including books on Karnataka history and agrarian history, research articles, historical studies, government publications, Institutional sources, Historical literature, gazetteers and scholarly works relating to colonial Karnataka and agrarian history.

Historical Background of Colonial Karnataka

The history of colonial Karnataka is characterised by major political, administrative, economic and social transformations that took place from the late eighteenth century until Indian independence in 1947. The region that constitutes present-day Karnataka was not a single administrative unit during the colonial period. It was divided among the Princely State of Mysore, the Bombay Presidency, the Madras Presidency, and smaller territories administered under different political arrangements. This administrative division resulted in regional variations in land tenure, revenue administration, agricultural practices and rural society.

1. Expansion of British Power: British influence in Karnataka expanded considerably after the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799 and the subsequent reorganisation of territories following the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War. The British East India Company established greater political and economic control over southern India. The restoration of the Wodeyar dynasty in Mysore in 1799 did not result in complete political autonomy, as the state remained under British paramount. In 1831, following serious disturbances in Mysore, the British assumed direct administration of the Mysore State. British administration continued until 1881, when the state was restored to the

Wodeyar ruler under the Rendition Agreement. Even after 1881, Mysore remained a princely state under British paramount.

Table -1 Administrative Division of Karnataka

Region of Present Karnataka	Colonial Administration	Important Features
Mysore region	Princely State of Mysore	Wodeyar administration under British paramountcy
North Karnataka	Bombay Presidency	British administrative and revenue system
South Kanara	Madras Presidency	Land revenue, customs and commercial regulation
Bellary region	Madras Presidency	Revenue administration and dry agriculture
Kodagu	Separate British-administered territory	Plantation and hill agriculture
Hyderabad-Karnataka region	Hyderabad State	Nizam's administration

2. Transformation of the Agrarian Economy:

Agriculture was the principal source of livelihood for the majority of the population. The colonial state increasingly treated land as an important source of government revenue. New systems of land assessment, surveys, documentation and revenue collection altered traditional relationships between cultivators, village communities and local authorities. In many areas, peasants were required to pay revenue in cash. This increased their dependence on agricultural markets, particularly when harvests were poor. Failure to meet revenue demands could result in penalties, debt and, in some circumstances, loss of control over land. The introduction of commercial agriculture also increased the importance of market prices. Crops such as cotton and other commercial products became increasingly connected with regional and international markets, exposing cultivators to fluctuations in prices.

3. Land Revenue and Rural Distress: Land revenue became one of the most important sources of colonial income. In South Kanara, for example, high land revenue assessment and collection became major sources of peasant dissatisfaction and contributed to the uprising of 1830–31. In Mysore, the colonial administration also attempted to rationalise revenue collection and strengthen administrative control. The Nagara uprising of 1830–31 demonstrated the extent to which revenue and administrative policies could provoke rural resistance.

Major Peasant Movements in Colonial Karnataka

1. South Kanara Peasant Uprising (1830–31)

The South Kanara uprising of 1830–31 was one of the important early agrarian disturbances in Karnataka. Colonial administrative records referred to these disturbances as ‘Roots’. The central issue was land revenue, particularly the high assessment and methods of collection. The movement also reflected wider grievances concerning salt and tobacco monopolies, courts, stamps and customs. Economic depression and the absence of profitable markets for agricultural products intensified the difficulties faced by cultivators. The uprising demonstrates that early peasant resistance was primarily concerned with immediate economic and administrative grievances rather than a fully developed nationalist ideology.

2. Nagara Uprising (1830–31)

The Nagara uprising was another major peasant rebellion in nineteenth-century Karnataka. Nagara was part of the Mysore Kingdom, which was under strong British influence. According to the Ministry of Culture's Digital District Repository, the rebellion emerged in response to a harsh taxation regime imposed on the peasantry. Budi Basappa Nayaka emerged as an important leader and organised peasants around demands for reduced rents. The rebellion began in 1830 and spread across substantial parts of the Mysore region. Government forces eventually suppressed the movement with British assistance. The uprising had major political consequences: on 19 October 1831, the Mysore Kingdom came under direct British administration, which continued for approximately fifty years.

3. Tarikere and Related Resistance

The agrarian resistance of 1830–31 was not confined to Nagara. Resistance spread to neighbouring areas, including Tarikere. Sarjappa Nayaka emerged as a prominent figure in the Tarikere region, while Budi Basappa Nayaka was associated with the Nagara movement. Recent scholarship describes the Nagara and Tarikere struggles as significant nineteenth-century peasant insurrections in Karnataka. These movements demonstrate the importance of local leadership and regional networks in mobilising rural communities against oppressive revenue and administrative policies.

4. Kalyanaswamy Rebellion (1837)

The rebellion associated with Kalyanaswamy represents another important episode in the history of resistance in South Kanara. The study of South Kanara's colonial history identifies the Kalyanaswamy rebellion of 1837 as a significant episode following the earlier peasant uprisings. It reflected the continuing tensions generated by colonial administration, revenue demands and changes in traditional political and agrarian relationships.

5. The Halagali Bedar Rebellion (1857)

The Revolt of 1857 spread beyond the major centres of northern India and influenced several parts of the Deccan and southern India. In the Bombay Deccan, the British administration attempted to strengthen its control over local populations and regulate the possession of arms. The Halagali Bedar Rebellion of 1857 was an important episode of resistance in present-day northern Karnataka during the wider uprising of 1857. It took place in and around Halagali in the Mudhol area of Bagalkot district and was led primarily by the Bedar community, a local martial and agrarian community. The rebellion reflected opposition to British disarmament policies and the interference of colonial authorities in the traditional rights and practices of local communities. The Bedars of Halagali had a long-standing tradition of bearing arms and serving in military capacities. When the British authorities introduced measures requiring local people to surrender their weapons, the Bedars strongly opposed the order. For them, the demand was not merely an administrative regulation; it threatened an important part of their social identity and customary rights.

National Movement and Tax Boycotts in Karnataka (1920s–1940s)

The tax boycott movement was an important form of mass resistance during the Indian National Movement. In Karnataka, particularly during the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement, peasants, farmers, local leaders and nationalist organisations used refusal or non-payment of certain taxes and revenue demands as a method of challenging colonial authority. These actions transformed economic grievances into political resistance and helped connect the rural population with the wider struggle for independence. The growth of Indian nationalism after the First World War brought new forms of political mobilisation to Karnataka. The Indian National Congress increasingly encouraged people to challenge colonial institutions through non-cooperation, boycott and civil disobedience. For the rural population, the most direct expression of colonial authority was often the collection of land revenue, local taxes, cesses and other government dues. Consequently, the refusal to pay taxes became an effective method of non-violent resistance. The tax boycott was particularly important because it combined economic pressure with political protest. By withholding revenue, people challenged the financial foundations of colonial administration.

Agrarian Conditions of Karnataka during the Colonial Period

The agrarian conditions of Karnataka underwent significant changes during the colonial period, particularly from the late eighteenth century to 1947. The expansion of British political authority, the introduction of new land-revenue systems, changes in land rights, and increasing monetisation of agriculture, rural indebtedness and the commercialisation of crops transformed the traditional agrarian economy. These changes affected peasants, tenants, landlords, agricultural labourers and village communities in different ways and contributed to the emergence of agrarian resistance. Present-day Karnataka was divided among different political and administrative authorities during the colonial period. Mysore remained a princely state under British paramountcy, while areas such as Dharwar, Belagavi and North Kanara were administered

under the Bombay Presidency and South Kanara under the Madras Presidency.

1. Land Revenue System

The colonial government regarded land revenue as an important source of state income. In the areas of present-day Karnataka under the Bombay Presidency, the Ryotwari system was widely implemented. Under this system, cultivators were recognized as holders of land but were required to pay revenue directly to the government. In Mysore State, revenue administration also placed considerable pressure on cultivators. Revenue assessments were periodically revised, and farmers often faced difficulties in meeting their obligations, particularly during years of poor rainfall and crop failure.

2. High Revenue Demand

One of the major causes of rural discontent was the burden of land revenue. Revenue assessments were often fixed without adequately considering fluctuations in agricultural production. During droughts or periods of falling agricultural prices, cultivators could still be required to meet revenue payments. Failure to pay revenue could result in penalties, attachment of property, or loss of land. Consequently, small and marginal cultivators became particularly vulnerable.

3. Indebtedness of Peasants

Rural indebtedness became a serious problem during the colonial period. Farmers frequently borrowed money from moneylenders, merchants and other private creditors to pay land revenue, purchase seeds and cattle, meet household expenses, and survive during crop failures. High interest rates made it difficult for many peasants to repay their debts. Mortgaging or selling agricultural land became common among heavily indebted cultivators. This contributed to the growth of rural inequality.

4. Commercialization of Agriculture

Colonial economic policies encouraged the production of crops that had market demand. In different parts of Karnataka, crops such as cotton, groundnut, tobacco, sugarcane and other commercial crops gained importance alongside food grains. Commercialization provided opportunities for some cultivators, but it also increased their dependence on market prices. A fall

in prices could cause severe economic hardship, especially when farmers had borrowed money to finance cultivation.

5. Dependence on Monsoon

Agriculture in large parts of Karnataka depended heavily on rainfall. The limited availability of irrigation made the rural economy highly vulnerable to drought. Poor monsoons include - crop failures, shortage of fodder, decline in agricultural employment, rising food prices, livestock losses, increased borrowing, and migration of rural labourers. Thus, droughts intensified the existing economic problems of the peasantry.

6. Famines and Food Scarcity

The nineteenth century witnessed several serious famines and food shortages in the Karnataka region. The Great Famine of 1876–78 was particularly devastating in the Deccan and southern parts of India, including areas of present-day Karnataka. Famines resulted in large-scale loss of agricultural production, livestock and rural livelihoods. The impact was especially severe among small cultivators, tenants, agricultural labourers and landless households.

7. Problems of Tenants and Agricultural Labourers

Not all cultivators possessed secure control over land. Tenants faced rent demands and insecurity of tenure in some areas. Agricultural labourers, who depended primarily on wage employment, were particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in agricultural activity. Low wages, seasonal employment and dependence upon landlords or large cultivators contributed to social and economic inequality in rural society.

8. Changes in Rural Social Structure

Colonial revenue and market policies contributed to changes in traditional village society. Moneylenders, merchants and commercially successful cultivators gained greater economic importance. At the same time, many small peasants became increasingly dependent on credit.

9. Impact of Irrigation and Agricultural Development

The colonial period also witnessed efforts to expand irrigation and improve agricultural infrastructure. The construction and improvement of tanks, canals, reservoirs and other irrigation facilities supported agricultural production in selected areas. However, the benefits were unevenly distributed. Large areas continued to depend on uncertain rainfall, and irrigation development did not eliminate rural poverty or indebtedness.

Major Causes of Peasant Movements and Agrarian Resistance in Colonial Karnataka

Peasant movements and agrarian resistance in colonial Karnataka emerged from a combination of economic exploitation, excessive revenue demands, indebtedness, social inequality, administrative policies, and political awakening. The major causes are discussed below.

Heavy Land Revenue Demand: The colonial government imposed substantial land revenue on cultivators. Revenue assessments were often difficult to meet, especially during droughts and crop failures. Failure to pay could lead to penalties, attachment of property and other hardships.

Rural Indebtedness: Peasants frequently borrowed money from moneylenders to pay revenue, purchase seeds, cattle and agricultural inputs, and meet household expenses. High interest rates made repayment difficult, resulting in the mortgaging or loss of agricultural land.

Exploitation by Moneylenders: Moneylenders occupied an influential position in rural society. Unfavourable credit conditions, compound interest and manipulation of accounts increased the burden on indebted cultivators. Resistance against moneylenders therefore became an important component of agrarian protest.

Commercialization of Agriculture: The expansion of commercial agriculture encouraged farmers to cultivate market-oriented crops such as cotton, groundnut, tobacco and other cash crops. Although commercialization offered new opportunities, fluctuations in prices could cause serious losses and increase dependence on merchants and moneylenders.

Droughts and Crop Failures: Large parts of Karnataka depended on monsoon rainfall. Recurrent droughts resulted in crop failures, shortage of fodder, livestock losses and unemployment. When revenue demands continued despite poor harvests, rural frustration increased.

Famines and Food Scarcity: Severe famines, particularly the Great Famine of 1876–78, caused widespread suffering in Karnataka and neighbouring regions. Loss of crops, livestock and employment weakened the rural economy and contributed to opposition to government policies.

Insecurity of Tenancy: Tenant cultivators often faced insecure tenure and heavy rents. The absence of adequate protection against eviction and exploitation created grievances among tenants and encouraged collective resistance.

Land Alienation: Indebtedness and inability to pay debts resulted in the transfer or mortgaging of land. The loss of land threatened the economic and social position of peasant families and became an important source of rural discontent.

Social and Economic Inequality: Colonial economic changes contributed to differentiation within rural society. Large landholders, merchants and moneylenders often acquired greater economic power, while small cultivators, tenants and agricultural labourers remained vulnerable.

Administrative and Judicial Policies: Revenue officials, courts and legal procedures often favoured the enforcement of revenue and debt obligations. Peasants who lacked education and resources found it difficult to defend their interests through formal institutions.

Exploitative Market Relations: The integration of agriculture into wider markets increased the dependence of cultivators on traders and merchants. Farmers frequently had to sell crops immediately after harvest, sometimes at unfavourable prices, particularly when they were under pressure to repay debts.

Forced or Compulsory Exactions: In some regions, peasants experienced various forms of compulsory services, levies or local exactions imposed by authorities or influential rural groups.

Such practices generated resentment and encouraged resistance.

Political Awakening and Nationalism: During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the spread of education, newspapers, political organisations and nationalist ideas helped peasants understand their economic grievances in a broader political context. The Indian National Congress and local organisations increasingly connected agrarian issues with the struggle against colonial rule.

Leadership and Organisation: The emergence of local leaders, social reformers and political activists helped transform individual grievances into collective movements. Organisation through village groups, associations and nationalist networks made it possible for peasants to participate in tax resistance, boycotts and other forms of protest.

Tax Boycotts and Civil Disobedience: During the nationalist period, campaigns such as Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience encouraged rural communities to resist certain taxes and government demands. Agrarian grievances therefore became closely linked with the wider freedom movement.

Conclusion

The agrarian history of Karnataka during the colonial period reveals the profound impact of British political, economic and administrative policies on rural society. The introduction and restructuring of land-revenue systems, particularly the rotary arrangements in directly administered territories, increased the state's control over agricultural land and cultivation. High revenue assessments, cash payment requirements, indebtedness, land alienation, commercialisation of agriculture and restrictions on customary rights placed considerable pressure on peasants and other rural communities. Agrarian distress was intensified by drought, irregular rainfall, crop failures and fluctuations in agricultural prices. While commercialisation created opportunities for traders, landlords and prosperous cultivators, small peasants, tenants and agricultural labourers often remained economically vulnerable. The expansion of moneylending and the increasing dependence on credit further weakened the position of indebted

cultivators. These conditions generated different forms of agrarian resistance in Karnataka. The South Kanara Peasant Uprising (1830–31), Nagara Uprising (1830–31), Kalyanaswamy Rebellion (1837), Halagali Bedar Rebellion (1857) and later tax and revenue resistance associated with the National Movement demonstrate that rural communities were not passive victims of colonial rule. They used petitions, refusal to pay revenue, preservation of customary practices, collective mobilisation and, in some cases, armed resistance to defend their economic and social interests.

The nature of resistance changed over time. Early movements were predominantly local and centred on revenue, taxation, customary rights and livelihood issues. During the twentieth century, however, agrarian grievances increasingly became connected with nationalist politics. The Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements provided new organisational and ideological frameworks for rural mobilisation. Thus, peasant movements and agrarian resistance formed an important component of Karnataka's colonial history. They reflected not only opposition to economic exploitation but also the efforts of rural communities to protect land, livelihood, dignity and autonomy. The study demonstrates that the history of colonial Karnataka must therefore be understood not merely through the actions of colonial administrators and political elites, but also through the experiences, struggles and resistance of its peasants and rural communities.

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