
The Role of Peasant, Common Man, and Working Class in the National Movement during the Colonial Period: North Karnataka Pirajade Mahmadaslam

Assistant Professor, Department of History, GFGC, Moka, Ballari.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17408253>

ABSTRACT:

The colonial period in North Karnataka witnessed a dynamic interplay between elite nationalist politics and grassroots social forces—peasants, commoners, and the working class—whose collective actions shaped the region’s contribution to India’s freedom struggle. Drawing from secondary literature, gazetteers, and colonial records, this paper examines how agrarian distress, indebtedness, and early industrial developments spurred localized mobilizations that later converged with national movements. Peasant resistance ranged from tax defaults to active participation in Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India campaigns. Artisans and small traders functioned as intermediaries linking urban and rural spheres, while the emerging working class in Belgaum, Hubli, and Dharwad adopted strike tactics connecting economic justice with anti-imperialist demands. Using a subaltern perspective, this study argues that North Karnataka’s nationalist trajectory cannot be understood without recognizing these non-elite actors whose collective defiance eroded colonial legitimacy and expanded the social base of India’s struggle for independence.

KEYWORDS:

Peasants, Working Class, North Karnataka, National Movement

.....

Introduction

Mainstream historiography of India's freedom movement has long emphasized elite leadership and the Indian National Congress. Yet beneath this leadership lay the energy of ordinary people—farmers, artisans, and labourers—whose daily struggles gave real strength to nationalist politics. North Karnataka, with its blend of agrarian and artisan communities and early industrial centres, provides a vital regional case of this grassroots dynamic.

This paper explores how the peasantry, the common populace, and the working class participated in and influenced the national movement during the colonial period. Drawing on administrative reports, gazetteers, and regional histories, it reconstructs the socio-economic foundations and collective actions of North Karnataka's people in the making of India's independence.

Historical Background

Colonial and Administrative Context

The northern districts of Karnataka—Belgaum, Dharwad, Bijapur, Gadag, Haveri, Bagalkot, and Bidar—were split across different colonial jurisdictions: the Bombay Presidency, the Nizam's Hyderabad State, and the Mysore princely domain. Despite administrative diversity, all experienced exploitative taxation, land alienation, and agrarian distress. Colonial economic policies reshaped rural life, generating the social tensions that later fuelled political awakening.

Agrarian Economy and Exploitation

Agriculture dominated North Karnataka's economy. The introduction of the Ryotwari system imposed direct taxation on cultivators, dismantling village-based security and exposing peasants to moneylenders. Famines of 1876–78 and 1899–1900 deepened indebtedness and depopulation. Famine Commission reports recorded widespread refusal to supply grain and cattle to colonial agents—early signs of agrarian defiance that would later mature into political resistance.

Early Anti-Colonial Uprisings

Before the rise of Congress nationalism, North Karnataka had already witnessed popular defiance. The Kittur Rebellion (1824), led by Rani Chennamma, protested British annexation under the Doctrine of Lapse and mobilized local peasants and retainers. Though suppressed, it

became a lasting symbol of agrarian revolt and female leadership. Similarly, Sangolli Rayanna's guerrilla resistance (1829–1831), organized among rural peasants, represented the first peasant-based insurgency against British authority. Both leaders entered popular folklore, inspiring later generations of resisters.

The Growth of Political Consciousness

The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of modern education, missionary schools, and vernacular journalism, which together spread ideas of self-rule and reform. Newspapers like Dnyanprakash and Kesari carried nationalist ideas into towns and villages. Teachers, artisans, and small traders formed local associations, translating political awareness into community action.

A turning point came with the 1924 Belgaum Congress Session, presided over by Mahatma Gandhi. It drew peasants, students, and urban workers, legitimizing regional activism and helping establish district Congress Committees that later led the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements across North Karnataka.

Gandhian Mass Movements and Rural Mobilization

Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) marked the first mass mobilization of peasants and townsmen. In Dharwad, Gadag, and Haveri, peasants boycotted colonial schools and courts; traders promoted swadeshi goods and khadi. Bhajan mandalis (devotional singing groups) transformed nationalist politics into familiar cultural practices, embedding the movement within rural moral life.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), local leaders such as S. Nijalingappa and R. R. Diwakar organized salt satyagraha's and revenue boycotts across Belgaum and Dharwad. Police records note arrests and property seizures—evidence of deep popular involvement and colonial repression. These movements forged bonds between the agrarian poor and nationalist ideology.

Rise of the Working Class

Industrialization in Belgaum, Hubli, and Gadag during the 1930s created small clusters of industrial labourers—railway employees, cotton mill hands, and ginning factory workers. Exposure to urban unionism and

Congress Socialist ideas gave rise to a new political consciousness.

The Hubli Railway Strike (1938) protested wage cuts and racial discrimination, while the Belgaum Cotton Mill Strike (1940) articulated both economic and national demands. British reports recorded slogans like “British Quit India,” illustrating how labour movements merged class struggle with anti-imperial politics. These early unions became nuclei of organized resistance linking economic justice to national freedom.

Quit India and Regional Revolt (1942)

The Quit India Movement brought North Karnataka to the peak of rebellion. Villagers in Belgaum, Dharwad, and Bijapur sabotaged railways and telegraphs, attacked government offices, and sheltered underground leaders. Confidential collector reports documented mass arrests and police firings. The participation of peasants, students, and workers illustrated how regional discontent had fused into a collective nationalist uprising.

This phase marked the culmination of a century-long continuum—from agrarian uprisings of the 1820s to the unified rebellion of the 1940s—demonstrating North Karnataka’s transition from localized resistance to organized nationalism.

Socio-Economic Foundations of Resistance

Agrarian Structure

Most peasants cultivated small holdings under oppressive land revenue systems. The Ryotwari and Mahalwari settlements intensified taxation and insecurity. Famines and indebtedness eroded livelihoods, generating sporadic resistance and migration. Colonial records document refusal to pay taxes and petitions for remission, signalling persistent yet understated defiance.

Social Composition

Caste and class overlapped in shaping political mobilization. Non-Brahmin and backward-caste movements of the early twentieth century introduced new social identities into the nationalist sphere, connecting caste-based reform to anti-colonial struggle. Artisans and small traders served as intermediaries who translated urban political ideas into local idioms.

Early Industrialization

Railway expansion and textile production produced a nascent

working class. Labourers' exposure to socialist thought and nationalist rhetoric made them receptive to unionization. Their strikes and demonstrations gave the movement an urban, class-conscious dimension, balancing rural protest with industrial militancy.

Literature Review

Historians have approached peasant and working-class participation from economic, political, and subaltern perspectives.

- M. H. Assadi (1997) links Karnataka's peasant movements to colonial agrarian structures, showing how exploitation fostered early political assertion.
- Bipan Chandra et al. (1989) situate rural participation within Congress-led mass mobilizations, helping contextualize North Karnataka as part of a wider national wave.
- Ranajit Guha (1982) introduces the subaltern framework, emphasizing autonomous peasant consciousness visible in uprisings like Kittur and Sangolli Rayanna's.
- S. U. Kamath (1980) and K. A. Nilakanta Sastri (1955) provide regional historical syntheses linking colonial taxation, education, and local governance with emerging political awareness.
- James C. Scott (1985) conceptualizes "everyday forms of resistance," explaining how small acts—tax evasion, grain hoarding—represented silent defiance.
- Sumit Sarkar (1983) highlights class interactions in nationalist radicalization, useful for analysing North Karnataka's labour strikes.
- Eric Stokes (1978) identifies recurring structural causes—taxation, indebtedness, landlordism—behind agrarian rebellions across India, equally relevant to the Deccan experience.

Together these works guide a framework that views peasants and workers not as passive followers but as active creators of political meaning.

Conceptual Framework

- **Peasant:** Cultivators and agricultural labourers dependent on land, whose resistance combined economic and political motives.
- **Common Man:** Artisans, traders, teachers, and village elites who

mediated between local communities and nationalist networks.

- **Working Class:** Industrial and transport labourers who merged class-based economic struggles with anti-colonial activism.

Research Gap and Objectives

Existing scholarship privileges elite narratives, overlooking North Karnataka's grassroots during colonial times. This study fills that gap by:

1. Documenting participation forms of peasants, commoners, and workers;
2. Analysing socio-economic causes linking rural grievances with nationalist ideology;
3. Examining interactions between local and all-India movements;
4. Highlighting the role of labour unions and civic associations in politicizing economic protest.

Findings and Discussion

1. Multi-Layered Resistance

Resistance in North Karnataka was diverse-ranging from passive tax evasion to organized mass campaigns. Early economic protests evolved into structured political assertion under Gandhian influence. These transitions show a continuum of struggle rather than isolated acts.

2. Integration of Local and National Agendas

Regional grievances such as taxation and famine distress were re-framed as symbols of national oppression. The 1924 Belgaum Congress session exemplified how local issues gained national articulation. This integration ensured North Karnataka's struggles were central, not peripheral, to Indian nationalism.

3. The Common Man as Intermediary

Teachers, artisans, and small traders acted as communicators and organizers between rural masses and political elites. Through bhajan mandalis, village meetings, and swadeshi processions, they transformed abstract ideas into culturally resonant practices. Their mediation democratized the nationalist movement.

4. Emergence of Labour Consciousness

Industrial strikes of 1938 and 1940 represented a decisive step in linking class struggle with national politics. Workers viewed colonial

capitalism and imperialism as interlinked oppressions. Their organized protests strengthened socialist tendencies within the Congress and widened the social base of the freedom movement.

5. Women's Participation

Though sparsely documented, women's involvement—organizing boycotts, hosting activists, and joining satyagraha's—added a gendered dimension. Their participation challenged both colonial rule and patriarchal norms, extending the meaning of freedom to social equality.

6. Symbolic Continuity and Memory

Historical icons like Rani Chennamma and Sangolli Rayanna remained enduring symbols. Through folk songs and festivals, they transmitted anti-colonial values across generations. This memory culture gave legitimacy and moral depth to twentieth-century activism.

Conclusion

The freedom struggle in North Karnataka was a grassroots-driven, multi-class movement that transcended elite politics. Peasants expressed defiance through agrarian protest; workers through strikes; commoners through civic activism and social reform. These collective efforts forged a regional nationalism rooted in daily life and moral conviction.

By integrating local grievances into national ideology, the region transformed economic suffering into political assertion. Invocations of Kittur Chennamma and Sangolli Rayanna linked past heroism with present resistance, nurturing a distinct regional pride within the all-India movement. Women's contributions and everyday forms of resistance further democratized the struggle.

In subaltern terms, North Karnataka's movement embodied "everyday resistance" evolving into conscious political action. Ordinary villagers, artisans, and workers—once subjects of colonial exploitation—became active agents of liberation. Their unity converted personal suffering into collective strength, ensuring that India's independence was not the triumph of elites alone but of the common people who made freedom a lived experience.

References:

1. Assadi, M. H. Peasant Movement in Karnataka, 1980–94.
2. Shipra Publications, 1997.
3. Chandra, Bipan, et al. India's Struggle for Independence, 1857–1947. Penguin/Viking, 1989.
4. Guha, Ranajit, editor. Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society. Oxford UP, 1982.
5. Kamath, S. U. A Concise History of Karnataka: From Pre-historic Times to the Present. Archana Prakashana, 1980.
6. Nilakanta Sastri, K. A. A History of South India. Oxford UP, 1955.
7. Sarkar, Sumit. Modern India, 1885–1947. Macmillan, 1983.
8. Scott, James C. Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance. Yale UP, 1985.
9. Stokes, Eric. The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India. Cambridge UP, 1978.

Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

About the License:

© The Authors 2024. The text of this article is open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.