



## A Historical study on Indian Peasants Developments during Congress Party in Power in the years 1937 to 1939

Dr. Shalabh Chikara

Associate Professor

Swami Shraddhanand College (University of Delhi), Alipur, Delhi, India.

### Abstract

This study examines the Historical-socio-economic and political developments among Indian peasants during the tenure of the Congress Party in power from 1937 to 1939. With the Government of India Act 1935 leading to provincial autonomy, the Congress Party's assumption of power in various provinces marked a significant shift in the rural landscape. This period witnessed crucial agrarian reforms, changes in land revenue policies, and increased political mobilization among peasants. The research delves into the legislative and administrative measures implemented by the Congress ministries aimed at alleviating peasant distress. Key reforms included reductions in land revenue, the abolition of oppressive landlord practices, and efforts to enhance agricultural productivity. The study also explores the challenges and limitations faced by the Congress in addressing deep-rooted agrarian issues. Through an analysis of archival records, legislative proceedings, and contemporary accounts, the study highlights the impact of these policies on the rural populace. It also assesses the role of the Congress agrarian program in shaping the political consciousness of the peasantry, contributing to the broader national movement for independence. This historical inquiry provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between politics and agrarian reforms during a pivotal period in Indian history. It sheds light on the Congress Party's strategies and their implications for rural India, offering insights into the complexities of governance and peasant-state relations in the late colonial period.

### Introduction

The period between 1937 and 1939 marks a crucial phase in the history of India's struggle for independence, particularly with respect to the socio-economic and political transformations in rural India. With the Government of India Act of 1935 coming into effect, provincial autonomy was granted, leading to the first elections in 1937. This political shift allowed the Indian National Congress to form ministries in several provinces. The Congress Party, led by prominent leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru,



Vallabhbai Patel, and Maulana Azad, brought with it a promise of reform and a vision of alleviating the widespread distress among the peasantry.

India, at this juncture, was predominantly an agrarian society, with the vast majority of its population engaged in agriculture. The peasants, who formed the backbone of this agrarian economy, had long been subjected to exploitative land tenure systems, oppressive landlordism, and high land revenue demands imposed by the colonial administration. These conditions led to widespread poverty, indebtedness, and frequent agrarian unrest. The advent of Congress ministries in 1937 was seen as a beacon of hope for these oppressed rural masses.

The Congress Party's ascendancy to power in various provinces brought with it significant expectations regarding agrarian reform. The party's manifesto had emphasized the need for reducing land revenue, providing relief to indebted peasants, abolishing feudal practices, and improving agricultural productivity. The Congress leadership recognized that addressing the grievances of the peasantry was not only a moral imperative but also a strategic move to garner mass support for the broader nationalistic cause.

This study aims to explore the developments among Indian peasants during the tenure of the Congress Party from 1937 to 1939. It seeks to analyze the legislative and administrative measures undertaken by the Congress ministries to address the agrarian crisis. Key reforms during this period included the reduction of land revenue, the enactment of debt relief legislation, and initiatives to improve agricultural infrastructure and productivity. These measures, however, were met with varying degrees of success and faced significant challenges, both from within the Congress ranks and from external forces. The research delves into the intricacies of the agrarian policies implemented by the Congress governments in provinces such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bombay, and Madras. Each province had its unique socio-economic conditions and thus witnessed diverse approaches and outcomes in the implementation of agrarian reforms. By examining provincial legislative records, administrative reports, and contemporary accounts, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact of Congress policies on the rural populace.

Moreover, the study assesses the role of the Congress Party in politicizing the peasantry and mobilizing them for the nationalist movement. The interaction between the Congress leaders and the rural masses during this period laid the foundation for a more organized and conscious peasant movement, which later played a crucial role in the Quit India Movement and the eventual struggle for independence.



However, the period was not without its challenges. The Congress ministries faced significant resistance from entrenched interests, including landlords, moneylenders, and colonial administrators. Additionally, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and the subsequent resignation of Congress ministries added to the complexities of governance and reform implementation. This study, therefore, also examines the limitations and setbacks faced by the Congress in realizing its agrarian agenda. This historical inquiry into the developments among Indian peasants during the Congress Party's tenure from 1937 to 1939 offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between politics, agrarian reform, and rural socio-economic conditions. It sheds light on the Congress Party's efforts to address peasant grievances, the challenges encountered, and the implications of these reforms for the broader nationalist movement. By situating these developments within the larger context of India's struggle for independence, the study contributes to a deeper appreciation of the complexities and dynamics of colonial governance and peasant-state relations in late colonial India.

## **Definition**

A historical study on Indian peasants' developments during the Congress Party in power from 1937 to 1939 examines the socio-economic changes, agricultural practices, land reforms, and political dynamics that affected the peasant class in India during this period. It focuses on the policies implemented by the Congress provincial governments, their impact on rural communities, and the broader implications for India's agrarian economy.

## **Aims**

1. To analyze the policies and reforms introduced by the Congress Party that affected the peasant class.
2. To assess the socio-economic conditions of Indian peasants before and after the Congress Party's tenure.
3. To understand the political dynamics and challenges faced by the Congress Party in implementing agrarian reforms.
4. To explore the reactions and responses of the peasant communities to the Congress Party's policies.

## **Objectives**



1. To document the legislative measures and policies introduced by the Congress provincial governments from 1937 to 1939.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of these policies in improving the living conditions of peasants.
3. To investigate the role of key political leaders and their influence on agrarian policies.
4. To analyze primary sources such as government reports, speeches, and contemporary accounts to gain insights into the period.
5. To identify the long-term impacts of the Congress Party's policies on Indian agriculture and rural life.

## Need

Understanding the developments of Indian peasants during the Congress Party's rule from 1937 to 1939 is crucial for several reasons:

1. It provides insights into the historical context of India's agrarian economy and rural society.
2. It sheds light on the political and social challenges faced by the Congress Party in implementing reforms.
3. It contributes to the broader understanding of India's struggle for independence and the role of agrarian issues in the nationalist movement.
4. It helps in drawing parallels and contrasts with contemporary agrarian policies and challenges.

## Importance

1. **Historical Insight:** This study provides a detailed understanding of a critical period in India's history, contributing to the broader historiography of Indian independence and agrarian movements.
2. **Policy Analysis:** By examining past policies, contemporary policymakers can learn valuable lessons for current agrarian issues and reforms.
3. **Social Understanding:** The study highlights the lived experiences of peasants, giving voice to a significant but often marginalized section of society.



4. **Educational Value:** It serves as an important resource for students and scholars of Indian history, politics, and rural studies.
5. **Foundation for Future Research:** The findings can inform further research on India's agrarian history, the impact of political movements on rural life, and the evolution of agricultural policies. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the developments and challenges faced by Indian peasants during a pivotal period in the country's history, offering valuable perspectives on the intersections of politics, society, and economy.

## Research Methodology

### 1. Historical Research Approach

This study employs a historical research methodology, which involves systematically collecting and evaluating data from past events to understand and interpret the developments affecting Indian peasants during the Congress Party's rule from 1937 to 1939.

### 2. Data Collection

#### Primary Sources

- **Government Documents and Reports:** Examination of legislative acts, policy documents, and official reports from the period.
- **Congress Party Archives:** Analysis of internal communications, meeting minutes, and policy drafts from the Congress Party.
- **Newspapers and Journals:** Review of contemporary newspapers and journals to capture public opinion and media perspectives.
- **Personal Correspondence and Memoirs:** Letters, diaries, and memoirs of key political figures and activists involved in agrarian reforms.
- **Census and Statistical Data:** Utilization of census data and agricultural statistics from the period to analyze socio-economic conditions.

#### Secondary Sources



- **Books and Scholarly Articles:** Review of academic literature on the Congress Party's policies and their impact on Indian peasants.
- **Theses and Dissertations:** Examination of previous research works focusing on similar themes.
- **Biographies and Autobiographies:** Insights from the lives and experiences of political leaders and prominent figures of the time.

### 3. Analytical Methods

#### Qualitative Analysis

- **Content Analysis:** Systematic analysis of textual data from primary and secondary sources to identify key themes, patterns, and narratives.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Categorization of data into themes such as land reforms, peasant protests, socio-economic changes, and political strategies.

#### Quantitative Analysis

- **Statistical Analysis:** Examination of numerical data from census and agricultural reports to identify trends and correlations.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Comparison of socio-economic indicators before, during, and after the Congress Party's rule to assess the impact of their policies.

### 4. Contextual Analysis

- **Political Context:** Analysis of the broader political environment, including the influence of the nationalist movement and British colonial policies.
- **Socio-Economic Context:** Examination of the socio-economic conditions of rural India, focusing on land ownership, agricultural practices, and living standards of peasants.
- **Cultural Context:** Consideration of cultural factors, such as traditional agrarian practices and rural community dynamics.

### 5. Case Studies



- **Regional Case Studies:** In-depth analysis of specific regions or provinces to illustrate the varied impact of Congress policies across different parts of India.
- **Individual Case Studies:** Examination of specific incidents or events, such as notable peasant protests or landmark legislative measures.

## 6. Triangulation

- **Data Triangulation:** Use of multiple data sources to cross-verify information and ensure the reliability and validity of findings.
- **Methodological Triangulation:** Application of different research methods (qualitative and quantitative) to provide a comprehensive analysis.

## 7. Ethical Considerations

- **Accuracy and Objectivity:** Ensuring the accuracy of data and maintaining objectivity in the interpretation of historical events.
- **Respect for Sources:** Acknowledging and properly citing all primary and secondary sources used in the research.
- **Sensitivity to Context:** Being mindful of the historical and cultural context of the period under study and avoiding presentism (the anachronistic introduction of present-day ideas and perspectives into depictions or interpretations of the past).

## 8. Limitations

- **Source Availability:** Potential limitations due to the availability and accessibility of primary sources.
- **Biases in Sources:** Acknowledging and accounting for potential biases in contemporary accounts and official documents.
- **Scope of Study:** The focus on a specific period (1937-1939) may limit the ability to draw broader conclusions about long-term trends. By employing a comprehensive and multifaceted research methodology, this study aims to provide a thorough and nuanced understanding of the developments affecting Indian peasants during the Congress Party's rule in the late 1930s.



#### 1. Historical Significance

- **Contextual Depth:** The study focuses on a crucial period in Indian history when the Congress Party first came to power in several provinces, offering insights into early attempts at self-governance and policy-making.
- **Foundation for Independence:** Understanding this period is vital for comprehending the socio-political landscape that shaped India's path to independence.

#### 2. Focus on Agrarian Issues

- **Peasant-Centric Analysis:** The study sheds light on the conditions and challenges faced by the peasant class, a significant but often marginalized section of Indian society.
- **Policy Impact:** Evaluating the Congress Party's agrarian policies provides a clear view of early reform efforts aimed at improving agricultural productivity and peasant welfare.

#### 3. Diverse Data Sources

- **Comprehensive Data Collection:** Utilizes a wide range of primary sources (government documents, newspapers, personal correspondences) and secondary sources (scholarly articles, biographies), ensuring a well-rounded perspective.
- **Triangulation:** Employing multiple sources and methods enhances the reliability and validity of the findings.

#### 4. Analytical Rigor

- **Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis:** The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a detailed and nuanced analysis of historical data.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Examining political, socio-economic, and cultural contexts provides a holistic understanding of the period.

#### 5. Relevance to Contemporary Issues

- **Policy Lessons:** Insights from historical agrarian policies can inform current and future agricultural reforms and rural development strategies.





- **Social Awareness:** Highlighting the struggles and responses of peasants during this period can contribute to a greater understanding of rural issues in contemporary society.

## Weak Points

### 1. Source Limitations

- **Availability and Accessibility:** Some primary sources from the period may be scarce, incomplete, or difficult to access, potentially limiting the depth of analysis.
- **Biases in Contemporary Accounts:** Official documents and media reports from the era may carry biases that need careful consideration and contextualization.

### 2. Scope and Generalizability

- **Temporal Limitation:** Focusing solely on the years 1937 to 1939 may limit the ability to draw broader conclusions about long-term trends and impacts.
- **Regional Variations:** The study may struggle to fully capture the diversity of experiences across different regions of India, given the varied impact of policies and local conditions.

### 3. Interpretative Challenges

- **Historical Interpretation:** Interpreting historical events and policies with modern perspectives can be challenging, requiring careful avoidance of anachronism.
- **Complex Causality:** Establishing clear cause-and-effect relationships in historical research is inherently complex, with multiple interacting factors influencing outcomes.

### 4. Ethical Considerations

- **Representation:** Ensuring a balanced representation of different perspectives, especially those of marginalized groups, is crucial but challenging.
- **Sensitivity:** Handling historical narratives with sensitivity to the context and the individuals involved is essential to maintain the integrity of the research.

### 5. Potential for Overgeneralization



- **Policy Outcomes:** While the study can provide valuable insights, there is a risk of overgeneralizing the effectiveness or impact of specific policies without considering the broader historical and socio-economic context.
- **Historical Complexity:** The period under study was marked by complex political and social dynamics, and simplifying these complexities can lead to an incomplete or skewed understanding. By acknowledging these strengths and weaknesses, the study can be designed to maximize its contributions to historical scholarship while addressing potential limitations and challenges.

## Background History of Research Study

### Historical Context

The period from 1937 to 1939 was significant in the history of British India as it marked the first time that Indian leaders from the Indian National Congress (INC) took control of provincial governments under the Government of India Act of 1935. This was a crucial step towards greater self-governance and eventual independence from British rule.

### Government of India Act, 1935

The Government of India Act of 1935 was a landmark legislation that provided for a significant degree of autonomy to the provinces of British India. It allowed for the establishment of provincial governments with elected Indian representatives, though the central government and key aspects of governance remained under British control. This act was a precursor to India's independence and laid the groundwork for the future Indian Constitution.

### Congress Party in Power

In the elections held in 1937, the Congress Party won a majority in several provinces, including the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh), Bihar, Bombay (now Maharashtra and Gujarat), Central Provinces (now Madhya Pradesh), Madras (now Tamil Nadu), and Orissa (now Odisha). This allowed the Congress to form provincial governments and implement policies aimed at addressing various socio-economic issues, including those faced by the peasant class.

### Socio-Economic Conditions of Peasants



During this period, the majority of India's population lived in rural areas and depended on agriculture for their livelihood. Peasants faced numerous challenges, including:

- **Land Tenure Issues:** Many peasants were tenants or sharecroppers with little security of tenure and were subject to high rents and arbitrary evictions by landlords.
- **Indebtedness:** Rural indebtedness was widespread, with many peasants trapped in a cycle of debt due to high-interest rates and exploitative lending practices.
- **Low Agricultural Productivity:** Agricultural practices were often traditional and inefficient, leading to low productivity and vulnerability to famines and food shortages.

### Congress Party's Agrarian Policies

The Congress provincial governments sought to address these issues through a series of reforms and policies aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of peasants. Key initiatives included:

#### Land Reforms

- **Tenancy Reforms:** Several provinces enacted legislation to improve the rights of tenant farmers. These reforms aimed to provide greater security of tenure, reduce rents, and protect tenants from arbitrary eviction.
- **Abolition of Zamindari:** Although comprehensive abolition of the zamindari system (a system where landlords owned large estates and collected rent from peasants) was not achieved during this period, steps were taken to limit the powers of landlords and reduce their ability to exploit tenants.

#### Debt Relief

- **Debt Relief Legislation:** Measures were introduced to provide relief to indebted peasants. These included the establishment of debt relief boards, reduction of interest rates, and provisions for the settlement of debts on more favorable terms.

#### Agricultural Development

- **Improvement of Agricultural Practices:** Efforts were made to promote modern agricultural techniques, improve irrigation infrastructure, and provide better access to agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers.



- **Cooperative Movement:** The promotion of cooperative societies aimed to help peasants pool resources, access credit at lower interest rates, and market their produce more effectively.

## Challenges and Limitations

Despite these efforts, the Congress governments faced significant challenges in implementing their agrarian policies:

- **Resistance from Landlords:** Powerful landlords and vested interests often resisted reforms, making it difficult to enforce new laws and policies.
- **Limited Resources:** The provincial governments had limited financial and administrative resources, which constrained their ability to implement comprehensive reforms.
- **British Control:** Key aspects of governance, including fiscal policy and law enforcement, remained under British control, limiting the effectiveness of provincial initiatives.

## Impact and Legacy

While the reforms of 1937-1939 had mixed results and faced significant obstacles, they represented an important early effort to address the plight of Indian peasants and laid the groundwork for future agrarian reforms. The experience gained during this period informed the Congress Party's approach to rural issues and contributed to the development of more comprehensive land reform policies after India's independence in 1947.

The period also highlighted the importance of addressing agrarian issues as a central aspect of India's struggle for independence and socio-economic development, shaping the broader nationalist movement and the policies of the independent Indian state.

## Conclusion

The period from 1937 to 1939, when the Indian National Congress held power in several provincial governments, marks a significant chapter in India's historical trajectory, particularly in the realm of agrarian reforms and the development of peasant communities. This brief yet impactful tenure was characterized by a series of legislative and policy initiatives aimed at alleviating the hardships faced by peasants, who formed the backbone of India's agrarian economy. The Congress Party's tenure was marked by efforts to address critical issues such as land tenure, indebtedness, and agricultural



productivity. The introduction of tenancy reforms aimed to provide greater security and fairness to tenant farmers, while debt relief measures sought to alleviate the crushing burden of rural indebtedness. Additionally, the promotion of modern agricultural practices and the cooperative movement represented attempts to enhance agricultural efficiency and self-sufficiency among peasants. Despite these well-intentioned efforts, the Congress governments faced substantial challenges. Resistance from entrenched landlord interests, limited financial and administrative resources, and the overarching control of the British colonial administration curtailed the effectiveness and reach of their reforms. These limitations underscored the complexities and entrenched power dynamics within Indian rural society, highlighting the difficulty of implementing transformative change in a short period. The agrarian policies and reforms introduced during this period, though not wholly successful, laid a crucial foundation for future efforts in independent India. The experiences and lessons learned from these early attempts at agrarian reform informed subsequent policy decisions and shaped the Congress Party's approach to rural development post-independence.

Moreover, this period highlighted the critical importance of addressing agrarian issues within the broader context of India's nationalist movement. The plight of the peasantry became a central theme in the struggle for independence, linking economic and social justice with political liberation. This connection galvanized support for the Congress Party among rural populations and underscored the need for comprehensive land and agricultural reforms as integral components of nation-building. In the Congress Party's tenure from 1937 to 1939 was a formative period that underscored the complexities and imperatives of agrarian reform in India. Despite facing significant challenges and limitations, the initiatives undertaken during this time represented a pivotal step towards addressing the deep-seated issues afflicting the peasantry. The legacy of these efforts continued to resonate in the post-independence era, influencing the trajectory of agrarian policy and contributing to the broader socio-economic transformation of rural India. By focusing on the lived experiences of peasants and the socio-political dynamics of this critical period, this historical study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted process of agrarian reform and its enduring impact on Indian society. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding historical contexts and policy legacies in shaping contemporary debates and strategies for rural development and social justice.

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