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### Abstract

The Tenancy Act of 1887 in British colonial India, followed by the eviction drive of peasants from their homes and lands in NWFP (present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) offers as an appropriate unit for scholarly attention to the land rights movement in Pakistan. The peasants of the British India were living a miserable life because of the newly imposed taxes of landed elites and were turning against the landed elites, while around the same time Marxist-Leninist ideology was making impact in the art, literature, and politics of the historic NWFP which changed the dynamics of resistance movement. The establishment and effective role of Kisan Jirga in 1930s organized the peasants of Ghala Dher, and Mufti Abad, who stood against the landed elites and opposed the British imperialism. It is therefore important to discuss and analyze the uprisings of British colonial India, with special focus on the peasant's uprisings at Ghala Dher, and Mufti Abad of NWFP.

**Keywords:** Ghala Dher, Social Movement, Proletariat, Kisan Jirga, Marxist-Leninist

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## Title

### The Peasant's Uprisings in British Colonial India: A Case Study of NWFP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)

#### Abstract

The Tenancy Act of 1887 in British colonial India, followed by the eviction drive of peasants from their homes and lands in NWFP (present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) offers as an appropriate unit for scholarly attention to the land rights movement in Pakistan. The peasants of the British India were living a miserable life because of the newly imposed taxes of landed elites and were turning against the landed elites, while around the same time Marxist-Leninist ideology was making impact in the art, literature, and politics of the historic NWFP which changed the dynamics of resistance movement. The establishment and effective role of Kisan Jirga in 1930s organized the peasants of Ghala Dher, and Mufti Abad, who stood against the landed elites and opposed the British imperialism. It is therefore important to discuss and analyze the uprisings of British colonial India, with special focus on the peasant's uprisings at Ghala Dher, and Mufti Abad of NWFP.

#### Keywords:

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## Introduction

Soon after the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 in Tzar Russia, the Marxist-Leninist ideology enormously impacted the mobilization of peasants and the working class throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reviewed literature for this research also highlights the change in the form and style of literary works in the countries of Africa, and Asia, especially the South Asian literatures (Coppola, 1974). Several countries in Southern America, and Europe also witnessed this impact as (Barros, Francisco, Jr, & Faria, 2012) elaborated on the peasant's mobilization in France, which attests to

the attention of Western scholarship in the study of peasants and land rights movements.

In British colonial India, the impact of Marxist-Leninist ideology undertook a long process of transformation through which it absorbed the anti-colonial revolutionary struggle led by *Pan-Islamist* and nationalist leaders (Mohammad Ayaz, 2023a). The émigré revolutionaries like Maulana Barkat Ullah Bhopali, M. N. Roy, and Partab Sing, etc. had already met V. Lenin to discuss their thesis on the nationalities question in British India. However, after the *Hijrat* Movement of the 1920s culminated in the return of *Muhajir*-turned-communists from





Soviet Tashkent, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was established (Ansari, 2015). Thus, under the leadership of CPI, the peasant and working class mobilized to carry out an organized struggle for their emancipation from the tyranny of landed elites (Chattopadhyay, 2006). Historically, the peasants, and working class who were dependent on the agricultural livelihood have been affected worst by the land policy of the British government. The Tenancy Act of 1887 The Punjab Tenancy Act of 1868 was amended in 1887 with more restrictions on the occupancy rights of tenants. For more details, see The Punjab Tenancy Act 1887.

They left the agricultural workers and peasants without land because of the eviction process initiated by the newly created class of landed elites and landlords (Makdisi, 2002).

The miseries of tenants, tillers, peasants, and workers increased as they were treated as subjects by the landed elites, who lived their lives as slaves and downtrodden (Khaleeq, n.d.). In those days, Maulana Abdul Rahim Popalzai (1889-1961) worked for an organization *Tehreek Naujawan-i-Sarhad* (Movement of the Youth of NWFP Kakaji Sanubar Hussain was among the founding members of TNS.

) which was the representative platform of the workers and peasants in the province (Popalzai, 1990).

Impressed by the increasing motivation of people to participate in the anti-colonial movement, Bhagat Sing founded Naujawan Baharat Sabha (NBS) in 1926 (Mittal & Habib, 1979) which played an effective role in the development of leftist radical politics. Because of its secular nature, its membership was open to all, and thus, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and members from other communities participated in its activities.

In Punjab, Kirti Kisan Party, which is associated with the banned Communist Party of India (CPI) was actively engaged in agrarian politics, while in NWFP, (Present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), *Kisan Jarga* (KJ) was functional in mobilizing the peasants and workers for an organized struggle against the landed elites (Mohammad Ayaz & Ali, Fayyaz Noorul, 2023). The KJ as a peasant organization carried out its activities at the Union, Tehsil, District, and Provincial levels with the expectation of gaining massive popular support of peasants and the working class for a socialist revolution.

Due to the increasing influence of KJ in NWFP, KKP in Punjab, and NBS, the slogan of liberation (*Azadi*) from colonial power was getting popular support and public consciousness for the anti-colonial struggle. Therefore, in usual political rallies, and gatherings against the British Government, organized under AINC had received considerable participation from members, of peasants' organizations. For example, during the civil disobedience, and non-cooperation movements as well as in the 1937 Election, where AINC was supported by them (Mohammad Ayaz, 2023b). In electoral politics, they have supported Khudai Khidmatgar (Red Shirts) in NWFP, with an expectation of home rule, where the tillers and peasants get fairly distributed land among them. However, due to class differences, AINC and peasant organizations could not work together.

The Bihar Kisan Sabha (Singh, 1992), the Oudh Peasant uprising (Mittal & Kumar, 1978), and the Ghala Dher Kisan movement (Khan, 1988), etc. are leading examples of peasant struggle. M.K. Gandhi did not have a place for socialism in AINC, as there were landlords and bourgeoisie in AINC (Kaka, 1968). In the following pages, an attempt is made to highlight the peasant struggle of British colonial times as well as in post-colonial Pakistan and its significance in anti-colonial activities. More attention shall be given to the peasant struggle at Ghala Dher and Hashtnagar Valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan.

### Ghala Dher Kisan Tehreek of 1938

*Ghala Dher* is a famous village located presently in District Mardan, which was historically famous for revolutionary and progressive movements in the undivided British India. Its land was very fertile and used to produce an abundance of wheat, maize, and other cash crops, which was therefore named *Ghala Dher*. This village is also popular in the social and political history of undivided British India due to the heroism of Hari Kishan Talwar who was hanged by the British government on account of his firing and killing attempt on Mount Gomery the then Governor of Punjab at the occasion of Convocation ceremony (Khan, 1988). His brother Baghat Ram Talwar was also an imminent figure in the left-leaning politics of his time and was a leading member of the Frontier Socialist Congress Party (Talwar, 1976). Dr Waris Khan and Ram helped

Subash Chandra Bose escape from India, who secretly came to Ghala Der before his journey as an émigré revolutionary. Thus, this village has remained famous in the annal of history as a place of revolutionary and progressive politics.

Long before the British arrival here, *Ghala Dher* was a large segment of lush green and fertile land used as *Warsho* (grassland) by the locals and indigenous people would use it to graze the cattle. After the colonization of India by the British, likewise, it had confiscated all territories and lands by expanding its empire, the lands of Ghala Der were also occupied in a similar fashion. The British Government not only confiscated the lands but also targeted landowners by charging them in conspiracy cases and many of them escaped to avoid the possible arrest. Those, who cooperated with the British Government and took oath of allegiance to work for the new masters, were considered as trustworthy. A person named Qadir Khan, who belonged to the Toru family of Mardan, worked as an informer of the British Government at *Ghala Dher*. He was promoted to the rank of *Nazir* (record-keeper) to collect different taxes and fees for the British Government. On recognition of his services, he was given ownership of these lands. Soon after the Tenancy Act of 1868, and subsequent land reforms, he was able to transfer lands of Ghala Dher to his name.

After the death of Qadir Khan, his son Mohabbat Khan succeeded as *Nawab* of *Ghala Dher*. He was a clever man, who tried to deposit a slight portion of the collect taxes in Governments' exchequer, while a big produce was to be used for his own utility. He used a strategy to keep good relations with farmers, and local people by gradually convincing them to trust the British Government. In this way, he earned a good position not only in the British Government but also his All the people belonging to the same clan or tribe. But slowly and gradually, his influence increased in police and local courts. Once he attained good control and his position became strong, he introduced Forced labor (*Beggar*) to produce more crops and wealth for his financial stability. After the death of Mohabbat Khan, his son Hamidullah Khan was raised to the position of Nawab. Hamidullah Khan, taking advantage of the amendment of the Tenancy Act in 1887, transferred all the surrounding territories and lands to his name. Thus, many people lost ownership of their land, and

their status was converted into tenants and tillers. He compelled them to work for him as forced labor and imposed new taxes, which increased his power and position (Mohammad Ayaz, 2023b).

Additionally, he found allies as *Mullah* (clerics) and *Malaks* (Tribal elders) to justify his power and position. In return, he granted them property and syndicated salaries to work for the Nawab of Toru. These arrangements had secured his political position which further strengthened his hands to take control of the administrative, executive, and social spheres. Gangs and bands of criminals in the region approached him to render their services for evicting and teasing those tenants, and tiller, who were apprehended to create problems for the Nawab.

The peasants, tillers, wage workers, etc. felt their status was not higher than the slaves and serfs. They imbibed a strong feeling of anti-landlordism and anti-colonialism the majority of them were ready for rebellion and were looking for a revolt against the cruel rule of the Nawab. The heavy taxes, like *Tora*, *Beggar*, etc. as well as evictions from their lands and homes were now unbearable for them.

On the other side, the situation in undivided India changed after the post-Khilafat agitation which culminated in the Hijrat Movement and the emergence of Bolshevik activities. The rise of NBS in the 1930s, and socialist organizations worked hard to prepare the people for an uprising. Dr. Waris Kham, Abdul Rahim Popalzai, Ram Sarin, and other leaders of the Frontier Socialist Party visited Ghala Dher, who convinced the people to stand united against the injustices of the Nawab. These new conditions conducive to the development of peasant uprisings, resulted in enhanced political activities at *Ghala Dher*.

Amidst this politically charged situation, Elections of 1937 were held in British India, where the People of Ghala Dher, who were living a miserable life under the Nawab of Toru, rejected to vote for landed elites. During the election campaign Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, alias Bacha Khan (1890-1988), who was also the founder of the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement Khudai Khidmatgar was contesting these elections in alliance with All India National Congress (AINC)

, visited Ghala Dher. In his speech he lamented that the 'dogs of Englishmen and these landed elites ate butter while people did not find bread to eat' and

thus, he was able to convince the people of Ghala Dher to vote for Khudai Khidmatgar in the Elections. He promised that after forming the Government, the social and economic conditions of peasants would be improved. Consequently, they voted for candidates of Khudai Khidmatgar in elections, which was a political ally of AINC (Nagina, 1939). Having a simple majority in NWFP, Congress ministries came into being with Dr. Khan Sahib (brother of Bacha Khan) who became the Chief Minister of NWFP (Shah, 1999).

The Nawab of Toru and Landlords were very disappointed to notice that their tenants and peasants did not vote for their candidates in elections. Therefore, to take revenge, they started ruthless evictions of these peasants and tillers. Peasants of *Ghala Dher*, knowing the fact that the Congress government is in place and their own representatives are elected to central and provincial legislative assemblies, strongly opposed the eviction orders (Khan, 1988). They have also immediately suspended all the responsibilities and services to the Nawab of Toru (Nagina, 1939). Leaders of the Frontier Socialist Congress party, like Maulana Abdul Rahim Popalzai, Anand Ram Talwar, Mia Mukarram Shah, Mian Akbar Shah, Bhagat Ram Talwar, and Dr. Waris Khan, came to the occasion and delivered speeches of anti-imperialism and Anti-Nawab (Ali, 1995).

The Police and para-military personnel reached along with Nawab's own force to carry out the eviction process. The peasants of Ghala Dher gathered to stop the eviction, but the police arrested them. Ram Saran (Nagina, 1939) gave details of more than a hundred peasant workers who were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment in jail. There were only women and children at home and the security forces tried to destroy the crops and erode the houses of peasants. Children and women fought gallantly to defy eviction.

Bacha Khan came to Ghala Dher to see the ground reality. He hardly met any man because they were either in jail or in hospital due to the atrocities of the security forces. While responding on the occasion said that this uprising is a conspiracy hatched by foreigners, who don't believe in God and the prophet 'Their advice has destroyed you. He was perhaps pointing towards Abdul Rahim Popalzai as he was an integral part of the Ghala Dher Peasant movement.

## Hazara Kisan Conference 1939

Like Ghala Dher, the peasants of Hazara division were also bearing the tyranny of landed elites by paying heavy taxes and fines imposed upon them. Maulana Abdul Rahim Popalzai, who was sentenced to imprisonment on account of Ghala Dher's peasant uprising, was released from jail in November 1939. Popalzai visited Hazara and organized the peasants for class struggle. The KISAN conference was held in 1939, which continued for two days (J. Khan & Islam, 2021).

The struggle of the peasants at Hazara division compelled the Congress Government to address the issues of peasants. Popalzai addressed the gathering with a blatant criticism on Congress Government by terming its policy of non-violence as subjective and cruel in terms of peasant's rights. Due to his fiery speech, the Government was compelled to listen the demands of the Hazara peasants. An inquiry committee was constituted by the Government to investigate the relations between the tenants-owner relations and issues faced by the peasant. The committee also considered the recommendations of Shariat Tenancy Bill proposed by the leadership of peasants for protection of their land rights according to legal framework of Islam (Farooq, 1998).

The Hazara Kisan activism continued till 1947 when Pakistan came into being after the partition of India. It was due to the role of Kisan Jirga, and the leadership of Maulana Abdul Rahim Popalzai that the peasants struggle continued in post-colonial Pakistan with Hashtnagar peasant uprising in 1948 (N. Ali, 2019).

## Peasant's Uprising of Mufti Abad in 1939

The village *Mufti Abad* is famous in peasant's history because of two peasants Sheerak, and Zardak, whose houses were burnt, and both were killed in the eviction of peasants from their homes and lands (Bacha, 1988). Their grandfathers migrated from Mohmand Agency and settled in Mufti Abad. Like Ghala Dher, the people of *Mufti Abad* village were earlier followers of the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement and had supported it in the 1937 Elections. After winning the elections, people were expecting support from the government of Khudai Khidmatgar, with Khan Sahib as Chief Minister. However, the Government did nothing when the landowners directed the peasants and tenants to

vacate their houses and land by announcing eviction.

The Eviction process started with police which was complemented by levies force and Frontier constabulary. The people of the village had no weapons as they gathered in large numbers to oppose the eviction. The security forces started throwing out all the belongings of peasants' houses while the villagers would move the stuff back into their houses. This conflict continued for a long time, while eviction could not be completed because of the resistance. Eviction.

Kisan Jirga was fully functional in leading this eviction conflict led by comrade Ziarat Gul Lala, Wali Mohammad Tofan, Lala Amin Gul, and Habibullah along with hundreds of peasants. Every night and day, 15-20 peasants would let themselves be arrested by security, and thus after 40 days around 600 peasants were arrested and sent to Dera Ismail Khan jail. Obaidullah, the Son of Dr. Khan Saib (Chief Minister) also stood on the side of the peasants in the eviction conflict, and he was also jailed alongside the peasants.

## Conclusion

The history of peasant's struggle in British India opens a window into an understanding of agrarian

politics which is linked with agricultural and economic development. The earlier peasants' movements before the partition of India were influenced by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The communist revolution in October 1917 had a deep influence on the politics of bordering NWFP, (present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), where the peasants were closely connected with CPI. An important organization *Kisan Jirga* (Peasant Committee), which was fully functional in the 1930s, had played a significant role in the awakening of peasants. Its leaders like Kakaji Sanubar Hussain, Abdul Rahim Popalzai, Mohammad Hussain Ata, and Comrade Ziarat Gul, organized peasants under the banner of Kisan Jirga.

*Kisan Jirga*, being a cadre in CPI, also played a role in the establishment of *Olasi Adabi Jirga* OAJ, a literary organization that was considered a branch of the Progressive Writer Association (PWA) (Muhammad Ayaz, 2023). The emergence of proletarian poetry in Pashtu literature owns its existence due to OAJ. The historic struggle of peasants against British imperialism contributed to the awareness and mobilization of people. The peasants of Ghala Dher, and Mufti Abad were the pioneering resistance movement against the colonial legacy of landed elites (Popalzai, 1990).



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