

Unfolding Peasant Rebellion in India

100 Years After Peace-Land-Bread and 50 Years After Naxalbari Peasants Rebellion. Where Do We Stand Now

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On the Sept 22, 2017, during a march of All India Kisan Sangharsh Co-ordination Committee, one of its leaders Mr Yogendra Yadav (henceforth YY) told us:

“So, what we are witnessing is the beginning of something that can only be described as a peasant rebellion”[1] Because, there were outbursts of peasants’ movement in several states of India in the last 12-14 months, and also, “Second, they are being run by different organisations, but the demands are actually common. Every single protest boils down to two demands: fair and remunerative price and complete loan waiver.... This de-facto common agenda has emerged in the formation of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Co-ordination Committee, bringing together more than 150 farmer organisations. So, there is a possibility.”[2]

Interestingly, we are hearing this on the 100th year after a revolution the fulfilled the demands of peace, land and bread; when state confiscated all land without compensation and peasants got control over almost all land of the country. Also we are crossing 50th year after the Naxalbari rebellion that started when nine peasant women and a child died in police firing in Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal, in May 1967 during left rule, where peasants had forcibly sequestered land of the landlords; and subsequently a great peasants’ struggle developed against landlords, usurers and village vested interests that spread over India challenging the rule[3].

It may be noted that some peasants’ organisations of “Naxalite” parties (different CPIMs) along with those of the CPI and CPIM etc left parties are there inside the abovementioned ‘All India Kisan Sangharsh Co-ordination Committee’.

Demand of “fair and remunerative price” or MSP (Minimum Support Price) was being heard since almost 40 years. It became much heard during the Nasik Movement in 1980. Demand of “loan waiver” is also an old one; it was even demanded by a Chief Minister of a state, 30 years earlier in Haryana[4]. These movements cropped up from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Western UP, Haryana etc ‘advanced’ states.

But during 1977-87 there were also echoes of some ‘old’ type, voices against landlords, usurers and village vested interests from Andhra, Telangana, Bihar, Jharkhand, etc states. It was then only 10-20 years from the Naxalbari Peasants struggle. From Punjab where an intense semi-religious Khalistan movement was going on we heard electricity workers and peasants raising a slogan – “Na Hindu Raaj na Khalistan, Raaj Kare Mazdoor, Kisan. (Neither Hindu rule or Khalistani rule, we want the rule of workers and peasants.)”[5]. In Bihar and Jharkhand there were peasants’ movements even after the Arwal killing where 30 peasants died in police firing in 1986.

So there were two kinds of fights. One was putting such demands and acting in such a way as to challenge the agrarian system and also the law and order of the system. There was a revolutionary seed inside such fights. The other type of fight takes as granted the present socio-economic system and seeks some remedy so that peasants (mostly in simple commodity production) can carry on and mainly the farmers (to whom agriculture is a 'business') can get a 'profit' and thrive.

Subsequently, one came in forefront and the other retreated. Words like agrarian revolution, democratic revolution, means of production etc. de facto retreated. Demands more and more were centred on prices of produces than production relations. Land to the tillers was seen to me 'no more viable' or even 'impractical'. Agriculture was seen as less of a necessity, livelihood, way of life and more of an investment where profitable return was the chief parameter. The 'lefts' were proud and happy with their 'land reform' in West Bengal which surpassed figures of other states even though touching only 6% of total land under agriculture which passed hands (from the landlords to the peasants); a figure which blushes in shame in front of post WWII land reform in Japan or South Korea.

In the mid-1990s several factors of agriculture again became important to the economy as a whole. Let us see some pertinent points. Firstly, the evils of chemically pushed hybrid (HYV) agriculture started getting manifested - more and more chemical needed to get same level of yield, depletion of groundwater, depletion of micro-nutrients and exhaustion of soil are some significant ones. Secondly, liberalisation led to reduction in subsidies (starting from 1993-94), which in turn moved up prices of fertilisers in an uneven way (increase in prices of P and K was more than that of N, leading to worsening of N:P:K input ratio). Thirdly, diminishing return in agriculture was amply apparent. And fourthly, shift towards commercial agriculture, away from basic foods, increased vulnerability.

As all answers were to be sought in market (and everybody knew revolution is not at all a practical word and equality is just a utopia, haven't you seen what happened in Russia, East Europe, China!), the question of influencing the biggest player, the state, came to forefront: Lowering of input price (= subsidy, loan waiver) and increasing the output price (= MSP). History, geography, economics etc all worked hand in hand so well to shape this inside the popular consciousness that we could understand this 'situation' even without the help of our learned friend YY. Only some small detail are missing here in this generalisation, for example, demand for irrigation water[6], outbursts against insufficient electricity supply[7] etc which are all related to basic needs of green revolution.

Still, the land question did not die. In the last 10 years it is also present sometimes in the news served by big media. Let us see some examples.

1. In July 2007 in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh we saw "If the police brutally throw them out of occupied lands, they are returning back with greater determination the next day. In Nellore, where there has been a most atrocious attack on women, children and old by the police, the people refused to vacate the lands despite our people trying to persuade them to retreat temporarily...[8]. CPIM and other 'opposition' parties quickly called a state wide general strike for a day and withdrew the movement for land.

2. In 2008-09 in Malwa region of Punjab we found Dalit peasants capturing govt. owned lands. We hear story of a woman peasant who was undaunted in her fight even after being in jail twice for the fight.[9]

3. "Holding banners and flags and raising slogans, nearly a thousand landless farmers who arrived from different parts of the district marched from Ambedkar Circle to the office of Deputy Commissioner here on Wednesday demanding cultivable lands for landless and residential plots for homeless."[10] And this was from Raichur, Karnataka, in July 2016.

4. Shortly after that we hear slogans in Gujarat— *ગુજરાતમાં ગાયનો ટેલ રાખો, જમણે આપણને જમણું જમણું આપો* (you keep your cow's tail, and give us our land)[11]. That was when thousands of Dalits marched from Ahmedabad to Una, Gujarat, in August 2016.

But there is a warning sign. If leaders of these movements gets in a parliamentary grouping with target of winning next parliament and assembly elections and 'reforming' the system from within, well, we have seen in the past how efficiently bourgeois parliament (and even state governments) can accommodate and reform these parties or groups or platforms and make all of them system-slaves.

Some last words:

1. We have seen above few peasants movements with demand of land. Interestingly, most of them took place in so called advanced or developed states of India. This only shows the presence of the demand in the mind of the peasants. We find in history how difficult it is to conclude that certain sections have become agro-labourers and they do not have this land demand anymore. We may recall a story from Russia during early soviet years; interested readers may read that given in the footnote section.[12]

2. If an averaging happens in India a peasant household will get a maximum of, say 0.75 Ha in WB, about 1 Ha in Andhra Pradesh, about 1.75 Ha in Madhya Pradesh and so on[13]; which is meagre and will not bring a lifelong solution to Indian peasants. But a democratic revolution is only a start of a solution. Most likely, to overcome the size and ability constraints they will move towards making cooperatives and eventually to social ownership of social means of production.

3. Our learned friends YY only mentioned the 'ecological' crisis of agriculture when he started the talk but did not put any 'demand' or emphasis corresponding to that. But shifting from this green revolution to natural agriculture is now imperative. Is there any peasants' organisation which is taking it up seriously?

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Notes

[1]. Oct 04, 2017 · 08:00 am, Manas Roshan in Scroll.in
<https://scroll.in/article/851846/interview-we-are-witnessing-the-beginning-of-a-peasant-rebellion-in-india-says-yogendra-yadav>

[2] *ibid*

[3] <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mazumdar/1968/06/x02.html>

[4]

<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/haryana-chief-minister-devi-lals-grand-loan-waiver-plans-go-awry/1/337755.html> “After sitting in the chief minister’s chair, I will call my finance minister and the chief secretary. I will ask them to draft an order waiving all loans taken by my brothers in the villages. You will all be free from the burden of loans the moment your man Devi Lal signs the order and puts the Haryana Government’s seal on it.” And he did it.

[5] http://www.massline.info/India/ht_MassRevLineDuringKhalistani.htm See also

<https://www.straight.com/news/389916/gurpreet-singh-khalistani-separatists-killings-leave-legacy-sorrow-canada-and-us>

[6] Farmers hold SDM as hostage, 30 hurt in police lathi charge

<http://www.thehindu.com/2004/10/27/stories/2004102711260500.htm> Then, “The tehsil town of Gharsana and the neighbouring Raola in Sriganganagar district of Rajasthan were brought under curfew on Tuesday morning after the previous night’s clashes between the police and the farmers agitating for irrigation water. The troops deployed late on Monday evening took over Gharsana town, which was till the other day virtually under the control of farmers who had laid siege to the Dan Mandi area for the past seven days. The troops carried out flag marches in the town.”

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/curfew-in-two-rajasthan-towns/article3062885.ece>

[7] Farmers stage dharna in protest against power supply disconnection

<http://www.thehindu.com/2004/06/02/stories/2004060210030300.htm>

[8] Peoples Democracy 2007, July1, Interview with B V Raghavulu, “We Will Continue & Intensify The Land Struggle” http://archives.peoplesdemocracy.in/2007/0701/07012007_raghavulu%20intrv.htm

[9] Interested readers may read the full story here <http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2009/08/3134>

[10] Landless farmers demand agricultural lands, residential plots, Raichur, July 20, 2016

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/Landless-farmers-demand-agricultural-lands-residential-plots/article14499308.ece>

[11] Dalit Asmita Rally August 6, 2016 <http://sandesh.com/dalit-asmita-raily-ahmedabad-to-una/>

[12] It was in March 1919. Lenin was addressing “Session of the First Congress of Farm Labourers of Petrograd Gubernia” and he ended his speech declaring the hope of formation of ‘All-Russia Farm Labourers’ Union’ soon. But some queer comments cropped up from those ‘farm labourers’ or whom they thought to be agricultural proletariat. They demanded, in front of Lenin, private vegetable plots and permission to keep and raise animals! Lenin was amazed. He said, “If private vegetable plots, animals, poultry, and so forth, were permitted again, we should revert to the small farming that had existed hitherto. If that were the case, would it be worthwhile to have all this bother. Would it be worthwhile establishing state farms?” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/mar/13.htm>

[13] Agriculture Census 2011 <http://agcensus.dacnet.nic.in/statesummarytype.aspx>

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