

Global Issues

India's Peasant Rebellions at the Current Juncture

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Even a casual perusal of Indian mainstream media reports (not to mention other sources) for the last few months would leave no one in doubt that incidents of peasant unrest across the country have been on the rise in recent months, and may have the potential to give a serious jolt to the aggressive, confident and smirking march of the neo-liberal order in contemporary India.

This brief note, apart from flagging the increased intensity of recent peasant restiveness, engages with two core issues: a) the underlying factors and triggers that may have contributed to the heightened protests and mobilisations of the peasantry; and b) state-peasantry dynamics in contemporary India. The note suggests that the pursuit of neo-liberal policies since the 1990s has resulted in the worsening of the overall economic prospects of large sections of the population in the countryside. This has tended to accentuate the contradictions between the mass of the working people and neo-liberal capital which is currently supported by a revanchist, retrograde and ever more marketist neo-liberal regime. As should be immediately evident, these are indeed large and complex themes requiring detailed considerations which are impossible to take up here. The task I can attempt in this note is, at best, a few telegraphic messages, pointers and teasers, which hopefully will promote further research and debates.

I

The recent images of the protests of farmers from Tamil Nadu occupying a part of Jantar Mantar¹ for almost four months were pretty hard-hitting, evocative metaphors of the tragedy playing out in the countryside. At times they sat with bones and skulls of relatives or friends who had lost their lives (either through suicides or destitution), and at other times they held rats and snakes in their mouths (presumably to highlight their hunger and non-availability of food); sundry other novel forms were used to draw attention to their plight Likewise photographs of milk tankers being emptied on the highways and farmers throwing away vegetables and other foodstuffs in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh convey their disgust with policymakers in these states as well as the Union Government.² We may recall several other instances of protest from across the country, even from relatively peaceful states in recent times – for instance, Kerala which is facing the worst drought in

¹ Jantar Mantar lies in the heart of the national capital; it is a territory designated for voicing dissent and disagreements, and for raising various demands vis-à-vis the lawmakers of the country.

² India has a federal structure where every state/province has its own government and the Union Government is responsible for the governance of the entire country. As per the Constitution of India there are demarcations between the powers and responsibilities of the Union Government and the state governments. Land and agriculture comes primarily within the domain of the state governments.

115 years. Even the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (Indian Farmers Union), which is affiliated to and supported by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, brought out hundreds of farmers onto the streets to blockade highways in order to press for loan waivers and higher minimum support prices based on costs of cultivation.

A number of local and fragmented struggles have been reported from different parts of the country during the last couple of decades. The novelty at the current juncture may well be the greater coordination among a whole spectrum of farmers' organisations, leading to a consolidation of their movements. The continuing agrarian distress has created objective realities where farmers' bodies all over the country have come together under the banner of the All India Kisan Sanghar³ Coordination Committee (consisting of 130 organisations at last count).⁴ This committee consists of farmers' organisations of diverse kinds. Some of them have a presence in only one district, or in one or two states like the Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (National Farmers' and Workers' Organisation). Others are federations like the All India Kisan Sabha (Farmers' Conference) which is spread across at least fifteen states. Though there are no reliable figures regarding the actual spread of the agitation,⁵ what is well known is that there have been coordinated protests in at least eight states over the last two years. The most prominent among these are Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra (covering almost all districts in the state), Odisha, Haryana and Punjab (covering a few districts). Sporadic protests have been taking place in other states like Assam and Jharkhand, depending on the All India call given by the coordination committee.

It should be noted that though the methods of protest are diverse – ranging from district-wide protests, to national all-India protests, to petitioning in terms of signature campaigns and blockades – most of the agitations have highlighted two demands: loan waivers for all farmers; and a minimum support price that is at least 50 per cent higher than the cost of production. This is the first time in recent history that all farmers' organisations are fighting for minimum common demands.

But rather than engaging with movements in any meaningful dialogue, the present ruling dispensation has chosen intensified repression. In the last few months there have been a few major confrontations between the farmers and the state, one of the worst being the case in which six farmers were killed in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh in police firing. In the face of this repression, a month after the police shootings the Coordination Committee initiated a nationwide procession from Mandsaur to Champaran, (where Mahatma Gandhi had led his first farmers' agitation against the British colonial regime). The procession has several objectives, including to make the nation aware of the plight of the farmers and also to demand a nationwide waiver of crop loans; another important demand is the implementation of the recommendations of the well-known Swaminathan

³ Kisan Sangharsh means Farmers' Struggle.

⁴ As per the estimates of the official publication *Trade Unions in India* (2013), the agricultural sector had a registered trade union membership of 28 million. This did not include approximately 15 million of the All India Kisan Sabha (not a registered trade union) or 20 million of the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (the farmers' front of the ruling party).

⁵ According to the Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Union, their protests were spread over almost 91 districts of the country, and the All India Kisan Sabha reports that continuing protests have taken place in 180 to 300 districts depending on the character of the struggle [information provided by Vijoo Krishnan, Joint Secretary, All India Kisan Sabha].

Committee report which the current ruling party had promised to do in its 2014 election manifesto. The growing spread of the agitation with the formation of the committee has been remarkable. In Rajasthan and Gujarat farmers initiated highway blockades, and in Maharashtra joint conventions of farmers were held throughout the state in support of the procession from Mandsaur. This solidarity reflects the growing resolve of the peasants to confront the state, which has done much within its powers to break the agitation. For example, in Maharashtra it attempted to use the standard tactic of creating divisions by announcing partial benefits to farmers, but failed to break the unity. Thereafter it proceeded with a crackdown to detain and arrest leaders just before the state-level mobilisation of farmers intensified.

II

The root causes for the widespread agitations described above are not recent in origin. Rather this explosion of protest has been the result of a long period of agrarian distress which resulted from several significant changes in the overall macroeconomic policy regime since the early 1990s and a progressive opening up of domestic agriculture to the world economy. State intervention and support in the domestic market for agricultural produce has tended to weaken considerably. For example, policy measures in this regard include the following: government procurement has been scaled down; for crops covered by minimum support prices (MSP), such as paddy or wheat, the MSP has not kept pace with rising costs, and private players, including multinational corporations, have been allowed to have a significant say in the course of events. In fact, the Indian government appears to have been more loyal to the emperor than the emperor himself, as it removed quantitative restrictions on agricultural imports in 2001, two years before the WTO-stipulated date. A combination of these factors has tended to increase the vulnerability of the Indian peasantry greatly.

The most worrisome manifestation of the distress in the countryside has been a significant increase in suicides by farmers, which has been reported from several regions of the country, including most of the agriculturally prosperous states. As per the data provided by the National Crime Bureau Records, during the period between 1995 and 2015, almost 322 000 farmers have committed suicide. This troubling phenomenon is concentrated in four major states, namely Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka; all these are witnessing major agitations today. In states like Punjab, it is not only the farmers who are committing suicide, but also the agricultural labourers who are unable to get regular and decent jobs because of the on-going agrarian distress.

In part, this distress has been attributed to the growing indebtedness of the Indian peasantry, which is a result of the policy changes since the early 1990s affecting the nature and cost of cultivation. While inputs are increasingly controlled by big private players, there has also been a drying up of institutional credit for agriculture, forcing the farmers to be dependent on private sources of usurious credit, like moneylenders, traders, contractors and even microfinance corporations. According to one of the most recent and credible studies coming from the large-scale data systems, the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) report of 2014, titled *Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households in India*, the overall scenario has become grimmer. This report was based on a country-wide survey of approximately 35 000 households during 2012 and 2013. It estimates that about 52 per cent of the total agricultural households in India were in debt *and the*

average volume of debt increased almost four-fold between 2003 and 2013. The average level of debt per agricultural household in the country was Rs. 47 000 in 2012–2013, while annual income from cultivation per household stood at Rs. 36 972. In other words, the average debt of an average agricultural household was approximately Rs. 10 000 in 2012–2013. Of course, the incidence and intensity of indebtedness varies considerably across states, with some states such as Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu doing much worse. It should be obvious that growing indebtedness has been one of the important causes of the recent spurt in peasant agitations and the current intensification of demands for loan waivers. However, it is important to keep in mind the entire gamut of policies which have resulted in the relative immiseration of large sections of peasants and agricultural labourers in the country. It would not be an exaggeration to say that India's countryside has evolved from a situation of *agrarian distress* during the 1990s to one of *agrarian crisis* in subsequent years, with no signs of relief or improvement on the horizon in the near future.

III

In the context of the policy changes described above, it is important to note that the current confrontation between farmers and the state reflects underlying shifts in the balance of class relations in the Indian economy – shifts that led to a significant transition in policy choices. In other words, one needs to come to grips with the political economy of India's transition from a *dirigiste* to a neo-liberal regime in which the countryside has been affected relatively more adversely. During the 1970s and 1980s, commentators often talked about the rising power and voice of the Indian countryside in the overall policy framework soon after the launch of the Green Revolution; there were frequent allusions not only to the rise of “kulak” power but that of “bullock-capitalists”, middle-peasantry, and so on. It was as if the “rural” had found much greater voice in the policy setting within the country. Therefore, it might be surprising how the presumed power of the rural has taken a massive drubbing in the era of neo-liberal reforms.

However, if one attempts a careful class analysis of the economic transformation in rural India during the 1970s and 1980s, the current scenario may not appear surprising after all. The leadership of the so-called “farmers’ power” was with the landlords and the rich peasants who happened to be the major beneficiaries of the Green Revolution. They were the ones who had benefitted disproportionately from the public policy support regime; growing differentiation was also accompanied by increased diversification as the profits generated through agriculture were channelled into a number of non-agricultural options. The growing diversification also implied a sort of “economic indifference”, at times even an “abandonment of agriculture”, by the rich and the powerful. However, the overwhelming majority of the peasantry did not quite have the wherewithal for even reasonable (economically speaking) “exit options” with the advent of the neo-liberal regime.

It is also worth highlighting that the ascendancy of finance capital from the late 1970s onwards has led to a dramatic reconstitution of class and state power across the world, and India is no exception. Thus the theories of state which made analytical sense in the *dirigiste* era are hardly compelling with the rise and consolidation of globalised finance and the neo-liberal regimes organically connected with it. In such a context, the increasing assault on petty production in general and the peasantry in particular has become widespread in India, and the ever-increasing pro-corporate nature of the current political regime is quite evident. Land acquisition laws have been

liberalised in order to facilitate acquisition by corporations, and the reduction in subsidies has opened the door for big corporations to make significant inroads in trade in several markets. Both wholesale and retail agricultural activities and back-end operations are increasingly influenced by a few big corporations like Monsanto, Sygenta and the like. In other words, the state–peasantry dialectic has undergone a sea change in the period of the so-called economic reforms.

IV

The current agrarian crisis may seem insurmountable in light of the above-noted tendencies underlying the country's political economy. However, the recent spate of agitations may generate some hope, especially because they have been preceded by the formation of several joint initiatives like the initiation of the Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan (Land Rights Movement), after successive governments, particularly the present ruling dispensation, brought about changes in the Land Acquisition Laws. These changes implied deepening of structural inequalities and growing dispossession of land. The pro-corporate thrusts in land laws were already evident during the attempts of the earlier Union Government to amend the Land Acquisition Act 1894, especially through its 2011 Bill. After considerable opposition from progressive quarters, the previous Congress-led government was forced to restructure the Bill in 2013 and to provide at least a semblance of protection for the farmers. However, even these minimal hard-fought changes were reversed with the election of the present government. The government attempted to pass further pro-business amendments to the Act, but met with stiff resistance both inside and outside of Parliament.⁶ In the wake of such opposition and its inability to get the amendments passed, the government tried to push the Land Acquisition Ordinances thrice between 2014 and 2015; each time they were unsuccessful.

As noted, the overall intensification of neo-liberal attacks on agriculture and the growing dispossession led to the formation of the Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan, which comprises left-led organisations like the All India Kisan Sabha and all the constituents of the National Alliance of Peoples Movements, along with other smaller organisations. The Andolan, which operates in fifteen states, intensified its agitation and forced the Government of India to withdraw its attempts to bring the Land Acquisition Ordinance for the fourth time. It also adopted a joint twenty-point charter which built upon the agitation against land acquisition and envisaged unity between different sections of the peasantry on the one hand, and workers and peasants on the other. This broader vision of working-class unity is evident from the reference to rights of all workers, women, adivasis and dalits within the charter. The charter especially calls upon the farmers to fight against the policies that accentuate land dispossession grabs of productive resources through predatory corporate practices and acquisitions. The larger alliance between peasants and other sections of society is also reflected in the vision of the Andolan, which asks all sections to fight against discriminatory practices in education and other public services. Hence the vision of the Andolan, as reflected in its charter, is systemic in character and challenges the neo-liberal policies that have been propelling the rural distress in the different regions of the country. The emergence of the Kisan Sangharsh Coordination

⁶ The Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan reported that they had collected two million signatures from 300 districts against the ordinance.

Committee can be seen as a direct result of these on-going efforts stressing the unity of the different segments of the working class.

The example given above is one of the many diverse tendencies within the farmers' movements in contemporary India. The long history of peasant struggles reveals several trajectories; two among these are worth flagging – class-based movements, and community-based struggles culminating in some form of narrow identity politics. The character of these is obviously connected with the social basis of the organisation and the actors leading the struggles. For example, in several states, by using caste identity, the rich and middle peasants, often great oppressors of agricultural workers, have succeeded in substantial caste-based mobilisations in pursuit of demands such as the application of reservations in government jobs.⁷ Many such agitations have been manipulated by the ruling class, often along communal lines, as was evident in western Uttar Pradesh in the riots of 2015. By using such politics, the ruling dispensation tried to expand its base among powerful Jat farmers and to dissipate the discontent against their policies.

However, with increasing assaults on their livelihoods, the peasantry at large may see through these games, become mobilised and realise that these narrow identity-based divisions are aimed at subverting their movements and pushing through neo-liberal policy changes. Of course, the theme of peasant consciousness is a complex one and I am not suggesting that there is a spectre haunting India's ruling elite through a widespread and well-coordinated open rebellion by the peasantry. Yet, I do hope (and not as wishful thinking), that the current phase of agitation will not implode into disconnected "million mutinies" (to borrow a phrase from Naipaul's extremely pessimistic account of India), and find a coherence to at least shock the march of the contemporary neo-liberal regime, if not halt it. Only the time will tell.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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⁷ India has a constitutional provision of affirmative action, part of which means quotas in jobs for economically and socially backward castes.