

NEED TO CONSIDER SOME QUESTIONS

- What was the reaction of the common people to the new British Raj and the changes that it brought?
- Was the revolt of 1857 an isolated event or was it preceded by protest movements of like nature?

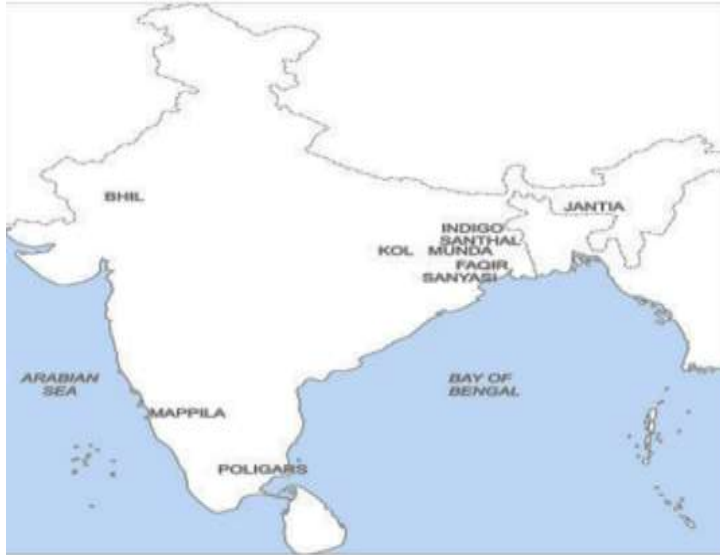


Figure 7.1 Map of India citing various places of Peasant and Tribal Revolts in the 19th century

ORIGIN

- In pre-colonial India popular protest against the Mughal rulers & their officials was not uncommon.
- The 17th & 18th centuries witnessed many peasant uprisings against the ruling class.
- The reasons provoking the peasants to rise in revolt :-
 - Imposition of a high land revenue demand by the state,
 - corrupt practices and harsh attitude of the tax collecting officials, were some
- The various policies of the colonial govt had a much more devastating effect on the Indian peasants & tribes.

CHANGES IN ECONOMY AFTER COLONISATION

- Promotion of British manufactured goods in Indian markets leading to destruction of Indian handicraft industries.
- Huge transfer of wealth from India to England (Drain of Wealth).
- British land revenue settlements, a heavy burden of new taxes, eviction of peasants from their lands, encroachment on tribal lands.
- Growth & strengthening of exploitation in rural society along with the growth of intermediary revenue collectors & tenants and money-lenders.
- Expansion of British revenue administration over tribal territories leading to the loss of tribal people's hold over agricultural & forest land.

- The appropriation of peasants' surplus by the company & its agents, the increasing burden of taxes made the peasants completely dependent on the mercy of the revenue intermediaries & officials, the merchants and the money-lenders.
- Moreover, the destruction of indigenous industry led to migration of large scale workers from industry to agriculture.
- The pressure on land increased but the land revenue & agricultural policy of the govt allowed little scope for the improvement of Indian agriculture.
- While the British economic policy led to pauperization & impoverishment of the Indian peasantry, the British administration turned a deaf ear to the peasants' grievances.
- British law & judiciary did not aid the peasantry; it safeguarded the interest of the government & its collaborators - the landlords, the merchants and the money-lenders.
- Thus being the prey of colonial exploitation & being deprived of justice from the colonial administration the peasants took up arms to protect themselves.
- The grievances of the tribal people were not different from those of the peasants.
- But what made them more aggrieved was the encroachment by outsiders into their independent tribal polity.

SANYASI REBELLION

- The official correspondence made by EIC in the second half of the eighteenth century referred to the incursion of the nomadic Sanyasis & Fakirs, mainly in northern Bengal.
- Even before the great famine of Bengal (1770) small groups of Hindu & Muslim holy men made sudden attacks on the store houses of food crops & property of the local rich men & govt officials.
- Though the Sanyasis & Fakirs were religious mendicants, originally they were peasants, including some who were evicted from land.
- However, the growing hardship of the peasantry, increasing revenue demand & the Bengal famine of 1770 — brought a large number of dispossessed small Zamindars, disbanded soldiers & rural poor into the bands of Sanyasis and Fakirs.
- They moved around different parts of Bengal & Bihar in bands of 5 to 7 thousand & adopted the guerilla technique of attack.
- Their target of attack was the grain stocks of the rich and at later stage, government officials.
- They looted local govt treasuries. Sometimes the wealth looted was distributed among the poor.
- They established an independent govt in Bogra and Mymensingh.

- One noticeable feature of these insurrections was the equal participation of Hindus and Muslims in it.
- Some of the important leaders of these movements were Manju Shah, Musa Shah, Bhawani Pathak and Debi Chaudhurani.
- Encounter between the Sanyasis-Fakirs and the British forces became a regular feature all over Bengal and Bihar till 1800. The British used its full force to suppress the rebels.
- William Pinch argued in his work "Warrior Ascetics & Indian Empires", that there might have been some inbuilt class dimension in the sannyasi-fakir rebellion & occasional peasant participation, but it was not sufficient to argue that it was a subaltern or peasant war (Pinch 2006:100-105).
- Matthew Clark observed that there was a possibility that the sannyasis were merely pretending to be sannyasis. They were involved in criminal activities
- Bhattacharyya added that the sannyasi & fakir rebellion was undoubtedly against the Company, but it was not anti-colonial.
- Warren Hastings labelled the sannyasis & fakirs as 'gypsies of India' wandering from place to place (Jones 1918:178- 179).
- He considered them as plunderers & freebooters.
- However, in reality, the sannyasis of the 18th century descended from the ten branches, of the Advaita school which Shankaracharya and his disciples had started in the 9th century. They were known as the Dasnami orders
- According to Matthew Clark, these ten groups of Dasnamis were divided up into four monasteries, located in Dwarka, Jagannath Puri, Badrinath and Sringeri.
- According to, Ethnographic accounts the Dasnami gossains were treated as mendicants & priests, bankers, traders, farmers & mercenaries. Therefore, they had a complex relationship with their social environment (Clark 2006:14)
- These Dasnami groups used to fight with each other. Even emperor Akbar had to intervene on one such instance (Pinch).
- These sannyasis were not particularly poor as they were involved in economic activities such as trade with Nepal & usury.
- Even the Persian sources such as Tarikh-i-Ahmadshahi & Marathi sources like Prithwi Gir, Gosavi Vatyacha Sampradaya demonstrate that the sannyasis were quite active in parts Northern India, Punjab & Gujarat since the Mughal period.
- They acted as traders as well as moneylenders in those areas
- According to J.N. Sarkar, the sannyasis deposited their earnings with the common fund of the maths from which the gurus and mahants would advance money to the chelas (disciples) to carry on trade and other economic activities (Steele 1986).
- The akharas were the warehouses of arms & weapons and produced fighters to combat enemies.
- Sarkar opined that even the majority of the wandering sannyasis belonged to the akharas
- According to Matthew Clark, there was also a group of travelling sannyasis who were not a part of the akharas & were called the jamat
- The original guru of Madariyas, was Badi-u-din Shah-I Madar (1315-1436).
- He travelled from Arabia & Syria and finally settled in India, preaching Islam.
- He travelled to Gujarat, Ajmer, Kanauj, Kalpi, Jaunpur, Lucknow, and Bengal.
- The mathas financed the Dasnamis for their pilgrimages and their trading activities.
- The sannyasis used to receive sanads from the Governor of Bengal. The sanads granted to the sannyasis permitted them to travel freely (Dasgupta 1992:10-23).
- The sannyasis and fakirs used to enjoy rent-free lands tenures as religious grants in the districts of Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Malda, and Rangpur
- The govt was unwilling to allow this. This culminated in the Regulations of 1788.
- The govt wanted to control these pilgrimages and put a stop to their practice of carrying arms & levying 'contributions'
- With the dubious assistance of the Raja of Nepal, the government was able to suppress the rebels. Most of them were executed.
- The fakirs were also captured and quickly forced into coolie labour.
- Sources reveal that the govt & the zamindars allied against the sannyasis & fakirs.
- Zamindars borrowed from the merchants & the mendicants.
- Majnu Shah, the venerable fakir leader, may have instructed not to oppress anyone and accept voluntary contributions.
- However, Govt records such as Rous' letters reveal that these armed 'banditti' had taken Rs.500 from Nurnagar village belonging to one Dayaram Ray, Rs.1690 from the kachari.

THE REVOLT OF RANGAPUR 1783

- Rangpur & Dinajpur were two of the districts of Bengal which faced all kinds of illegal demands by the East India Company and its revenue contractors.
- Harsh attitude of the revenue contractors and their exactions became a regular feature of peasant life
- One such revenue contractor was Debi Singh of Rangpur and Dinajpur. He and his agents created a reign of terror in the two districts of northern Bengal.
- Taxes on the Zamindars were increased which actually were passed on from Zamindars to cultivators or ryots.

- Debi Singh and his men used to beat flog the peasants, burn their houses and destroy their crops and not even women were spared
- Peasants appealed to the company officials to redress their grievances. Their appeal however remained unheeded.
- Being deprived of justice the peasants took the law in their own hands
- The rebel peasants gathered large number of peasants, armed with swords, shields, bows and arrow.
- They elected Dirjinarain as their leader & attacked the local cutcheries and store houses of crops of local agents of the contractors and government guards.
- The rebels formed a government of their own, stopped payments of revenue to the existing government and levied 'insurrection charges' to meet the expenses of the rebellion.
- Both Hindus and Muslims fought side by side in the insurrection
- Ultimately the government's armed forces took control of the situation and suppressed the revolt.
- According to official correspondence peasants killed Gouri Mohan Chowdhury, an gumasta of Raja Devi Singh (revenue farmer of these districts) and was known be cruel to the peasants
- Peasants stopped collection of revenue for two months
- Rangpur Commission was set up after crushing down the revolt under the leadership of J.D. Paterson
- According to Peterson, Numerous illegal taxes such derinwallah, batta, hoonderan, rusum ('rusoom'), mustajir ('mustageer') were imposed on the peasants.
- Devi Singh forced the zamindars to pay their rents in French Arcot rupees.
- He compelled the zamindars, naibs, amla, to pay sums they could not possibly pay. He beat them if they refused.
- Though essentially a peasant rebellion, it was not anti-Company.
- They were not against their zamindar as well, as there was participation of zamindars in this rebellion.
- The peasants selected their targets; these were not random attacks. Their violent actions met with brutal counter-action by the Company state.
- The zamindars were compensated by getting their money back. The ryots' conditions did not improve
- According to Ranjit Guha, "nothing in the militant movements of the rural masses that was not political. This could hardly have been otherwise under the conditions in which they worked"
- According to Guha, there were some plan and coordination amongst the peasant masses – This was the case with the rebels who revolted against

Devi Singh, as well as rebels of Kol, Munda and Santhal rebellion.

- Jon Wilson, argued that the Rangpur uprising was against their British and Indian rulers.

THE BHIL UPRISING

- The Bhils were mostly concentrated in the hill ranges of Khandesh.
- The British occupation of Khandesh in 1818 enraged the Bhils because they were suspicious of outsiders' incursion into their territory.
- Moreover, it was believed that Trimbakji, rebel minister of Baji Rao II, instigated the Bhils against the British occupation of Khandesh.
- There was a general insurrection in 1819 and the Bhils in several small groups ravaged the plains.
- There were similar types of insurrection quite often by the Bhil Chiefs against the British.
- The British govt used its military forces to suppress the rebels and at the same time tried to win them over throw various conciliatory measures.
- But the British measures failed to bring the Bhils to their side.

KHANDESH map with an area of 10041 sq.miles



- The Bhil leaders like Kazi Singh (Khaja Naik), Bhima Naik played very important role in this rebellion.

THE MYSORE REBELLION

- After the final defeat of Tipu Sultan the British restored Mysore to the Wodeyar ruler & imposed on him the subsidiary alliance.
- The financial pressure from the company on the Mysore ruler compelled him to increase revenue demands from the Zamindars.
- The increasing burden of revenue ultimately fell on the cultivators.
- The corruption & extortion of local officials added to the existing miseries of the peasants.
- The growing discontent of the peasants broke out into an open revolt in the province of Nagar, one of the four divisions of Mysore.
- Peasants from other provinces joined the rebellious peasant of Nagar and the rebel peasants found their leader in Sardar Malla, the son of a common ryot of Kremisi.

- Budi Basavappa Nayaka, who claimed himself “king of Nagar”, organised the farmers and held several meetings by mid-1830.
- He promised the people a reduction in land rents and compensation for losses.
- With an army of 200 people, he attacked the fort at Anandpur, now in Sagar taluk, in August 1830. Though his effort to capture the fort failed, it led to many such violent clashes with the rulers.
- Then king Krishnaraja Wadiyar III ordered the officers to act tough on the rebellions.
- The people who refused to pay taxes were subjected to grave punishment. By the end of December 1830, more than 50 people were killed in different incidents.
- The company govt actively joined the efforts to quell the rebellion. Lieutenant Rochfort, who was a resident of the Mysore kingdom, advised the Mysore rulers on how to tackle the rebellion.
- They eventually succeeded to recapture forts conquered by the rebels.
- During one such incident at Honnali, now in Davangere district, on March 12, 1831, the Mysore army captured 180 rebels from a fort and a temple.
- Of them, 99 were later hanged on the road towards Shikaripur.
- The British govt had constituted a committee to probe into the rebellion and submit a report. The committee in its report, based on testimonials and written sources, noted that 240 people were killed during the rebellion.
- The then Diwan of Mysore had submitted that 164 had been killed.
- However, one officer in charge of Nagar had claimed that he alone had killed more than 700 insurgents.
- The rebels had also killed many civil servants. Following the rebellion, the Mysore State went under the control of the British in 1831.
- The king handed over the rule to the company on October 19, 1831. For the next 50 years, the State was under the direct rule of the British.
- Ranajit Guha believes that most common uprisings in India in the period from 1783 to 1900 were partially motivated by an idea of a historical golden era (Millenarianism)
- This theory is supported to an extent by Burton Stein
- The peasants defied the authority of the Mysore ruler.
- The British force regained control of Nagar from rebel peasants after strong opposition and ultimately the administration of the country passed into the hands of the British.
- They successfully resisted all attempts made by the Raja of Chota Nagpur and Mayurbhanj to subdue them.
- British penetration into this area and the attempt to establish British law and order over the jurisdiction of the Kol Chiefs generated tensions among the tribal people.
- As a result of British occupation of Singhbhum and the neighbouring territories, a large number of people from outside began to settle in this area which resulted in transfer of tribal lands to the outsiders.
- This transfer of tribal lands and coming of merchants, money-lenders and the British law in the tribal area posed a great threat to the hereditary independent power of the tribal chiefs
- This created great resentment among the tribal people and led to popular uprisings against the outsiders in the tribal area.
- The rebellion spread over Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau and Manbhum.
- The target of attack was the settlers from other regions whose houses were burnt, and property looted. The insurrection was ruthlessly suppressed by the British militia.
- The Hindu, Mohammedan and Sikh merchants and adventurers from north Bihar and northern India were introduced by the raja as thikadars (lessees) over the heads of tribal village land owners.
- The thikadars obtained from the Maharaja temporary leases of the villages as payment for their goods.
- They took away land from the tribals and levied rents and other services from them.
- One of the services taken from the tribals was the beth begari or forced labour.
- In 1820, the unrest burst forth in open revolt. It originated again from Tamar.
- The leaders of this revolt were Rugdeo Munda and Kanta Munda.
- A war against the alien thikadars and jagirdars was proclaimed.
- Destruction of all these alien intruders was the avowed aim of the revolt which spread far and wide, and military operations of an extensive scale had to be resorted to for several months by Major Roughsedge with the Ramgarh Battalion in order to counter it
- The horrors of the 1820 uprising were still fresh in the memory of the authorities when towards the end of the year 1831.
- Tribals’ deep discontent manifested itself once again in the Kol Insurrection (1831-32).
- Thikedars took away the land of the tribals & levied rents and other services from them. They demanded beth begari or forced labour from the tribals.
- The Munda & Uraon tribals were chiefly driven to desperation.

KOL UPRISING

- The Kols of Singhbhum for long centuries enjoyed independent power under their chiefs.

- They called upon their neighbours to join the revolt.
- Various tribal groups and their local non-tribal neighbours of Chotanagpur, such as, (a) the Mundas, Uraons, Hos, (b) the Bhogta and Ghasi of Tori, (c) the Chero, Kharwar and Poliar of Palamu; self-consciously joined the revolt in solidarity.
- The selective violence of the rebellion measured up to the bitterness and anger of the above words.
- In villages where the tribal people and dikus (outside non-tribal exploiters) lived together, it was on the latter that the attack was concentrated.
- In many cases they were killed while their houses were burnt to the ground. The British authorities were entirely unprepared for an outbreak of such a magnitude.
- It was not till March 1832 that Captain Thomas Wilkinson with the collective help of all available forces, succeeded in bringing back order in the country.
- All the risings mentioned above were against the dikus who were the new class of middlemen, zamindars, moneylenders, government officials and the British colonists at large.

THE FARAIZI DISTURBANCES 1838-51

- The Faraizi sect was founded by Haji Shariatullah of Faridpur.
- Originally Faraizi movement was fuelled by the grievances of rack-rented and evicted peasants against landlords and British rulers.
- The Faraizis under Dudu Miyan, the son of the founder of the sect, became united as a religious sect with an egalitarian ideology.
- His simple way of teaching & belief that all men are equal and land belongs to god & no one has right to levy tax on it appealed to the common peasants.
- The Faraizis set up parallel administration in some parts of Eastern Bengal and established village courts to settle the peasants' disputes.
- They protected cultivators from Zamindar's excesses and asked the peasants not to pay taxes to the Zamindars.
- They raided the Zamindars' houses and cutcheries and burnt indigo factory at Panch-char.
- The govt & Zamindars forces crushed the movement & Dudu Miyan was imprisoned.

THE MAPPILA UPRISING

- Mappilas are the descendants of the Arab Settlers & some Hindus who had become Muslims.
- Majority of them were cultivating tenants, landless labourers, petty traders & fishermen.
- The British occupation of Malabar in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the consequent changes that the British introduced in the land revenue administration of the area brought unbearable hardship in the life of the Mappilas.
- Most important change was the transfer of "Janmi" from that of traditional, partnership with the

Mappila to that of an independent owner of land – the right of eviction of Mappila tenants which did not exist earlier

- Overassessment, illegal taxes, eviction from land, hostile attitude of government officials were some of the many reasons that made the Mappilas rebel against the British and the landlords.
- The religious leadership played an important role in strengthening the solidarity of the Mappilas though socio-religious reforms and also helped in the evolution of anti-British consciousness among the Mappilas.
- The growing discontent of the Mappilas broke out in open insurrections against the state & landlords.
- Between 1836 and 1854 there were about twenty-two uprising in Malabar.
- In these uprisings the rebels came mostly from the poorer section of the Mappila population.
- The targets of the rebels were the British officials, Janmis & their dependents.

SANTHAL REBELLION

- The Santhals were inhabitants of the districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Murshidabad, Pakur, Dumka, Bhagalpur & Purnea.
- The area of maximum concentration of Santhals was called Daman-i-koh or Santhal Pargana.
- When the Santhals cleared the forest & started cultivation in this area the neighboring Rajas of Maheshpur & Pakur leased out the Santhal villages to Zamindars & money-lenders.
- Gradual penetration by dikus (outsiders) in the territory of the Santhals brought misery and oppression for the simple living Santhals.
- The oppression by money-lenders, merchants, Zamindars and government officials forced the Santhals to take up arms in order to protect themselves.
- Initial protests of the Santhals were in the form of robbery & looting of Zamindars & money-lenders houses.
- But violent suppression of these activities & harassment of Santhals at the hands of police & local officials made them more violent.
- The rebel Santhals found their leaders in two brothers, Sidhu & Kanu, who were believed to have received blessings from the gods to put an end to the ongoing oppression of the Santhals & to restore "the good old days".
- Several thousand Santhals armed with their traditional weapons of bows, arrows, axes assembled & took the decision to give an ultimatum to the Zamindars & the govt officials to stop oppression immediately.
- They decided to get back control of their lands and to set up their own govt.
- The authorities however paid no serious attention to this ultimatum.

- Santhals flared up in open armed insurrection against the local government officials, Zamindars and money-lenders.
- The insurrection spread rapidly in the whole Santhal Pargana.
- Large number of low caste non-Santhals also came out in support of the Santhals.
- The govt & Zamindars started counter-attacking the insurgents.
- The heroic struggle of the Santhals ultimately failed because of British superiority of arms.

NATURE OF UPRISING

- The historians with sympathies towards the British often regarded these uprisings as a problem of law & order.
- The rebels were often portrayed as primitive savages resisting "civilization".
- The Nationalists tended to appropriate the peasant tribal history to the purpose of the anti-colonial struggle ignoring certain other facets of the oppressed people's struggle.
- Those who are sympathetic to the cause of the tribes & peasants however tended to negate very often the logic of peasant & tribal protest in terms of the people's own experience.
- Barrington Moore attributes the alleged weakness of Indian peasant movements to the caste system with its hierarchical divisions among villagers & to the strength of bourgeois leadership against the landlords and the British.
- "Indian Mutiny" of 1857-58, had vast presence of peasants struggled to destroy British rule over an area of more than 500,000 square miles.
- Apart from the Mutiny of 1857, peasant uprisings in China usually had a wider geographical scope than those in India – reasons for this may have included the political fragmentation as well as the diversity of language and culture among India's people.
- During the later decades of Mughal rule the country had already disintegrated into virtually autonomous, warring kingdoms and principalities.
- After the British repressed the Mutiny, political disunity was perpetuated by the division of India into British provinces interspersed with Native States having separate judicial systems, making it difficult to organize popular resistance.
- Ethnic & linguistic divisions compounded the problem of coordinated action.
- Between the Mutiny & Independence the British govt & army were also better coordinated than those of China, and India was not disturbed by invasions.
- In these circumstances, from 1858 to 1930 peasants engaged only in local uprisings led by religious figures & by peasant committees
- At least two Indian authors have, indeed, argued that the caste system provided a framework for the organization of peasant rebellions, since in many

cases peasants were able to assemble quickly through the medium of their caste assemblies.

- Information about pre-British uprisings is limited
- Revolts broke out in many areas during the 17th & 18th centuries, as the Mughal bureaucracy became more oppressive.
- The British land settlements for the first time made land private property of a capitalist kind
- The population of colonial India more than doubled between 1891 & 1951. However, industry developed very slowly, so that there came to be too many villagers for a paleotechnic agriculture.
- In India as a whole, per-capita agricultural output declined between 1911 and 1947 – Some of the consequences of "agricultural overpopulation" were fragmentation of land holdings leading to dwarf-tenancies.
- From the 1850s with the building of railroads, the increased movement of goods and people had profound effects.
- It further undermined the unity and self-sufficiency of villages.
- The modern transport of food grains reduced the danger of severe regional famines; by permitting grain stocks to be removed from prosperous areas – allowed the growth of chronic malnutrition throughout the country.
- However, modern transport fostered the movement of ideas between town and country, and created links between urban and rural people.
- Such links strengthened the Indian nationalist movement led by the bourgeoisie.
- There were serious regional famines before British rule, notably in the Deccan in 1630-32 and in 1702-4.
- It seems certain, however, that the famines of the British period were more frequent.
- Thus, 14 major famines are known to have occurred between the early 11th & 17th centuries.
- During the period of govt by the East India Company, by contrast, in addition to the catastrophic Bengal famine of 1770, there were twelve serious famines and four periods of acute scarcity before the Mutiny of 1857
- The worst occurred between 1865 and 1899, and the most severe of all in 1896-97, when 97 million were seriously affected and at least 4.5 million died. Another 650,000 died in 1898, and a further 3.25 million in 1899.
- In the famines of the 1860s the principal victims were landless laborers and unemployed weavers.
- Due to improved transportation, there was no very large famine between 1908 and 1943, when the stoppage of rice imports from Burma by the Japanese invasion, coupled with hoarding and speculation, produced the Bengal famine in which 3 million died

- Stephen Fuchs' *Rebellious Prophets: a Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religionist*, describes more than fifty movements with messianic & millenarian overtones.
- Thus five of the nineteen movements studied were classically millenarian in character, waiting in tense expectation of imminent deliverance, chiefly by supernatural means
- These movements included the early movement of Mappilla tenants in the 1830s to 1850s led by the Mambram Tangal, the Naikda tribal movement in Gujarat under the leader joria Bhagat in 1867-70, the Munda tribal movement under Birsa in the 1890s & the Bhil tribal movement under Govindgiri, a tribal convert to Hinduism, in 1900-1912, following a severe famine in 1900.
- All had divine or prophetic leaders believed possessed of supernatural

LEADERSHIP

- The context in which these movements arose gave very little scope for a leadership to make an entry

from outside the immediate context of the rebellion.

- This is quite in contrast to the times of the national movement where leaders from various sections of upper strata consciously, on certain ideological premises, made an intervention into the peasant & tribal movements.
- The leadership of these movements often devolved upon men or women who were within the cultural world of the peasants they led.
- They were able to articulate the protest of the oppressed.
- The Faraizi rebellion illustrated how holymen as leaders were on the one hand trying to return to a past purity of their religion and on the other, also addressed the peasants' problems.
- Thus, the notion that all land was god's land and everyone had an equal share in it, mobilised the oppressed peasants and also invoked the sanctity of the 'true' religion.



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