

HISTORY

British Dominance

and

Indian Independence

A module from the book

SOCIAL STUDIES

Class 8

AN EKLAVYA PUBLICATION



HISTORY

British Dominance and Indian Independence

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CHAPTER 3

British Rule and The Peasants of India

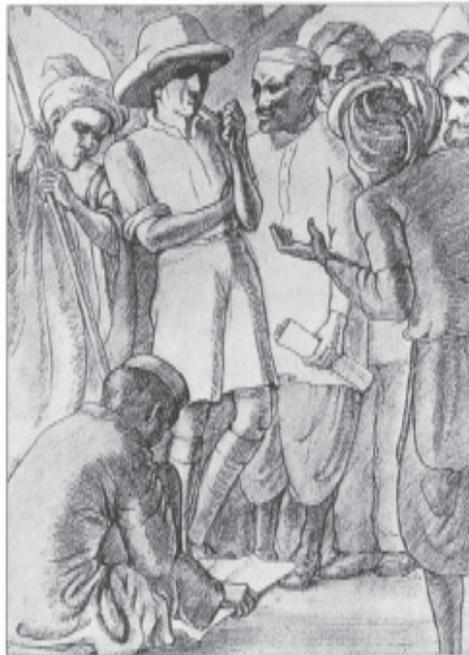


Pay your Tax or your Land will be Auctioned Off!

Like the Mughal rulers, the British also wanted to collect as much tax from the peasants as they could. During Mughal rule, if peasants did not pay their land tax on time, the amount they owed would be noted against their names. They would then have to pay it later. If they didn't, it would be taken from them by force, if necessary.

But the British introduced a different system. If peasants or zamindars did not pay their tax on time, their land was sold off in an auction to whoever offered the highest price. The government

would take the tax from the money paid by whoever bought the land. If the land had been sold for more than the amount of the tax that was owed, the remaining money would be given to the original owner, who would no longer own the land.



Peasants arguing with a British officer about their problems.

You may have read or heard about auctions, for example in a mandi or vegetable market. Describe an auction.

If you don't know about auctions, ask your teacher to explain how they are conducted. See how selling things in an auction is different from the way things are sold in shops in a market.

Peasants and zamindars faced various kinds of problems in those days. Sometimes their crops would be destroyed by floods or famines. Sometimes the prices of crops would be so low in the market that the peasants got very little money when they sold their crops. When this happened, they found it difficult to pay their taxes. But the British government wouldn't listen to the peasants' problems or exempt them from paying tax. It did not even give people extra time to pay their taxes when they had a shortage of money. Instead, the government would get a court order to auction off their land.

Thus, the land of hundreds of peasants and zamindars was auctioned off by the British rulers. Many peasants had borrowed money from moneylenders in order to pay their taxes. However,

if they did not repay their loans on time, the moneylenders also went to court to get their land auctioned to recover the loan money.

What were two main aspects of the British system of collecting land tax?

What effects might the British system of tax collection have had on:

- (a) **ordinary peasants**
- (b) **rich zamindars**
- (c) **moneylenders**

With this new British rule for collecting tax, many peasants fell deep into debt. But there was also another reason why their debts kept increasing. It was because there was an increase in foreign trade and the export of agricultural produce.

Let's study the example of cotton trade to understand the effect it had on peasants.

Cotton Export and its Effects on Maratha Peasants

In the 1700's India had been exporting a lot of cotton cloth to Britain and other parts of Europe. But by the middle of the nineteenth century (around 1850), many mechanised cloth mills were being set up in Britain to cheaply produce cotton cloth. These mills got most of their raw cotton from the USA.

When a civil war broke out in the USA in 1861, the supply of cotton to the mills in Britain almost came to a halt. As the mill owners continuously needed cotton for their factories - they began buying cotton from India. Hence the demand for Indian cotton increased.



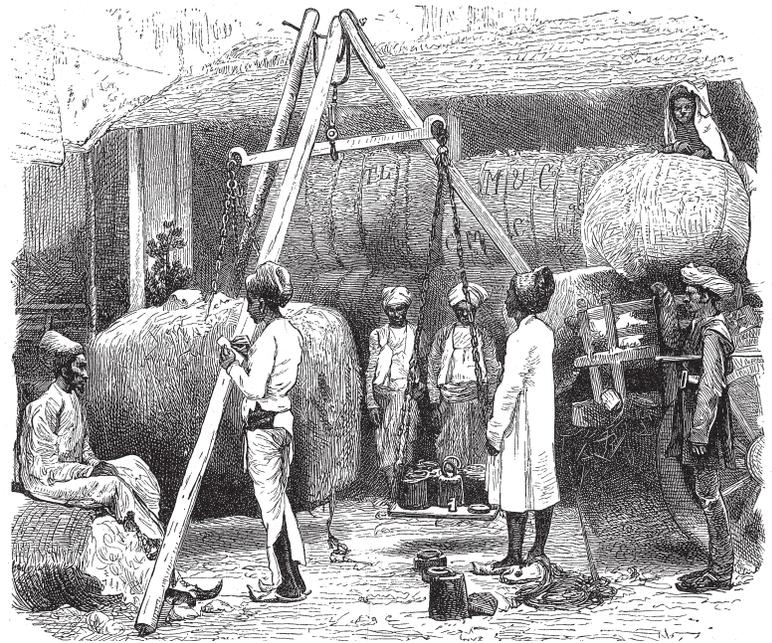
This led to an increase in the price of cotton. From 3 annas per kilo, the price of cotton rose to 12 annas per kilo. Many peasants in cotton growing areas like Maharashtra began growing cotton instead of food grains because of the high price it was fetching in the market. They began to take loans from moneylenders so as to increase the area under cotton cultivation.

Since cotton cannot be grown in Britain's cold climate, it was brought there from other countries. This picture from 1872 shows a trader sampling the raw cotton available in a warehouse in Kolkata.

In 1865, the civil war in the USA came to an end and the supply of cotton to Britain was resumed. The demand for cotton from India fell and so did its price. Cotton that fetched 12 annas per kilo in 1864 now fetched only 6 annas per kilo. The peasants suffered a lot as they could not earn enough to pay back the loans they had taken. Added to this, they also had to pay tax to the government. The moneylenders got richer and richer as more and more peasants came under their grip.

The suffering Maratha peasants began revolting against the moneylenders to whom they were so much in debt.

Thus, the growth of foreign trade and events in faraway countries like the USA led to large profits as well as heavy losses for Indian peasants. Besides cotton, Indian wheat, sugar, indigo, jute, tea, etc were also sold in other countries. When the prices of these crops increased or decreased, Indian peasants were affected.



Weighing cotton in India for export to Great Britain

Which of the following statements are false? Correct them:

1. In the 19th century, cotton was grown in the USA and India, and supplied to cloth factories in Britain.

2. Between 1861 and 1865 there was a large increase in the supply of cotton from the USA to Britain.
3. British factories that produced cloth preferred Indian cotton to cotton from the USA.
4. Indian peasants increased cotton production when the peasants of the USA could not grow the crop because of the civil war.
5. Cotton prices fell sharply when demand went up.



Maratha Peasants Revolt Against Moneylenders

In 1875, the peasants of Pune and Ahmednagar in Maharashtra revolted against the moneylenders of their villages.

In village after village, the peasants surrounded the houses of moneylenders and tried to seize their account books. If a moneylender refused to hand over the account books, they burnt down his house. Other villagers supported the peasants. Even the barbers and washermen refused to serve the moneylenders. Many moneylenders fled from their villages to escape the anger of the people.

Here is how the peasants explained the reason for their uprising: "These moneylenders get *kurki* (notice of auction) from the court. If we cannot pay our debts they auction our homes and land. For generations, these people have kept us burdened with debt. However much we pay, the debt is never fully repaid. They have put false debts against our names in their account books. Only when their account books are burnt to ashes will our problems be solved."

Eventually the government tried to tackle the problems faced by the peasants and a new law was passed to control moneylenders so that they could not easily cheat the peasants.

*How did the trade in cotton add to the debts of the Maratha peasants?
Why did the Maratha peasants revolt against the moneylenders?*



Who owns the land?

One question troubled the British a lot - from whom should they collect land tax in India? They kept debating and trying different solutions to this problem at different times and in different parts of India.

The British knew that the zamindars were powerful people and if they won the support of the zamindars, it would be easier for them to rule India. They also knew that it was difficult to collect tax directly from hundreds of thousands of peasants.

The British also wanted to collect tax from the actual **owners** of the land who either worked on the land themselves or got the lands cultivated by others. Now the question was, who



were the owners of the land? There were no owners as such in Mughal times - land was not something that was bought and sold like it is today. The zamindars, jagirdars and others had the right to collect land tax and other payments from the peasants who were tilling the land. The peasants had the right to occupy and cultivate the land. The zamindars could inherit, gift, or

sell their rights to collect taxes from the peasants. The peasants could also inherit, gift, or sell the right to cultivate it. But not many peasants would 'buy' land, because they could just start cultivating some of the available unused land without having to pay anything.

However, by the 19th century, population was rising and new land suitable for cultivation was becoming scarce. It was no longer so easy for peasants to shift to new places and find untilled land to plough.

If land had not become scarce, would the British have been able to auction the land of peasants and zamindars who could not pay the taxes on time?

In 1793 the British decided to declare the zamindars as the owners of the land and collect tax only from them. They argued, "We have a rule that if people fail to pay the full tax in time, we auction their land to get the money. So the zamindar who we collect tax from must be considered the owner of the land, otherwise whose land will we auction if tax is not paid? If a person is paying the tax for some land, how could someone else be owning the land?" The zamindars were given full rights over the land, thus making the peasants their tenants or **sharecroppers**. They no longer had any rights over the land they cultivated. This system was put into practice in Bengal, Bihar and the Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh. The revenue for the land was fixed permanently and the zamindars had to pay the tax to the British by a fixed date each year.

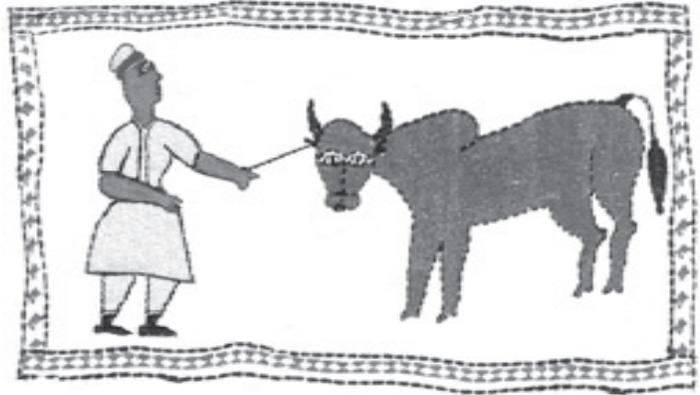
Compare the systems of land ownership and tax payment before and after 1793.

If you were a peasant during British times, what would you think about the new system of land ownership? What would you think if you were a zamindar?

The Peasants' Land and the Zamindars' Rights

This story is based on the conditions described in government reports of that time.

Once they became legal owners of the land, the zamindars took advantage of their new rights and the helplessness of the peasants. The peasants could be evicted from the land easily. It was also very difficult for them to leave the villages, as there was no land available elsewhere. They were becoming more and more indebted. The following story of a peasant from Awadh, UP, shows how the zamindars treated their tenants.



Gayadeen was a poor peasant who lived in a village in Awadh region. One day he went to the market to sell his cow.

Why do you think he wanted to sell his cow? This is what Gayadeen had to say: "Every year, the zamindar demands a bigger and bigger share of the money I get after I sell the crops. He keeps increasing the amount every year. How can I pay him when I don't have any money? He filed a case in the court against me. Now I have to sell my cow to pay him."

The zamindar let Gayadeen plough the land only after he paid the money.

Next year Gayadeen arranged the marriage of his 10-year-old daughter to an old man. Why do you think Gayadeen made his young daughter marry such an old man?



This is what he had to say: "The zamindar wants me to pay a *nazrana* of Rs 500 this year. He says he will let me plough the land only if I pay the *nazrana*. If I don't pay he will evict me from the land. What am I to do? This old man has given me Rs 500 for my daughter. I will pay this money to the zamindar so that I can plough the field. Otherwise, what will I eat?"

The zamindar took a share of the crop from the land cultivated by Gayadeen. Why didn't Gayadeen refuse to pay him? Why did the zamindar take nazrana from Gayadeen?

Like Gayadeen, many hundreds of thousands of peasants were reduced to a pitiable state. They filled the purses of the zamindars with their hard earned income. The zamindars took advantage of the peasants. They took more money from the peasants than the tax they paid to the government. Of course they never gave receipts for the extra money they collected from the peasants.

The zamindars kept this extra money because they felt it was their share. According to them, the peasants were only tenants on their land. Because the zamindars were now the owners of the land they began to increase their share whenever they felt like it. They also gave out their land for farming to whomever they favoured and evicted those they did not like.

The Zamindars Exploit the Peasants in Many Ways



Even before the zamindars became legal owners of the peasants' lands, they had some land of their own. These were known as *khudkasht* (खुदकाशत) or *seer* (सीर) lands. The zamindars had sometimes hired labourers to till these lands or else they gave them to the peasants on sharecropping.

When the zamindars became owners of the peasants' land they thought, "Why should we pay someone to cultivate our seer land? Why don't we just make our tenants cultivate this land for us?"

So the peasants were forced to do *begar* (बेगार: work without wages) on the seer land of the zamindars. If they refused, the zamindar's soldiers would beat them up and force them to do *begar*. The zamindars soon began terrorising the peasants. Their soldiers would even catch peasants walking on the road and force them to do *begar* in the zamindars' fields.

Because they were forced to work on the zamindars' fields, many peasants could not cultivate their own fields properly. They would also not improve their fields. Their plight can be seen in a government report written in 1878. The report says that the peasants do not try to dig wells on their land or irrigate it, nor do they try to *bund* their fields or dig drains or use fertilisers. "They do nothing to improve their land because they fear they can be evicted from their land at any time. If they improve their farming, the zamindar immediately increases the share he takes from them. But the zamindars also prevent the peasants from improving their fields because they are afraid that the peasants would then start asserting their rights over the land."

What were khudkasht lands?

In whose fields did the peasants have to do begar?

Why were the peasants not keen on improving cultivation in the fields rented out to them by the zamindars? Why were the zamindars also not keen to improve the land?

Countless Collections, Cesses and Payments

So the peasants faced many problems on the land they cultivated. The zamindars also tried to extract as much money as they could from the peasants under a variety of pretexts. If the commissioner saheb came on a tour to the area, the peasants were forced to pay a contribution known as 'commissioneraavan'. Similarly, the peasants had to make a contribution known as 'hathiaavan' for the elephants of the zamindar. If the zamindar wanted to buy a motor car, a 'motoraavan' was collected. Or if he bought horses the peasants had to give a 'ghodaavan'. The zamindars extracted countless such contributions from the peasants. It was reported that once a *thakurain* (zamindar's wife) had to spend a lot of money to treat an abscess infection and the peasants had to contribute a 'pakaavan' fund to cover the cost of treatment. They also had to regularly supply ghee, milk, vegetables, *gur*, straw, cowdung cakes, etc free of cost to the zamindar's house.

This was the situation in many provinces of India. Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh had many big and powerful zamindars. Each of them owned dozens or even hundreds of villages. The peasants kept trying to resist the excesses of these zamindars.

The Peasants Protest

Awadh Peasants Protest Against Oppression by Zamindars

In 1920-22, the peasants of Awadh in Uttar Pradesh took out huge processions to protest against the zamindars who were extracting money from them. Many zamindars were socially boycotted and driven from the villages. The peasants also refused to till the fields of those zamindars who tried to evict their tenants or claimed too much rent from them.

The peasants formed 'kisan sabhas' to carry their agitation forward. Baba Ram Chandra, Jhinguri Singh, Suraj Prasad, Madari Pasi were some of the well-known peasant leaders in Uttar Pradesh. The British government helped the zamindars to suppress the revolts. But the British saw how powerful and impressive the agitation of the peasants was, so they soon made laws in favour of the tenants.

Bardoli Peasants Protest Against Increasing Land Tax

The British had made different arrangements to collect land revenue in different parts of India. They found out that a lot of the money the zamindars collected from the peasants did not reach the government but was pocketed by the zamindars themselves. So in some areas, like Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, the British decided to do away with the zamindari system. Instead they would fix the amount of land tax for each cultivating peasant and collect the tax directly from the peasants. They also gave up the idea of permanently fixing the revenue rates. They decided to fix the revenue rates for thirty years at a time. Peasants who cultivated their own land would be responsible for paying the same amount of tax each year for 30 years.

Now let's find out exactly what happened when this system was implemented in Bardoli (बाड़दौली) Taluka of Surat district of Gujarat.

In 1896 the government had fixed the land revenue in Bardoli for thirty years. In 1926, when the thirty years had ended, the government had to again decide the amount of tax – whether it should be kept at the same rate for the next thirty years or increased.

The government decided to increase the tax by 22 percent. When the peasants of Bardoli found out about the government's decision they were furious. They said, "There is no reason for increasing the tax so much. The government should first study the problem more carefully. It should not increase the tax just like that. We won't pay the increased rates. If the government wants, we will continue paying the tax we are paying now. But if it doesn't agree, we will not pay even a single paisa."

The government did not agree to the demand of the peasants. It was adamant about increasing the tax.

The peasants decided to launch an agitation against the government. They asked Vallabhbhai Patel and Mahatma Gandhi





from the Congress Party to support their agitation. The Congress party had been formed by then and was working for the freedom of the country. Members of the Congress party came to Bardoli to support the peasants. In all, 137 villages took part in this movement which was launched in February 1928.

Seize and Auction

The peasants of Bardoli devised many ways of not paying tax. As we saw earlier, the government would seize the crops, land, utensils, jewellery, animals and other things belonging to the peasants who refused to pay tax and sell these items to recover the amount of the tax.

In many villages of Bardoli, the peasants hid their utensils, jewellery and other possessions in the houses of their relatives living in other places. Boys from the villages would hide in trees and keep watch. As soon as government officials were spotted they would blow a bugle to let the village people know. On hearing the warning the villagers would set loose their cows, bulls and buffaloes and lock their houses. The government officials then had no way of

finding out which animals belonged to which peasant. So, they could not confiscate things from the peasants so easily.

The village people also refused to give the government officials food, water or a place to rest. These officers would be forced to leave, frustrated, in the blazing sun of April-May.

If the government officials did manage to confiscate some animals, the peasants would go and set them free at night. The peasants who refused to pay tax even found a way to get back their land after it was auctioned away by the government. If some people from the village bought the land, peasants would get together and put so much pressure on them that they would be forced to return the land to the original owner. If people from outside purchased the land and came to the village to till it, the villagers would forcibly evict them.

Many peasants tried to secretly pay tax because they feared their land would be confiscated. However, the agitating peasants decided to boycott these people who gave in and agreed to pay tax. They stopped eating, drinking and sitting with them. This is how they put pressure on such peasants and made them join the agitation.

In this way many peasants were able to protect their lands from confiscation and continue their protest against the government. However, there were still many peasants who suffered huge losses. Troops of policemen and tax officers would break the locks of their homes and destroy them while confiscating utensils, jewellery and other household goods. There was no guarantee that the confiscated land or goods would be returned. A large number of peasants never got their auctioned land back. However, the peasants continued to show great courage and refused to pay tax. They came out in open confrontation of the government and refused to be cowed down by the police or army. They were not even afraid of the threat of being jailed.

They were defiant, saying, "If the army turns up, can they extract tax from us? Will all these white people load our land on an aeroplane and take it to Britain? Let them try. We'll see what they can do."

The peasants' movement received support from the educated people as well as the mill workers and other people. In the end, the government had to bend to the will of the people and the tax was increased by only 6 percent.

After seeing what happened in Bardoli, the government decided not to increase the tax in other places. The peasants of Bardoli had made the British government bow to their will and this sent a wave of joy and enthusiasm throughout the country. Gandhiji said that movements like the one at Bardoli would help the country to free itself from British rule.

Why did the peasants of Bardoli refuse to pay tax?

What losses did the agitating peasants of Bardoli have to suffer?

Do you think the Bardoli movement was successful?

The Telengana Movement in Andhra Pradesh (1946-50)

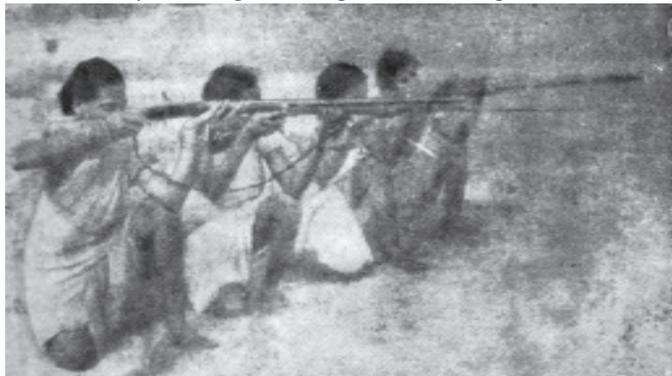
Another very powerful protest movement by the peasants took place in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh. This region was not under British rule but was under the rule of the Nizam of Hyderabad.

The protest began in 1946-47 in a village called Bishnupur. The zamindar of the village, who owned 40,000 acres of land, tried to grab a small piece of land belonging to a poor washerwoman. The peasants rose up in protest. Within a few days, the protest spread far and wide. It was led by people belonging to the Communist Party. The peasants bought guns and formed their own army and drove the officials and zamindars away from almost 3,000 villages. They seized their land and redistributed it among the peasants and labourers.

The peasants set up their own administration in these villages. *Begar* was stopped, the wages of the labourers were increased and land was restored to tenants who had been evicted earlier by the zamindars. A rule was made that no one would have the right to own more than 100 acres of non-irrigated land or 10 acres of irrigated land. If anyone had more land than this, the excess was distributed among poor peasants.

Meanwhile, India became independent in 1947. After Independence, the Indian government promised the peasants of Telengana that it would make laws in their favour and asked them to end their agitation. It also sent in the army to suppress the movement.

Women practicing shooting in the Telengana Movement



What did the peasants of Awadh want?

What did the agitating peasants of Telengana do to help their people?

The zamindars of Awadh and Telengana were powerful people. Yet for long they could not resist the agitating peasants. Discuss why.

The Peasants and Laws in Independent India

The agitations during British rule focused attention on the problems, demands and hopes of the peasants. It was clear that the peasants wanted the government to reduce tax and free them from the stranglehold of moneylenders and the terror of the zamindars. They also demanded that the land should belong to the peasant who actually ploughed it.

After India became independent, tax was greatly reduced. The government also opened banks and co-operative societies to give loans to the indebted peasants. But the biggest decision the government made was to put an end to the zamindari system in all of India.

The law to abolish the zamindari system was passed in 1950. The government decided to collect tax directly from each peasant and not through the zamindars.

The law also said that the zamindars would be the owners of their own seer land but would no longer have any right to the peasants' lands. The peasants were made the owners of their own land.

Naturally, the zamindars were not happy. They demanded compensation from the government for taking away their 'right' to the lands of the peasants.

Do you think the demand of the zamindars was just and correct?

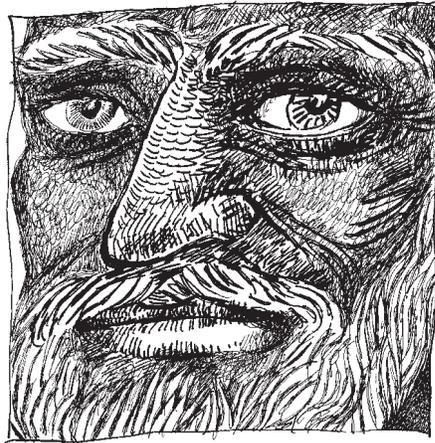
Here is a folk song from Haryana sung in the days when India became independent. It expresses what the peasants were hoping to have after five years.

पाँच साल के बाद देखना,
दुखिया ज़मींदार नहीं रहणे
सब जाति इकस्तर होवै,
कोई ताबेदार नहीं रहणे।

मशीन काट दे, मशीन काढ़ दे,
आराम बड़ा देगी।
भारतवासी कहै या आज़ादी गंगा,
किसी धाम बड़ा देगी।

It is hoped that in five years the miseries of the peasants would be eliminated, all castes would become equal and no one would dominate others. Machines would do all the work and people would live in comfort. This independence would make villages prosperous and they would become places of pilgrimage.

The government decided to pay compensation to the zamindars. It acquired land from them after paying some compensation. When the government found that it had spent a lot of money in paying compensation, it made a rule that the peasants would be given their land only if they paid some price for it. This was not acceptable to many people. Those peasants who could pay, became the owners of their land and were freed from the burden of the zamindari system. However, hundreds of thousands of poor peasants could not pay the price. So they remained landless sharecroppers or labourers and had to keep working in the fields of big peasants and one-time zamindars.



What laws have been implemented to protect the interests of tenants and agricultural labourers in the area where you live?

Even today, all those who till the soil in India are not the owners of the land they till. There have been agitations even after Independence to restore land rights to those who plough the land.

Find some elders in your area who are from villages that used to be under a zamindar (or malguzar). Find out from them what kind of relationship the zamindar had with the peasants of the village.

What changes have occurred in your area after the law to abolish the zamindari system was passed?

Are there any landless peasants or agricultural labourers in your area? Why don't they have land of their own?

However, after Independence some laws were also made to safeguard the interests of the tenants, so that no one could claim an unfair share from them and they could not be evicted from the land without reason. Some laws were also made in the interests of labourers. But big peasants found many ways of ignoring these laws.

Exercises

1. Write at least fifteen sentences to describe the impact of British rule on the peasants of India.
2. What effect did the 1861-65 war in the USA have on the Maratha peasants? Explain.
3. Do peasants suffer severe losses if the price of a crop falls drastically even today?
4. In what ways did peasants fight the oppression they felt from moneylenders, zamindars and the government?
5. If you were a peasant in the 1930's, how would you try to get your rights?
6. How do peasants fight for their rights today?



"Threshing",
a painting by
KK Hebbar