
**Economic Voices from the Margins:
Peasants and Working Classes in Historical Perspective**
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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the economic experiences of peasants and workers under colonial and early post-colonial regimes, highlighting their often-marginalized role in shaping economic structures. Colonial policies prioritized surplus extraction and export-oriented production, impoverishing rural producers and creating exploitative labor systems that shaped enduring inequalities. Peasants faced cash-crop cultivation, heavy taxation, and forced labor, while industrial workers endured low wages and insecure conditions. Agrarian uprisings, including Indian satyagraha's and African women's protests, reflected collective resistance rooted in subsistence rights. Post-independence land reforms and industrial policies aimed at equity were unevenly implemented, leaving structural disparities. Drawing on economic history and development perspectives, the paper underscores how peasants and workers contributed labor, resistance, and transformation while remaining constrained by colonial legacies.

KEYWORDS:

Colonial Economy, Peasant Movements, Working Class, Land Reforms
and Economic Inequality.

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Peasants and workers made up the majority of colonized societies, yet their economic roles and voices are often overlooked in historical narratives. This study foregrounds the experiences and agency of these groups from the late colonial period into the early post-independence decades. Colonial and corporate policies largely subjugated local producers, extracting surplus through taxes, tariffs, forced labor, and monopolized trade, while discouraging indigenous industry and landownership. This created dual economies, pushing peasants into export agriculture or exploitative wage labor, with profits flowing abroad.

The emergence of industry textiles, railways, and plantations produced a new working class whose rural ties persisted, and whose migration and labor patterns were shaped by caste, gender, and regional identities rather than a linear transition from peasantry to proletariat. Both peasants and workers actively resisted exploitation, fuelling anti-colonial nationalism and laying the groundwork for labor movements and leftist ideologies.

This paper examines four phases: (1) colonial economic policies and peasant marginalization, (2) the rise of industrial labor, (3) agrarian resistance movements, and (4) early postcolonial reforms, including land and labor rights. Comparative case studies and economic histories inform a narrative of how peasants and workers shaped and were shaped by the colonial and postcolonial world.

Literature Review

Scholars have examined peasants and workers from economic, social, and political perspectives. Classical historiography often portrayed colonial economies as enriching metropolitan elites at the expense of local producers, with taxes and repatriated profits hindering local capital formation. More recent studies highlight how monopolistic cash-crop schemes, forced labor, and trade restrictions undermined peasant self-sufficiency and constrained growth (Diamond 1988; Bertocchi & Canova).

The understanding of peasants and workers has evolved. Early Marxist debates questioned whether peasants were conservative or potential agents of change, while recent scholarship emphasizes contingent migration, political activism, and the “moral economy” of peasants (Chakrabarty 1989; Scott 1976). African studies show similar agrarian protests arising from subsistence concerns rather than formal political

identity.

Labor and development research documents exploitative wages, caste- and season-linked recruitment, and uneven benefits of postcolonial reforms, such as land redistribution or industrial policies. Overall, the literature underscores that marginalized groups exercised agency and contributed to economic and social change, but enduring institutional constraints limited equitable outcomes.

Rise of Industrial Labor and Urban Working Classes

The late colonial period saw the expansion of factories, mines, and ports, drawing rural workers into wage labor and forming a new urban and industrial working class. In South Asia, textile mills emerged in Bombay and Calcutta in the mid-19th century, later joined by jute, coal, and iron works. Similar patterns occurred globally: tea plantations in Assam and Kenya, copper mines in Katanga, and rubber factories in Malaya. These industries relied heavily on migratory workers. Recruitment often targeted distant regions: by 1897, Bengal jute mills employed many low-caste workers from UP, Bihar, and Orissa, while local Bengalis largely filled skilled roles. By 1929, only 17% of unskilled mill jobs were held by locals, highlighting caste and regional stratification.

Working conditions were harsh: long shifts, child labor, minimal safety, and overcrowded housing. In Calcutta jute mills around 1907, only 5% of workers were women due to restrictions on nocturnal labor. Some labor legislation, like India's 1881 Factory Act, was introduced, but enforcement was weak. Trade unions began forming in the 1920s, though leaders often faced political constraints. Industrial workers participated in strikes and nationalist movements, exemplified by the 1899 Bombay mill strike.

Not all labor was factory-based. Small peasant plots could not sustain growing populations, leading to seasonal migration. In Bengal, nearly a million peasants moved to Assam for harvests in the early 20th century, reflecting agricultural exhaustion. Seasonal migration linked villages to urban labor markets, while employers often preferred revolving workforces to suppress unionization. By independence, colonial economies had created large pools of landless rural poor and a nascent urban proletariat, marginalized by caste and class.

Agrarian Resistance and Peasant Movements

Where colonial rule disrupted agriculture, peasants often resisted. Movements typically arose from subsistence crises or overt exploitation, reflecting James Scott's concept of the "moral economy." Riots and protests emerged over taxes, crop failures, and landlord abuse. Notable examples include the Deccan riots of 1875, Indigo Revolt (1859–60), Bardoli satyagraha (1928), and Moplah uprising (1921). Local leadership, including Gandhi's mobilizations, often guided these protests, which were primarily driven by economic interests rather than abstract ideology.

Globally, similar patterns emerged. In Nigeria, the 1929 Igbo "Women's War" arose from taxation and price controls on palm oil. In colonial Burma, the Saya San rebellion (1930s) protested tax hikes and debt. Southeast Asia's Java War (1825–30) reflected mixed motives but extreme colonial repression. Women and lower-caste groups frequently led or joined movements, engaging in both violent and non-violent "everyday resistance" such as tax refusal, crop adulteration, and work slowdowns.

These movements highlight peasant agency. In Igboland, women demanded tax abolition and removal of chiefs. In India, Communist-led revolts, like Telangana (1946–51), explicitly targeted feudal landlords. Even post-independence, peasants continued to assert demands, indicating that marginalized groups consistently articulated economic grievances and influenced policy.

Early Post-Colonial Reforms and Developments

Independence brought new governments the challenge of integrating peasants and workers into national development. Land reforms and industrial policies aimed to reverse colonial inequities. In India, China, and parts of Africa and Latin America, zamindari abolition and land ceilings were enacted, and import-substitution industrialization sought to generate employment. Public-sector enterprises often recruited heavily from rural populations.

Outcomes were uneven. In India, landlords circumvented land ceilings, and by the 1960s, land inequality persisted in many states. In Africa, colonial-era chiefs retained power, frustrating landless farmers. Development studies document that colonial land tenure systems constrained investment, limiting agricultural and public health improvements.

For the working class, early postcolonial states expanded labor rights and social services. India's constitution guaranteed an 8-hour workday, union rights, and welfare boards. State-led economies prioritized heavy industry and public-sector jobs, offering stable employment and benefits. However, these protections applied to only a small fraction of the workforce; millions of small farmers, plantation workers, and informal laborers remained unprotected.

Economic reforms in the 1950s–70s had mixed social effects. The Green Revolution improved yields for some regions but largely benefited wealthier farmers with access to irrigation and credit, leaving poorer peasants vulnerable to debt and rising rents. Industrialization concentrated in regions with existing infrastructure, reinforcing regional disparities. Development scholars note that small elites often captured growth benefits while rural poor and urban informal workers remained marginalized. Marketing boards that regulated colonial trade now subsidized wealthier farmers, leaving tenants with minimal support.

Despite limitations, peasant and worker movements continued to shape policy. Political parties courted rural constituencies with promises of loans or minimum support prices. Many states abolished remnants of forced labor by the 1960s, reflecting peasant and worker influence. Post-independence reforms sought to address colonial marginalization but were only partially successful: many peasants remained impoverished, and large segments of workers continued in precarious employment.

Conclusion

Peasants and workers were both exploited by and resistant to colonial and early postcolonial economic systems. Colonial governments imposed revenue, market, and labor structures prioritizing extraction over local welfare. Peasants were often forced into cash crops, heavy taxes, or indentured labor, while an industrial proletariat emerged in urban centers, largely composed of migrant labor stratified by caste and region.

Rural and urban poor did not passively accept these conditions. Agrarian uprisings and everyday resistance emerged wherever subsistence was threatened, giving marginalized groups a voice. Early postcolonial reforms sought to address these grievances through land redistribution, labor protections, and industrial policies. Yet reforms were incomplete: land redistribution often failed, and many workers remained outside for-

mal protections.

Colonial legacies persisted. Economic structures favouring export crops and large estates endured, while social hierarchies influenced who benefited from development. Nevertheless, peasant and worker activism influenced politics and policy. Some farmers gained land or subsidies, and urban workers obtained higher wages and social protections. Development economists now recognize that equity-focused policies—land reform, credit cooperatives, inclusive industrialization—can enhance productivity and growth.

Overall, peasants and workers were agents of historical change, shaping both colonial and postcolonial societies. While exploitation entrenched marginalization, it also provoked movements demanding reform. Understanding the economic roles, constraints, and aspirations of these marginalized groups remains crucial for crafting policies that avoid repeating colonial inequities.

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