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The Rebel of Awadh: Madari Pasi and the Forgotten Vanguard of the Peasant Revolt, 1922

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Abstract: *The Eka Movement, also known as the Awadh Peasant Struggle of 1920–1922, was an important part of India's peasant resistance against colonialism. One of its most important leaders was Madari Pasi, a militant organizer from a lower caste whose name is often left out of mainstream nationalist stories. This essay looks closely at Madari Pasi's leadership, the social and economic conditions that led to the peasant uprising, his ideological approach, and how the colonial state responded to the revolt. This study uses primary sources and academic works to try to put Madari Pasi back into the history of Indian resistance movements by showing how caste, class, and nationalism interacted in rural Awadh.This essay looks at Madari Pasi's life and politics in the context of the Awadh Peasant Struggle. It says that Madari's leadership not only fought against colonial and feudal exploitation, but also changed the story of Indian nationalism that the elites were telling. This study adds to the growing body of work that tries to "write history from below" by looking at the actions of ordinary people at the grassroots level. The paper will look at archival records, oral histories, and secondary literature to piece together the ideological, organizational, and tactical aspects of Madari Pasi's role in the Eka Movement and see what this means for understanding peasant politics in colonial India.*

Keywords: *Madari Pasi, Awadh, Peasant Movement, Eka Movement, Colonial Agrarian Policy, Caste, Nationalism, Subaltern Resistance*

1. INTRODUCTION:

In colonial India in the early 1900s, there was a lot of unrest among farmers. This was caused by deep-seated social and economic inequalities, colonial extraction, and the growing political awareness of the peasantry. The Awadh Peasant Struggle (1920–1922) was one of the most important uprisings. It was a movement that showed how unhappy rural tenants and small farmers were with the harsh landlordism that British colonialism had created. This movement was a strong grassroots expression of resistance, even though it is often forgotten in the larger story of India's fight for freedom. The Eka Movement, which was a radical offshoot of the larger peasant uprising in Awadh, not only fought against colonial rule but also questioned the legitimacy of the feudal systems that existed in the area. Madari Pasi, a subaltern leader, was at the center of this defiance. His role in organizing and leading the movement has mostly been ignored in nationalist history. The taluqdars, hereditary landlords whose power was strengthened by the British policy of revenue farming and Permanent Settlement (Metcalf, 1995), had a big impact on the social and economic structure of Awadh. These taluqdars, who were often landlords who weren't there, charged outrageous rents, forced people to work (begar), and kept private militias to carry out their orders. High rents, illegal cesses, and crop failures that happened often made it hard for rural farmers to get out of debt and become dependent on others (Hasan, 1990). The time right after World War I made things worse because inflation and economic problems caused by the war made life even harder for people in rural areas (Dhanagare, 1983). At the same time, the colonial government's lack of concern and harsh tax collection only made the rebellion worse.

In this situation, the Non-Cooperation Movement, which Mahatma Gandhi started in 1920, struck a chord with the peasants. Congress leaders, on the other hand, called for a peaceful boycott of British institutions. The peasants of Awadh, on the other hand, were in immediate material pain and turned their anger into more direct forms of resistance. People in the districts of Barabanki, Hardoi, Sitapur, and Unnao were unhappy with Congress leadership, which led to the Eka Movement. This movement quickly turned into a violent campaign against both colonial officials and local landlords. Unlike the Kisan Sabhas led by Congress, which stressed moderation, leaders like Madari Pasi used

confrontational and often violent methods, which showed how radical the peasants were in their demands for land reform and justice (Pandey, 1990). It wasn't by chance that Madari Pasi became a leader. He was a member of the Pasi caste, which is a historically oppressed Dalit group that mostly did agrarian work and tapped toddy. He represented the social marginalization that most rural farmers face. His leadership marks a major turning point for Dalits, when caste and class came together to spark revolutionary politics in rural North India. Madari saw the fight for land and dignity as part of the larger fight against colonialism, unlike elite Congress leaders who often saw peasant radicalism as a threat to national unity (Siddiqi, 1978) .

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE AWADH PEASANT STRUGGLE:

The Awadh region, annexed by the British in 1856, became a site of deep agrarian exploitation where colonial land policies consolidated the taluqdari system, empowering loyal upper-caste landlords while reducing lower-caste peasants like Pasis, Kurmis, and Chamars to insecure tenants and sharecroppers (Metcalf, 1995; Stokes, 1978). By the early 20th century, peasants faced a triple burden of colonial taxation, exorbitant taluqdari rents, and moneylenders' usury, while export-oriented cash cropping, recurring monsoon failures, and World War I–era inflation and shortages worsened food insecurity and debt (Dhanagare, 1983; Hasan, 1990; Jones, 2005). Socially, Dalit groups like the Pasis endured caste humiliation, *begar* (forced labor), and criminal stigmatization under colonial ethnography, making their rebellion as much about dignity as survival (Singh, 1998). The launch of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920 provided a new political framework, but when Congress leaders limited demands to peaceful non-cooperation and avoided militant action, grassroots leaders like Madari Pasi mobilized peasants into the Eka Movement. Emerging in late 1921, this movement—built on unity across caste and religion—used rent strikes, oath-taking, and village panchayats to assert rural sovereignty against both colonial and feudal domination (Pandey, 1990).

3. MADARI PASI: ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE AS A LEADER:

Madari Pasi's emergence as a leader in the Awadh Peasant Struggle reflected not just spontaneous rebellion but also the deeper realities of caste oppression, land alienation, and political exclusion. Belonging to the Dalit Pasi community, historically marginalized as toddy-tappers, pig rearers, and landless laborers, he came from a group stigmatized in colonial ethnography and even listed under the Criminal Tribes Act (Singh, 1998; Rao, 2009). Oral histories suggest he was born in Hardoi or Sitapur, where he would have witnessed the violence of taluqdari rule, including forced rent collection, sexual exploitation of Dalit women, caste humiliation, and *begar* (Pandey, 1990). While Congress-led Kisan Sabhas initially gave peasants a platform, their moderate, upper-caste leadership sidelined the radical demands of Dalits and landless farmers (Dhanagare, 1983). In this context, Madari, a grassroots figure who spoke the local dialect and organized from within, transformed villages into centers of resistance by holding oath ceremonies under trees, urging peasants to refuse rents and landlord authority, and creating self-governed panchayats (Siddiqi, 1978). His leadership was moral as well as strategic, blending spiritual symbolism with demands for land redistribution and rent reduction, casting the struggle as a fight against *adharma* (injustice). Unlike Baba Ram Chandra, who sought to align peasant resistance with Gandhian nonviolence, Madari embraced militancy, organizing peasant militias armed with sticks, sickles, and even stolen rifles to punish exploitative landlords and defend villages from colonial retaliation (Hasan, 1990). Gandhi criticized these methods in *Young India*, calling violence a pollutant to the cause of *Swaraj* (Gandhi, 1922), but for Madari and his followers, the fight went beyond political freedom to securing "zameen aur sammaan" (land and dignity), rights denied by both colonial rulers and Indian elites. His defiance represented a major shift in the Awadh Peasant Struggle—from elite-led petitions to subaltern-led insurgency—and his ability to fuse tactical militancy with community justice made him one of the most important yet marginalized figures in India's history of peasant resistance.

4. NATURE AND SPREAD OF THE REVOLT:

Madari Pasi led the Eka Movement, which was not just a small rebellion but a large-scale rural uprising that showed how unhappy many people were with colonial agrarian systems and feudal authority. The movement led by Madari Pasi was different from earlier spontaneous uprisings because it had clear goals, a plan, and a lot of people involved. This made it spread quickly across districts in central and eastern Awadh. The revolt really got going in late 1921, starting in the Hardoi district, where tenants were angry with taluqdars because rents were going up, illegal cesses were being charged, and they were being threatened with eviction. The movement quickly spread to the nearby districts of Sitapur, Barabanki, Bahraich, Unnao, and Rae Bareli from Hardoi. Colonial reports say that by early 1922, more than 200 villages were actively taking part in the revolt (Dhanagare, 1983). Village-level networks, local problems, and shared cultural practices all helped this spread quickly. Madari Pasi's leadership was able to use all of these things to their advantage. The practice of "Eka sabhas," or mass meetings in village commons, under trees, or near temples, was

at the heart of the movement. These sabhas were very religious and ideological. Peasants, no matter what caste or religion they were from, swore to not pay rent, to stay away from cruel landlords and moneylenders, and to follow the decisions of the movement's peasant panchayats instead of colonial courts (Pandey, 1990). During these ceremonies, there were sacred fires (dhuni), broken earthen pots (to show that they were no longer tied to their landlords), and prayers to village gods. In some places, people swore by religious texts like the Ramayana or the Quran, depending on the makeup of the village (Jones, 2005). This ritual-sacral structure was both a way to get people to join the revolt and a moral code that kept it going. The revolt was not organized, but it was not decentralized. There was a panchayat (council) in each village that made sure everyone followed the rules of the movement, settled disputes, and made sure everyone was following the rules. These groups often took over the colonial government's legal and tax duties. Peasants stopped going to colonial courts, stopped working with police officers, and in some places, they even physically kicked landlords and tax collectors out of their homes. Landlords ran away from many villages, rents were cut or dropped without warning, and peasants set up new ways to govern their own areas (Hasan, 1990). Madari Pasi had an impact not only through his ideas but also through new ways of doing things. He put together groups of armed peasants on the move, called "dastas" (militias) in some records, who would go to villages to keep order, gather information, and scare off traitors. These groups often took grain that people had stored up, punished people who told on them, and gave goods to the poor. The movement had a semi-military feel because they used guerilla tactics like ambushes, raids on landlord estates, and stopping police patrols, even though they didn't have a lot of guns .(Siddiqi, 1978) . One of the most interesting things about the revolt was that people of different castes and religions took part. The leaders in most villages were still from lower caste groups like the Kurmis, Ahirs, and Pasis, but the foot soldiers were from Muslim and other marginalized groups. The movement's rhetoric focused on justice and unity instead of sectarian or communal lines. In this way, the Eka Movement was like what later scholars would call "subaltern solidarity," where class-based interests briefly took precedence over social divisions (Pandey, 1990). But not all parts of Awadh became equally radical. The revolt was less violent in places where the Congress was stronger or where landlords used less harsh methods. In some places, especially where taluqdars responded with violence, the revolt became more violent and confrontational. For instance, in Bahraich and Rae Bareli, peasants set fire to landlords' records, took over land by force, and destroyed grain stores. In some cases, landlords were publicly humiliated, beaten, or driven out—a symbolic reversal of centuries of domination (Dhanagare, 1983). The movement's cultural aspects were also interesting. Songs, slogans, and stories spread from village to village, praising peasant resistance and making landlords look bad. Formal historians often ignore these oral traditions, but they were very important for keeping morale and unity high. For instance, folk ballads that praised Madari Pasi as a hero who "took back the land from the thieves" or "defended the honor of the poor" became part of local folklore .(Siddiqi, 1978) ,; Singh, 1998). This kind of cultural production made the movement as much a moral crusade as a political campaign.

In short, the Eka revolt under Madari Pasi was based on deep social and economic problems, but it grew into a mass movement for freedom, justice, and respect. It showed that poor, illiterate people in the countryside could build new political systems, fight against established power, and push for a vision of grassroots democracy. The movement would eventually be crushed, but its radicalism is still an important part of India's history of subaltern resistance.

5. RESPONSE FROM CONGRESS AND GANDHI:

The relationship between the Eka Movement and the Indian National Congress reveals a deep ideological and strategic divide within India’s anti-colonial struggle, as what began as part of the Non-Cooperation Movement soon exposed tensions between elite nationalism and peasant militancy. While Baba Ram Chandra welcomed the movement and sought to align its goals of reduced rents and ending *begar* with the Congress agenda (Dhanagare, 1983), the Congress high command grew wary of Madari Pasi’s militant methods, including rent strikes and village justice systems, which challenged both landlords and colonial authority. Gandhi, alarmed by reports of violence, condemned the movement in *Young India* (1922), insisting that violent action was a “sin against Swaraj and against God” (p. 84), thus prioritizing moral purity and nonviolence (*ahimsa*) over the peasants’ urgent need to resist everyday exploitation. For Pasi and his followers, however, nonviolence was not viable amid caste oppression, landlord brutality, and colonial exploitation (Pandey, 1990). Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru sympathized with the peasants but admitted that Congress lacked the capacity to address such deep economic and social injustices, noting that while peasants were awakening to their misery, Congress had “no way to guide or organize” them effectively (Nehru, 1936, p. 137). Ultimately, Congress’s withdrawal highlighted the limitations of elite-led nationalism, exposing the gap between strategy and mass militancy, moral idealism and social reality, and rhetoric of unity and caste exclusion.

6. COLONIAL REPRESSION AND DECLINE OF THE MOVEMENT

The Eka Movement, led by Madari Pasi in early 1922, was a direct challenge to both British colonial power and indigenous feudal authority in Awadh, but despite its rapid spread and strong ideological base, it was brutally suppressed after Congress withdrew support over its rejection of nonviolence. The British, using spies, informants, and loyalist landlords, identified key leaders and villages, then launched a harsh crackdown that targeted Madari Pasi, who was eventually captured or killed under disputed circumstances, marking the symbolic collapse of the movement. With village panchayat leaders arrested, networks destroyed, and peasants left vulnerable, the revolt lost strength, and by the end of 1922 most Eka sabhas dissolved, rent strikes ended, and British "law and order" was restored. Official narratives dismissed participants as criminals while ignoring the deeper realities of landlessness, caste oppression, and exploitative taxation, and nationalist histories largely erased the movement because it did not align with Gandhian nonviolence or elite leadership. Yet, Madari Pasi endures in rural oral traditions and Dalit political memory as a martyr and symbol of resistance, showing that while the movement failed strategically, its moral vision of land, justice, and social equality continues to inspire struggles from below.

7. CONCLUSION AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The Eka Movement, led by Madari Pasi in early 1922, was a direct challenge to both British colonial power and indigenous feudal authority in Awadh, but despite its rapid spread and strong ideological base, it was brutally suppressed after Congress withdrew support over its rejection of nonviolence. The British, using spies, informants, and loyalist landlords, identified key leaders and villages, then launched a harsh crackdown that targeted Madari Pasi, who was eventually captured or killed under disputed circumstances, marking the symbolic collapse of the movement. With village panchayat leaders arrested, networks destroyed, and peasants left vulnerable, the revolt lost strength, and by the end of 1922 most Eka sabhas dissolved, rent strikes ended, and British "law and order" was restored. Official narratives dismissed participants as criminals while ignoring the deeper realities of landlessness, caste oppression, and exploitative taxation, and nationalist histories largely erased the movement because it did not align with Gandhian nonviolence or elite leadership. Yet, Madari Pasi endures in rural oral traditions and Dalit political memory as a martyr and symbol of resistance, showing that while the movement failed strategically, its moral vision of land, justice, and social equality continues to inspire struggles from below.

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