CHAPTER III

PEASANT AGITATION IN SHIMOGA DISTRICT

In this chapter our primary concerns are to introduce the peasant and the background factors responsible for the rise and efflorescence of the peasant movement in Shimoga district.

For a good understanding of the peasant movement in the district a brief sketch of the peasant society and their culture is essential. The peasants by and large are rural inhabitants and they do not have any regular formal schooling. So a large body of peasants are illiterate. Yet through systematic and traditional socialization and training in cultivation they are a well informed lot. With the advent of independent state and formation of linguistic federal units to govern the country, a spate of agricultural reforms affecting both the land owners and the cultivators took place, between 1950 and 1960. As a consequence, the interaction between the land owners, cultivators, and the governmental authorities who were in charge of executing the new policy of land for the tiller, bitterness and conflicts began to arise.

In a way the above factors should be taken as the
genesis of the peasant movements in the district. The owners wanted to secure their interest and played their roles well with the governmental authorities and also exploited their connection with the elected leaders. Farmers being illiterate in a way not very well informed about the intended reforms, financially weak and not well connected with the authorities or leaders, were ineffective initially.

Leaders who had to depend on the number game in democracy had to come out with the truth and utility of the reforms, at least during election years. This exercise of lying low and outwitting one another had to have its limits and could not last for ever. With many elections to different democratic institutions, from village to state and centre levels, exposed the illiterate farmers, to the provisions of the state policy and concept of welfare state. Crystallisation of all these forces that were rubbing the wrong ends of one another that generated the heat of propal, the movement in defence of the farmers' rights which were intended to put an end to their exploitation by the land owners.

**Origin and Development**

To understand the origin of peasant movement in
Shimoga district, we should briefly sketch the historical developments of the peasant movement itself.

In the recent decades there were several agitations organized by the peasants of Shimoga district. The sufferings and sacrifices that the peasants made brought some impact on the political life of the district. All peasants of the district at this stage became conscious of the movement across the boundaries of taluka and district and they actively participated in it by identifying themselves with peasants on rebel. A few nationalist movement workers who operated in this area and outside the district took the help and co-operation of the residents of this district. Several persons from this district sneaked into the neighbouring British governed area and took active part in the national movement which was going on there. This shows how the people of the district took an active part in different agitations.

During the year 1930-31 there was loss of paddy crop in some parts of the district owing to failure of rains. The farmers agitated for compensation from the Government. In the year 1941-42 again there was an agitation aimed at protecting the interests of the farmers whose lands were submerged in the Hire-Bhaskar Reservoir of the Mahatma
Gandhi Hydro-electric Project. At that time the Maharaja of Mysore was visiting the district and the people of the district submitted a memorandum about this loss to the farmers. In this memorandum they put forth their demands about relief and rehabilitation of the victims. During the year 1943-44 the area crop was affected by a pest in Hosanagara, Segara and Tirthahalli talukas of the district. It was urged by the tenants that the land-owners must accept half the rent and accordingly many land-owners conceded to this demand.

In a state not known for overt agrarian unrest this is indeed a remarkable development. As far back as the early fifties the socialists spearheaded farmers' agitation in Shimoga district. Popularly called the "Kagodu Raitara Satyagraha" the agitation ended without achieving its ends, as most such uprisings unfortunately do, mainly due to internal dissensions. There has been no other major demonstration of bitterness by farmers, certainly not on an organised scale and the state has also not witnessed the kind of landlord-peasant struggle, in however a sporadic form as several other states have.

In the year 1963 once again the peasants of Shimoga district started an agitation against a few provisions
in the Tenancy Act, land revenue, collection of levy and
so on. A few talukas of the district, namely, Hosanagara,
Shikaripura, Soraba and Tirthahalli took actual lead during
1969. They went to the extent of cutting the trees in the
forest land and occupied the deforested lands.

From 1970 to 1972 again there was a “land-grab” stir
in Hosanagara, Shikaripura, Segara and Soraba talukas
under this agitation. People started occupying available
fallow government lands for cultivation. The above instances
show that the farmers of the district participated in each
and every type of agitation.

The instance of peasant insurgency in Shimoga
district during the year 1980 is not a novel one. The
difference between the 1980 agitation and the previous
ones is that the recent one was a whole-hearted and much
better organised agitation with the cooperation of all
sections of agrarian structure. All the farmers of the
district realised that collective bargaining has got the
power to redress their grievances. In this agitation
leaders from this district came forward to lead an agitation
very effectively. From 1980 onwards this agitation used
a new strategy. It has spread to other districts and even
to all over the State. We can see this when we observe
the Chatsprabha peasant agitation organised against the authorities of the irrigation department to solve their water problem in that area. When the situation was out of control the police force was called in. To control the mob they lathi-charged and even fired at them. A few farmers and their leaders even went to jail. Like this they fought bravely and got their demands fulfilled.

The Chatsprabha farmers' problems began with the construction of the much publicised Malaprabha and Chatsprabha irrigation project in Belgaum district. No doubt canal irrigation brought about expected greenery and prosperity in the watered area. But it also brought some problems. Even though the canal water was not used by the farmer all the cultivable but non-arable land was also subjected to irrigation tax. Irrigation betterment tax followed it later. As days passed, the rate of irrigation tax went on increasing. This became a burden for farmers and they started mobilising an agitation expressing their inability to pay taxes levied by the Government.

So farmers of Chatsprabha Irrigation area formed Farmers' Co-ordination Committee and started an agitation, which got a tremendous response. The agitation spread
like wild fire and attracted the attention of farmers throughout the State. When the situation went beyond the control of revenue authorities, police force was called. They later ordered firing on agitating farmers. The firing took the first life of a farmer at Navalgunj. The farmers got wild with this and intensified their agitation. It was followed by many such firings throughout the State. As a result another fifteen farmers met the same fate.

The lead given by the Maragund and Navalgunj farmers during 1980 was soon seized by the farmers of Shimoga district. At the time a few political parties made efforts to enter the fray and take control of the situation and also the peasant movement. But the farmers were not at all gullible. The organisation of peasants in the district and the political awakening created by independence movement helped to create awareness among the peasants in the State. Further, awakening among the farmers was accelerated by the peasant movements. From this we can notice that the incidents of peasant movements in Shimoga district were frequent.

Peasant Leaders and Leadership

Success of any movement depends upon a number of factors such as awareness among the agitators, the
situation conducive for uprising, we feeling and above all an able leadership. The success of peasant movement in Shimoga district is due to all the above factors.

Before assessing the role of leaders of peasant movements in Shimoga district, their commitments to the cause of their fellowmen and so on, it is better to have a brief understanding of the concepts leader and leadership. Because since time immemorial these words have been receiving reverence from the people.

A leader is something more than a citizen or common men. He can arouse the blood of the ordinary man and possess the strength enough to mobilise them into a unified force. A good leader is a national asset and a 'precious dynamic device' to pull the national boat out of the floating dangers of the time.

The term leadership means in common usage, to excel, to be in advance, to guide others to hold command and so on. According to Boonix and Dounell leadership is the "activity of influencing people to strive willingly for mutual objectives" (1955:69). This definition is more comprehensive and relevant to the present study. Leadership according to the above mentioned definition is the name of the
Fairchild (1967:174) defines leadership as the act of “organising and directing the interests and activities of a group of persons, as associated in the same project or enterprise, by a person who develops their co-operation through securing and maintaining their more or less voluntary approval of the ends and methods proposed and adopted in their association”. Katz and Kahn (1966) opine that the concept of leadership, as generally understood in social science literature, has three major meanings: the attribute of a position, the characteristics of a person and a category of behaviour. It means leadership always involves attempts on the part of a leader or ‘influencer’ to affect or ‘influence’ the behaviour of a follower or ‘influence’ in situation. Social Anthropologists usually define leadership in terms of power or the capacity of any actions in a social system to influence the behaviour of others.

After a brief overview of meaning of leadership one can very easily perceive the meaning of the term ‘Leader’. Through the historical analysis of society, we do not come across any society whether a modern complex society like a nation state or a proverbial society such
as tribal community of the primitive type that functions without a leader or a set of leaders.

The concept 'leader' is very difficult to define. It is interesting to note the opinion of Barnard (1966) in this context who says, "Indeed I have never observed any leader who was able to state adequately or intelligently why he was able to be a leader, nor any statement of follower that acceptably expressed why they followed". It is spontaneous and automatic. Laswell and Kaplan (1958) maintain that "the leaders of a group are its most active power-holders, effectively, and in the perspectives of the group. The rank and file are the non-leaders." In simple terms a 'leader' is he, who leads the nation, a community, or a group of persons joined for a common purpose. He is obeyed, heard, and honoured by his followers. He unifies and embodies the opinion of the people and mobilises it to a dignified or any coveted goal.

**Qualities of Leadership**

A leader's efficiency to a great extent, depends on his personality, intelligence, decision, self-confidence and expression. Sociability, initiative, persistence, prominence, vitality and his capacity to judge the people
correctly are the other qualities that can be added to the list. It is also proper to comment that leadership is not only a personality trait, but the way in which a leader relates himself with his group of followers. It is the quality of bringing together the people of diversified objectives with the people of similar opinions. At the same time it is also correct to say that leadership also depends much upon situations. The test of a leader is finally done on the basis of his capacity to lead his followers in the most crucial moments.

Types of Leaders

There are different types of leaders who exert differential degrees of influence on the variegated structure of social organisation. Among such typology Max Weber's typology of authority is a classic one (1947). He made three classification of leaders on the basis of three types of authorities. They are as follows:

1) Charismatic leaders;
2) Traditional leaders;
3) Legal leaders.

Charismatic leaders refers to those leaders who emerge as leaders solely on the basis of their personal qualities and charisma. They possess the power of 'crowd
pulling'. Traditional leaders include those persons who exercise their power on the basis of ascription. Especially in a traditional society old people exercise authority over junior members. Belonging to a high casto group, their experience, maturity and so on are the key factors determining leadership in a traditional social structure. Legal leaders refers to 'de jure' leaders who lead or try to lead his followers in the capacity of one's office. Government officials and elected persons may be included in the list of legal leaders.

According to Henry Geenstain (1960 and 1965) there are two categories of leaders such as (1) Formal leaders and (2) Informal leaders. Formal leaders include leaders like officials and elected leaders and they are leaders because of formal authority which is vested with them whereas in case of informal leadership, traditional leaders are included.

A more comprehensive typology is presented by Biddle (1968:4) as follows:

1. The Celebrity

Any person who is prominent in some specific field.
2. **The Expert**
   A person with specialized knowledge or ability.

3. **The Father Substitute**
   Hitler type, demanding blind, childlike obedience.

4. **The Natural Leader**
   Person endowed with unique and rare activities.

5. **The Manipulator**
   Leaders who lay claim to the title by exploiting other leaders.

6. **The Community Organizer or Educator**
   Professional or voluntary community leaders involved in social action programmes.

7. **The Participant Leader**
   The active community influential person who mobilizes local resources and initiates the community into programme building and execution. To this list we may add the opinion leader, who is sought after by members of a community for advice on various activities, like collective bargaining, mass movements and so on.
Leadership in Rural Area

In rural India tradition plays a predominant role. Usually elders exercise power and control over the behavior of younger members of the society. While studying leadership pattern in North India, Oscar Lewis (1958:127) observed that "An analysis of the personal and socio-economic characteristics of Jat leaders reveals that leadership depends upon the following factors in order of importance: wealth, family reputation, age and genealogical position, personality traits, state of retirement, education, connections and influence with outsiders and finally, numerical strength of the family and lineage." All these are the traits of a traditional leader. In this regard Vidyarthi (1967:270) remarks, "In the traditional societies where leadership is primarily aspirant rather than functional, maturity in years gives venerable status to individuals. The older village leaders who behave like patriarchs are elevated to higher pedestals with growing age. In India aged people have always carried a halo around them." The same is true in rural Karnataka also.

Sen, another student of leadership approves the above given statement of Oscar Lewis and adds to it the following: "Status and authority in Indian villages are still ascribed, and the fact is recognized and accepted
by all. With changing times, the leaders have sought for other secular forms of power such as holding elective and nominative offices, but the overall effect of their position is the same as before (1969:56).

Ladie, Dhillon, Majumdar and other students of rural Indian leadership have shown that elders are active in various traditional organisations, that they sponsor elaborate ritualistic ceremonies, conduct village festivals, mediate on caste disputes, and are paid great respect on ceremonial occasions. Traditionally they are also patrons of rural community for they own most of the arable land in the village. These characteristics point to the traditional orientation of opinion leaders.

But now the situation is changed and today younger, educated, elected and development-oriented leaders lead the village life and activities. In this context Vidyarthi affirms the opinion of other social-scientists as follows: "The new social and economic forces generated by the large scale development plans have shaken up the social structure and are beginning to alter the old values and attitudes as well. This traditional leadership is also undergoing a change and new patterns of leadership are emerging on the scene. In this context, the introduction of community
projects, land reforms, decentralised local administration and adult franchise which aim at the reconstruction of rural society, have brought forth the importance of leadership (cf. Vidyarthi 1967:38). Hence it is clear that as a result of various developmental programmes traditional leadership in India is giving way and the same is replaced by new pattern of leadership.

It is evident from the above given opinions of Anthropologists and other social scientists that in rural India leadership pattern is undergoing a tradual change. Traditional leaders are slowly replaced by modern leaders. Emphasis is also gradually shifting from ascribed to achieved type of leaders. This argument is confirmed by various village studies cited above and related to the dynamics of rural leadership in India. This holds good even in case of rural Karnataka, more particularly in Shimoga district.

Course of Peasant Movement

We shall try to understand factors responsible for the rise of the peasant movement in Shimoga district. Peasants are known for their hard work and loyalty. Similarly they are also known for their poverty and sufferings. These two are not the self-creation of the
peasants and the outside world is mostly responsible for them. Till recently the peasants thought that they and their fate are responsible for their problems. However, they have now begun to understand the real causes of their suffering. A wave of new awareness is also emerging among them now.

The policy decisions taken by the Government in the matter of agriculture and other matters which are directly connected with the life of peasants like levy, money lending, prices of agricultural commodities and revenue matters are mainly listed as causes responsible for reducing the peasants and their economic position to just a subsistence level. This situation ultimately leads to acute poverty. In short, one can argue that Government plans for the peasants can be listed as number one cause for the poverty of peasants. They think that it sucks the blood of peasants.

Now let us see how different political parties supported the causes of peasants in Karnataka and more so in Shimoga district.

Congress Party and Peasant Movement

Since independence of India and till 1983, the Congress
Party was in power in Karnataka State. Whenever peasants faced problems it was alleged by them that the Congress Government offered lip sympathy or at the most very minor benefits. This was again done with a motive to strengthen their political interests in the rural areas. When peasants realised that the Congress Government was not going to listen to their problems they started doubting the very credibility of the Congress leadership. But the Congress Party never wanted to have a confrontation with the peasants as they thought that it may prove disastrous to them and may result in incredible political loss.

The difference of opinion between peasants and Congress Party very clearly surfaced during Shri Gundu Rao's regime as the Chief Minister of Karnataka. As an outspoken Chief Minister he proved himself a most irrational and impertinent leader towards the woes of peasants. This time both the agitators and Karnataka Government remained very firm in their stand. Agitation was intensified and Government started handling agitators ruthlessly. During the month of October 1969 this reached its climax throughout the State and more particularly in Shimoga district. Both the agitators and the Government were set for testing their strength. Morthas were arranged on a large scale, mammoth picketings emerged and spread all
over Karnataka. In Shimoga district almost all peasants were organized and had realized the importance of collective bargaining to safeguard their rights. At last the 'black-day' came on 27.2.1932. On that day the police killed by firing, about 139 agitating peasants throughout Karnataka.

In Nagasandra village, in Bhadravati taluka of Shimoga district, three peasants met their death in a police firing. The spot death of a 19 year old school going boy by police firing, virtually aroused the agitating peasants in Shimoga district. Peasant agitators used this opportunity and took out big processions. The three victims were buried in a prominent place and memorial stones were erected depicting them as martyrs of peasant movement. First of May, the day of their killing is being observed every year as martyr's day. Public functions are arranged to remember the sacrifices and sufferings made during this agitation and to gain inspiration for the forthcoming generations.

Many police firings were also made on peasants in other parts of the State. All prisons in the district were filled with peasants who volunteered to fill the jails under their 'Jail Shara' programme. The jails and police stations were full with peasants and their leaders who had covered...
their heads with green cloth. All these anti-peasant activities made the peasants to say that the Congress Government in the State did not do anything to solve their problems. Instead it contributed to the growth of ill-will between the peasants and the Government of Karnataka.

**Socialist Party and Peasant Movement**

Among all other political parties in Karnataka the Socialist Party played a very important role in strengthening the peasant movement in the State. Since the pre-independence days Shimoga district happens to be the stronghold of the Socialist Party. Most of the political leaders of the district, whichever political party they represent today, once cherished the Socialist ideology. A historical analysis of peasant movements clearly indicates the significant role played by the Socialist leaders. Right from Kāgōdu farmers’ agitation (Raitare Satyagraha) to today, it was the Socialist Party leaders who led the peasants.

During 1951-52 under the able leadership of the renowned Socialist leader late Shri Shantavari Gopala Gouda, a famous agitation was started at Kāgōdu, a village in Tirthahalli taluka of Shimoga district. At that time the present President of the Karnataka Farmers’ Association, Shri H. S. Padappa, was a Minister in the State Cabinet and
he too participated in this agitation. The agitation was
the result of a rift created between tenants and landlords.
In due course of time it became very strong and went beyond
the control of the Government. It was only Dr. Rammanohar
Lohia, the national level socialist leader, who could
persuade the agitators to stop it. This movement was
organised right from the grass root level and was the
first of its kind after independence. Owing to all these
factors most of the leaders of the present peasant movement
in Shimoga district, are sympathetic towards the socialist
ideology even though they claim that they are not affiliated
to any political party.

Janata Government and Peasant Movement

The Janata Party which came to power in Karnataka
during 1983 and with the support of MLAs from Socialist
lobby, could get the open support of Karnataka State
Farmers' Association. Naturally the Janata Government
was sympathetic towards the peasants and their problems.
This affinity marked in the fulfilment of as many as 7 to
8 demands of the peasants out of a list of 19 they had
put forth. It also declared many beneficial programmes
and rebates favouring the peasants.

The Janata Government unlike the previous Congress
Government was not reluctant to have direct discussions with the peasant leaders. They had frequent meetings and exchanged opinion. They also honestly tried to solve the problems of the peasants.

**Communist Party and Peasant Movement**

Indian peasant faces innumerable problems like low wages, seasonal unemployment, uneconomical land holdings, lack of skill, exploitation by middlemen and so on. In spite of these problems we do not come across any well organised protest movements to fight for the rural peasantry. There was an organised movement in Tirthahalli taluka of Shimoga district in the past, which was supported and led by the Communist Party leaders. The Communist Party had put forth some demands before the Government which were basically of regional importance. But one can notice both Socialist and Communist parties were genuinely interested in solving the problems as their motto was non-political. This quality of both Communists and Socialists attracted the attention of suppressed peasants of Shimoga district. As time advanced the Communist Party started lagging behind. Because, in this case, the ideologies were not important and the personality of the leaders played a very important role in building up of the image of the political parties.

Late Shri Shantawari Gopala Gowda, a Socialist leader,
made use of his charismatic influence and gained many followers. Unfortunately the Socialist movement in this district also lost its significance when it took the cause of tenants against the landlords. At this juncture, the Communist Party was in a better position. But unfortunately, two important Communist party leaders of the area expired and another was withdrawn from the task of organising the peasantry. With this, the Communist Party lost its base in Shimoga district.

However, the Socialist Party still had its hold on the masses because of the Tenancy Act passed by the Government and the active part taken by the Party to get justice to the tenants. A new generation of youth, trained under late Shri Shantayari Gopala Gowda, were very active. Owing to all these factors the Communists lost their hold on peasants in Shimoga district.

It is evident even though the Congress Party took the initiative in organising the peasantry to fight against the alien rule, its leaders especially the recent ones, did not play their cards properly. This was owing to several splits which took place within the party. The Socialists, with good leaders at grassroots level, seized the opportunity and built their political influence among
the peasants. They too lost control of them when they supported the tenants and labourers against the landlords. However, the district remained a stronghold of the Socialist Party and the party workers continued to fight against the harassments and exploitation of the peasants. Interestingly enough, we notice the failure on the part of the Communist Party of India in organising the peasants. This happened in spite of its claim that it is the party of 'peasants and workers'. However, some stray and significant efforts made by the party workers were successful with the peasants, especially against the landlords.

The Congress Party which was in power for a long period also never directly tried to organise the peasantry through its workers. It showed only lip sympathy whenever the situation demanded. The Janata Party which came to power with the support and sympathy of peasants, was interested in solving the problems of the peasants. They could also bridge the gap between the peasants and the State Government. But the peasants were in a hurry to get all the benefits from the Government. However, the State Government alone could not solve all the problems of the peasants and it needed the approval of the Central Government. When they told of this the peasants once again
broke-off with the State Government and went on an agita-
tional path. As of now they are once again opposed to each
other and recently, i.e., during 1986, many agitations
were organised by the peasants.