



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Indian muzaras refuse to pay landlords and demand restoration of property, 1930-1953

*Time period notes: Tenants in the villages of Rajomajra and Bhadaur began refusing to pay batai in May 1930.*

May  
1930  
to: 15 April  
1953

**Country:** India

**Location City/State/Province:** Patiala, Punjab

**Location Description:** farming villages throughout the Princely state of Patiala

**Goals:**

The end to the Biswedari system and restoration of property rights to tenants

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 023. Destruction of own property
- 074. Rent withholding

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 023. Destruction of own property
- 074. Rent withholding

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 023. Destruction of own property
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 074. Rent withholding
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 023. Destruction of own property
- 074. Rent withholding

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 023. Destruction of own property
- 074. Rent withholding

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 023. Destruction of own property
- 074. Rent withholding

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

Defense

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

**Group characterization:**

- Kisan Party
- Lal Communist Party
- Praja Mandal
- tenants

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Sewa Singh Thikriwala, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia and Jagir Singh Joga

**Partners:**

The Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal, Kisan Party, and Lal Communist Party

**External allies:**

not known

**Involvement of social elites:**

not known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Praja Mandal
- tenants

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

### Groups in 4th Segment:

- Kisan Party

### Groups in 5th Segment:

- Lal Communist Party

### Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** 4 years

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, government of Patiala, and the biswedaris

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

not known

### Campaigner violence:

There were several violent clashes in villages between tenants, landlords, and police in later years of campaign, sometimes resulting from tenants attempting to forcibly take possession of landlords' properties. Violence by tenants included beating landlords and throwing bricks at police. It is unclear whether police and landlords or tenants initiated the violence in these instances.

### Repressive Violence:

police firing, beatings, forcible seizure of crops, torture of imprisoned political leaders, and gang violence organized by landlords

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

### Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

Police suppression and lack of centralized leadership for the majority of the campaign made maintaining resistance efforts in villages difficult.

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In the 1870s, the Maharaja (prince) of Patiala, a small princely state in the Punjab region of northern India, implemented the Biswedari (big landlord) system, which appointed biswedaris as local authorities of agrarian villages. The biswedaris, mostly government officials and close kin of the Maharaja, gradually took full possession of lands and reduced the original owners to the status of muzaras (tenants). Muzaras had to pay batai (share rent) to their landlords, consisting of half of their crop, though landlords often overestimated the crop yield to justify taking a larger share.

In 1930, the Maharaja, Bhupinder Singh, governed the state under the paramountcy of the British Raj. The government did not tolerate political dissent and police jailed anyone who publicly spoke out against the government. Political organizations within Patiala held meetings in secret or outside of the state's borders to avoid arrest and police brutality.

The Sikh population of Patiala had participated in the successful Akali movement calling for the government to put gurwaras (Sikh places of worship) under the control of a religious committee.

Leaders of the Akali movement founded the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal political party in 1929 in Patiala to agitate against princely states and promote the establishment of representative government. In 1930, Sewa Singh Thikriwala, then leader of the Praja Mandal, began organizing tenants in several biswedari villages, encouraging them to withhold payment of batai to landlords. Praja Mandal members Bhagwan Singh Longowalia and Jagir Singh Joga also helped to organize and lead tenants in their resistance.

Since the formation of the Praja Mandal, police had imprisoned, tortured, and released Thikriwala several times. Police arrested him for the last time in November 1930, and he died in jail four years later.

Tenants in the two villages of Rajomajra and Bhadaur began refusing payments of batai to their landlords in May 1930. Many of the tenants had lost their hereditary property rights within their own lifetimes. The tenants only handed over their crops under police supervision. Over the next few years, tenants in several other villages began refusing to pay landlords, and landlords increasingly had to rely on police force to collect batai. Some tenants destroyed their own crops in order to avoid paying their landlords.

The Maharaja enacted a law in 1932, making any form of political meeting illegal, but tenants continued to organize and meet in secret or across state borders. Police arrested organizer and Praja Mandal member, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia in 1933, and he died in prison in 1935 after a prolonged hunger strike. Police systematically repressed tenants, forcibly confiscating their crops for batai payments, and imprisoning resisting tenants. The high level of repression and lack of organization among villages made it difficult to maintain resistance efforts.

A violent confrontation between police and tenants on 25 November 1937 in the village of Qila Hakiman publicized the plight of tenants. Three hundred to four hundred tenants were peacefully protesting, asking police not to take away their crops when police and landlords opened fire, killing several tenants.

The state made an official inquiry into the incident. The state magistrate condemned the tenants for their defiance of authority and exonerated police of all charges of excessive use of force. In response, the Praja Mandal formed a counter committee to investigate the issue and came to the conclusion that the tenants were unarmed and peaceful, and landlords had illegally participated in the shooting. The Praja Mandal aided muzaras in printing and distributing pamphlets on the Qila Hakiman incident.

Following the Qila Hakiman incident, a group of muzaras went to Master Hari Singh, leader of the communist Kisan Committee, to ask for support in their struggle. In response to the incident, tenants in 30 bullock carts traveled to Patiala city to protest the forcible confiscation of batai. A group of muzaras insisted on meeting with the Maharaja and even tried throwing themselves in front of his car, but police thwarted their efforts. Six participating villages renewed their efforts to resist paying batai.

The death of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh in 1938 and the coronation of a young inexperienced ruler strengthened both the Praja Mandal and the tenants' resolve to continue in their struggle. In 1938, tenants from villages across the state formed the Muzara Committee to promote further organization among villages.

By 1939, refusing to pay batai had become common in most villages, and the state had to direct additional police force to rural districts to forcibly collect batai. Many tenants ploughed over their own crops to prevent landlords from confiscating them. With the help of the Praja Mandal, the tenants made and distributed posters depicting incidents of police repression.

On 19 May 1939, a conference of 100 muzaras from 10 different villages decided to send petitions to the Maharaja demanding the restoration of their property. During another meeting on 26 September, they mandated that all muzaras in participating villages refuse batai, have no social interaction with landlords, and destroy crops if police try to take them by force, and they urge unemployed villagers not to work for the landlords.

In the face of increased police repression, the campaign died out in 1940, and the muzaras remained relatively submissive until 1942, when the muzaras began to align themselves with the communist Kisan Party. A small group of tenants in 1942, after several failed attempts, were finally granted a meeting with the Resident, the British official in charge of maintaining the relationship between the princely state and British Empire, to state their grievances. The Resident, however, did little to address these grievances.

In 1945, the muzaras organized a conference with the Kisan Party to protest a pre-planned looting and beating of tenants in villages of Patiala by police and landlords.

Muzaras in the village of Dhandoli Khurd clashed with biswedaris and police in July 1945. Police opened fire and killed two tenants. Soon after, tenants in villages of Bakshiwala and Dharamgarh began forcibly seizing landlords' properties. During the following three years, police reported many incidences of assault by muzaras in some villages as their resistance to paying batai became more aggressive.

When India gained its independence in August 1947, the Maharaja of Patiala state was the first prince to join the Indian union. At that time, the Patialan people demanded the establishment of representative government. The Maharaja announced constitutional reforms in January 1948 and became Rajpramukh (governor) of the newly formed Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU).

Following India's independence, the tenants continued to resist paying landlords as the transitioning government failed to pass agrarian reforms. Landlords had begun to employ armed gangs to terrorize the tenants into submission. The Lal Communist Party, which had become increasingly involved in the muzara resistance in recent years, helped tenants organize an armed defensive wing. But, this group never amounted to more than 40 individuals. It meant to discourage landlords from using gang violence against tenants, but little known violence resulted from the group's formation. In the later years of the campaign, some tenants clashed violently with landlords in attempts to forcibly take possession of their property. Organizers, however, remained committed to promoting methods of noncooperation with landlords and police in achieving their goals.

In 1951, the newly elected congress ministry formed the Agrarian Reforms Inquiry Committee with the purpose of addressing the grievances of the tenants and implementing agrarian reforms. The committee enacted the PEPSU Tenancy Act in January 1952 that protected tenants against eviction from their lands while the committee continued to search for a more permanent solution. In the same year, PEPSU acquired 800,000 acres of unworked, potentially rich wheat land for distribution to peasants in accordance with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's land reforms.

In April 1953, congress passed the PEPSU Occupancy Tenants Act, which allowed the tenants to become owners of their own land and effectively abolished the biswedari system. Tenants had to pay compensation to their landlords based on the value of the land, but due to the rapid inflation that occurred in later years, the sum did not amount to much.

The communist parties affiliated with the tenants were not happy with this solution because it required tenants to compensate the landlords. Tenants, however, found this agreement acceptable, and all resistance ended after the state enforced the PEPSU Occupancy Tenants Act.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

This campaign was influenced in part by the concurrent Akali movement of the Sikh population in the region.

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