

Rich Peasant, Poor Peasant

K. Balagopal

Seminar, Issue No, 352, Farmer Power, December 1988

The major threat to the Indian state and the social structure supported by it have in recent times come almost exclusively from the villages. It is not the urban working class is a 'labour aristocracy' and therefore uninterested in or incapable of threatening the structure. A small section of the urban working class has deceptively high wages but the large majority of them lead lives which are often worse than those of the rural poor. But the urban working class is numerically so small that it has not as yet succeeded in posing a very serious threat to the state. About the only time a recent years the Indian state got a real shock from the urban worker was in 1974 when the railway workers went on a nationwide strike.

There are two types of pressures from rural India: one, the struggle of the poor peasants and landless labourers, and the other, the struggle of the relatively better-off peasants usually called 'middle peasants' or 'rich peasants' The two movements differ not only in the classes they fight. The movements of the rural poor fight the rural rich - the landlords and the contractors for instance - whereas the movements of the 'middle' peasants fight the urban rich and the imperialists.

In the last decade or two the former type of movements were very much in the news and it was intellectually fashionable to support them; now the latter type of movements are rapidly occupying the same position. The shift is sharp and it is now widely held by one time radical intellectuals that the fervour of the seventies was a gigantic illusion. The shift is semantically facilitated have supported both types of movements in the name of the same 'peasantry'. The word 'peasant', as used by our intellectuals, means whichever class one sympathises with among the rural population. It is difficult to arrive at a more precise definition from the intellectual practice of the Indian *buddhijeevi*.

But it is necessary to realise that there is a third and very strong pressure that works from rural India on the Indian state. This understanding is crucial for a complete comprehension of rural society as well as a proper appreciation of agrarian struggles of both the types mentioned above. The lack of such an appreciation is reflected in the very limited terms of which those struggles are understood. Struggles of the rural poor are analysed in the same terms in which they would have been analysed fifty years ago - land distribution, wages, control of waste land, bondage, tenancy, unpaid labour, etcetera, whereas agitations of the 'middle' peasants are - even more simplistically - analysed

exclusively in terms of unequal exchange between the primary and secondary sectors of the economy.

The picture of rural India given in the two sets of analyses have nothing whatsoever in common. It is almost as if the rural poor and the 'middle' peasants live in different villages altogether. No wonder that people who are worried about conceptual and analytical coherence have begun to suspect that one of these two must be imaginary, and since the 'middle' peasant world of inflated input costs and unremunerative sale prices appears real - what with the Sharad Joshis and the Tikaits capturing the headlines every second day - the other must be illusory.

To recover our sanity it is necessary to obtain a total picture that will contain both these movements within a meaningful and internally related whole. The picture is best understood against the backdrop of the wide variety of social disturbances rural India is regularly subject to; struggles of the rural poor for land, wages, and against social oppression; struggles of landed peasants for remunerative prices, cheap inputs and infrastructural facilities; booth capturing, physical assaults and other forms of physical violence at the time of panchayat, assembly or parliament elections; conflicts and power struggles relating to rural cooperatives and government contracts; organised assaults on the rural poor including atrocities on dalits and other forms of community-based oppression; and so on. It is significant that of all these disturbances, the first two alone occupy the attention of analysts, and are held to be sufficient in themselves for understanding rural society and politics.

This is particularly true of those analysts who are partial to 'middle' peasant agitations, who conceptualise village society in terms of just two classes, labourers and peasants, and analyse the dynamics in terms of the suicidal/ treacherous agitations of the labourers against the peasants, and the peasants against the urban capitalists and imperialists. This 'model' would find it impossible to explain much of what goes on in rural India; to take just one instance, the fact that in Andhra Pradesh, nearly 60 to 70 murders have taken place in rural and small town areas during the last year and a half of elections - elections to panchayat mandals, agricultural cooperatives, municipalities and gram panchayats. In these murders and counter murders perpetrated by TDP and Cong (I) gangs, it was 'peasants' of some variety who killed and got killed on both sides, and we require an analysis that will explain these killings, as well as the struggles of labourers/peasants/farmers, whatever one wants to call them, and the murderous attacks on the rural poor, whether they take place on community or class lines.

Methodologically, the total picture has been missing because rural society is often studied principally on the basis of a single analytical category: degree of commoditisation of the economy. This focus leaves out many things which are essential for understanding the situation in its totality. To achieve a total understanding we need to focus on not just the degree of commoditisation of the economy but on the structure of rural society as it has evolved since 1947. The 'ideological' reason behind this methodological failure is the perception that the Indian state is exclusively an agent of capital, intent on creating a market for goods produced by it and on developing agriculture for the purpose of

providing raw material for its consumption and food for its workers' consumption. This understanding, which finds expression in the tendency of economists of the left as well as the right to be preoccupied with matters like the rate of capital formation, has badly distorted our understanding of the role of the state.

The efforts of the Indian state to consciously consolidate and enrich a class of rural rich - not only in the interests of capital but in the interests of the rural rich themselves - has been missed out because of the self-imposed preoccupation of the economists. Since it is assumed that what characterises the Indian state definitely is its interest - or lack of it - in 'developing' India, and since development means rapid capital formation and industrial growth require a certain pattern of trade and a certain transfer of resources between industry and agriculture, this preoccupation is but natural. If we give up this 'problematic' of economic development and take an unimpeded look at what has happened to the rural social structure in the last four decades, we are likely to get a more complete picture. The period of the nationalist movement was also a period of scattered but frequent and violent anti-feudal struggles of various sections of the peasantry. These struggles were only selectively integrated into the Congress-led nationalist movement, but the Congress party had no option but to take note of them in devising its policies for post-independent India. Yet that party had so many leaders at the national and provincial levels who were themselves of the class of rural rich or were politically and communally allied to that class that it had but to proceed slowly and cautiously. And therefore, immediate action was taken only against the zamindar type of holders of superior revenue rights, and that too only against their revenue rights, and with compensation; their land holdings and the wide range of feudal authority the class possessed, were not immediately touched. Nor were the landholdings and feudal authority of the smaller class of landlords - mostly resident landlords whose claim to agrarian surplus was based partly but not principally on revenue rights and mainly on landholding and social authority - touched by the state. But as this small measure did not and could not satisfy the peasantry, further land reforms in the form of tenancy and land ceiling legislation were enacted and much rhetoric against feudal oppression was indulged in. This was a much more difficult matter since this class was the mainstay of the Congress party in most parts of the country. And that is why the legislation was not implemented and the rhetoric was not given real content to any greater extent than was necessitated by the agitational strength of the peasantry, which varied from region to region. Today, three decades and more after these enactments, the 'game' of enactment - evasion - pressure - concession has reached a seemingly stable equilibrium.

Government statistics - which are gleefully frank in this matter - say that about one per cent of the total land available for cultivation has been taken over as surplus under land ceiling laws. Miserable as it is, this figure, is still misleading since the land taken over is mostly unsuitable for cultivation. All the cultivatable surplus land was disposed off by the landlords through timely sales and subdivision - some of it benami and nominal but some of it real - or by selling it to their own tenants or farm servants, thereby creating for themselves a permanent constituency in the days to come. Tenancy reforms were used by the bigger tenants to liberate themselves and join the class of dominant landholders. As for the smaller tenants, in most parts of the country they got evicted and converted into

unrecorded tenants/farm servants/wage labourers; though in some places - depending principally on political factors -they managed to use the reforms to become independent cultivators.

In the process there has been a gradual consolidation of a class of dominant landholders in villages, who range all the way from old style landlords holding 100 acres or more to their modern progeny or ex-tenants holding smaller but usually technologically modernised and highly productive holdings.

However, this landholding pattern does not explain all that is required for understanding rural India. This is another point where accepted methodologies for analysing rural society are insufficient for our purpose. It is necessary to also see the role played by the state in consolidating and enriching this class, or at least the upper section of this class. As I have said above the gamut of `developmental' activities undertaken by the Indian state cannot be and should not be understood exclusively as aimed at creating a pattern of production, exchange and resource mobilisation needed for urban oriented capitalist industrialisation.

The technological and infrastructural modernisation of rural India - electrification, provision of artificial irrigation, chemical inputs and machinery, setting up agricultural and other rural cooperatives and marketing institutions, extensive development of rural banking in recent years, the widespread habit of giving out most rural works to contractors instead of getting them done departmentally, the ruralisation of politics through the panchayat institutions and their linkages with rural developmental works, the extensive infrastructural facilities available for the transfer of rural wealth to urban areas to get invested in real estate, finance, trade, transport, contracts, business, agro-processing industry and the marketable professions like medicine and law - all these must be taken fully into account and seen as aimed at the consolidation of a class of rural - small town rich, the class that has taken the place of the landlords of yesteryears without any rupture or discontinuity.

Taken as a class it is still land-based to a significant extent and generally village-based. It exercised social domination over the villages through pre-capitalist institutions like caste and through the tradition of domination it has inherited from its fore-fathers, both of which are neatly integrated with `modern' institutions like gram panchayats and cooperatives. In the more `backward' areas, even more primitive pre-capitalist institutions like beggar, feudal monopoly of political and social opinion and arbitration, and the maintenance of armed gangs for enforcing this monopoly, prevail quite extensively; sometimes many of these institutions recover after a period of apparent demise, in times of drought or political turmoil.

This class, which the Indian state had nurtured as assiduously as it has helped the accumulation of the urban capitalists and imperialists, is completely missed out in the dominant analyses of rural society. The prevalent methodologies are incapable of capturing its existence, and the prevalent conceptualisation of social transformation has no place to accommodate it.

And yet, this class is a key reference point for most of the social disturbances that affect the lives of the large majority of the people at India. The CPI-ML movement, which perceives the agrarian revolution as the axis of the new democratic revolution, has fought this class as the immediate enemy of the rural masses; some of the groups even regard it as the principal enemy. Landlords holding large and prosperous estates of land, those controlling access to common or wasteland and those exercising feudal social domination; corrupt and authoritarian headmen and heads of institutions like gram panchayats, cooperatives and marketing societies, oppressive and extortionist and contractors - these oppressors and the political representatives of these oppressors constitute the class against which the CPI-ML groups have organised the rural poor. Their agrarian programme has been the distribution of its assets among the rural poor. The issues around which the masses are organised do include agricultural wage rates and other matters which seemingly pit the landless poor against the middle peasants', but to view it as a labourer vs peasant conflict is to view a political struggle economically.

The enemies of the movement have themselves never had any doubts about its political content even when its main demands have been higher wages for transplanting or harvesting paddy. The rural rich - as distinct from the 'middle peasants' - can very well afford to pay the wages demanded, but they have reacted with the correct political instinct and opposed the CPI-ML movement viciously. Where the 'middle peasantry' or a section of it has turned against the CPI-ML movement, it is invariably possible to discern behind this opposition the hand of a landlord, a contractor, a domineering gangster of feudal descent, a corrupt political boss, and suchlike. As the economic and political and political strength of this class increases the viciousness of these attacks also increases. In recent years, especially after the Telugu Desam party came to power, the ruthlessness of the repression on the CPI-ML movement has increased manifold, and its class content is clearly revealed in the exchanges in the state's Legislative Assembly, which is populated by the cream of the absentee landlords, contractors, financiers, businessmen-brokers. Suppression of the rural poor is an important requirement for the strengthening of the hegemony of this class. It is not just that payment of higher wages of them would affect its accumulations, or that the demands for land redistribution would affect its property; it is a political requirement, too. When this class challenges the monopoly bourgeoisie and the imperialists in its desire for greater benefits for itself, it needs the full and solid well reflected in the phenomenon that goes by the description time Andhra Pradesh witnessed an escalation of such atrocities, especially after the Telugu Desam party came to power. Contrary to commonly accepted academic opinion that it is the 'green revolution' that is causing the tensions in villages, these atrocities have taken place in all kinds of villages. It is a consequence of the academic's unhappy methodological obsession with capital that the green revolution is isolated from all the fiscal, political, administrative and other measures undertaken by the Indian state to further enrich the rural rich. And these measures have had their impact even in the 'backward' areas. Where a good amount of irrigation is available the rural rich have been enriched through technological modernisation; in other areas they have found a substitute in government contracts, cooperatives, and the wide variety of administrative and 'developmental' institutions created since independence.

The major incidents of killing of harijans have taken place in Karamchedu (Prakasam district), Neerukonda (Guntur district), Dontali (Nellore district), Gudiada (Vizianagaram district), and four or five villages in Chittoor district. Karamchedu is a model 'developed' village in the canal irrigated part of the old Guntur district. Paddy, cotton and tobacco are cultivated extensively and intensively here and the wealth generated by this cultivation has taken the form of and further reproduced itself in trade, real estate, business, cinemas, and lately politics. Neerukonda lies in the un-irrigated upland region of interior Guntur district, which has been a centre of commercial cultivation ever since the first ryotwari settlement in 1865-66, and especially tobacco cultivation under the aegis of ILTD in later years.

Dontali in Nellore district and Gudiada in Vizianagaram district are situated in symmetric opposition, outside the reach of the Krishna basin in the south and the Godavari basin in the north; they are archetypal backward villages in drought hit regions whose dried up tanks have rendered paddy more a memory than a foodgrain. Finally, Bandlapalli and other villages in Chittoor district lie in a region that has been agriculturally prosperous in a traditional sense ever since the days of the Vijayanagar empire. The region receives good rains from the northeast monsoon which drains the eastern ghat hills and fills the irrigation tanks and keeps them full all the year round. Paddy, sugarcane, and groundnut are grown in plenty here, and the prosperity is symbolised by the temple to Lord Venakateswara built by the Vijayanagar kings in the midst of thick forests on the eastern ghat hills.

In all these villages harijans or other toiling caste people have been killed and their houses set on fire in the last two years. The assailants are mostly ordinary peasants but invariably they have had the backing and instigation of the class of provincial rich that we have been discussing above. Ministers, MLAs, absentee landholders with trade and business in nearby towns, resident landlords who also indulge in trade and contracts - such individuals have been accused of behind the scenes complicity by the dalits, and claimed as their patrons by the assailants. Caste, of course works as a cementing factor, but there are many other less visible binding threads. The instigators do not have any insurmountable economic conflict with the dalits, but they need to suppress the dalits to consolidate the rural constituency behind them in the struggle with the classes with whom they do have serious conflict over the control use of the nation's resources: the Urban capitalists and the imperialists. And for this suppression the ordinary the labourers, playing upon its insecurity in the kind of agricultural conditions we have.

Rural electoral violence is another indicator of the nature and the inner contradictions of this class. The culture of gang fights of feudal lords is now carried forward by this seemingly much more modern class. Large parts of Andhra Pradesh - Rayalaseema districts, for instance - are vertically split into factions locally dominated by individuals of the landlord-contractor-quarry owner class owing allegiance to two or three big figures at the district level - usually present ministers of the Telugu Desam government or past ministers of the Congress governments. And yet, as far as their economic activity goes, these overlords are as modern as you could wish to see, complete with Maruti cars and VCRs at home.

During the last year and a half, factional violence during elections to panchayat bodies, cooperatives and municipalities have claimed 60 to 70 lives apart from hundreds of haystacks and houses burnt. The district of Kurnool in Rayalaseema witnessed the remarkable spectacle of 300 villages - about 25 per cent of the total - returning their sarpanches un-opposed, a feat for which the villages received handsome grants in cash from the state government in recognition of the maturity that made them elect their sarpanches by consensus and not wasteful conflict; in point of fact, the successful candidates managed to get elected unanimously because they were sponsored by the factions whose write runs unquestioned in the respective villages and is questioned only on pain of considerable physical violence. And the writ extends far beyond electoral choices and decides almost everything in the villages.

It is within the matrix of the enrichment and domination of this class that one should make sense of rural struggles - struggles of the poor as well as struggles of the 'middle' peasants. The market orientation of the rural economy is better described as monetisation than commoditisation, much less capitalist cultivation. The general monetisation of the economy forces cultivators to produce marketable crops even when that is not altogether the optimal choice for them. It forces subsistence production into the market without destroying its subsistence character. In severely drought hit Anantapur district, for instance, peasants who had a choice of wet land crops like ragi and paddy and dry land crops like jowar, bajra and groundnut, are today growing groundnut almost as an exclusive crop. The unending drought has forced them into dry and farming all over again, and since their credit with the cooperatives has dried up due to repeated defaulting and no moneylender is going to lend money for the cultivation of a non marketable crop like jowar or bajra, they are left with groundnut as the only alternative.

This way very well show up in statistical tables as a spurt in commercial cultivation in Anantapur district. Indeed, there is a general tendency on the part of even small peasants to grow cash crops on dry land, not because they are profit maximising capitalist cultivators but because any other choice of the crop would leave them starved for credit at one end and cash at the other. For instance, most of the Lambada (Banjara) cultivators in Warangal and Karimnagar districts grow groundnut on their small patches of red soiled holdings (kushki land), and most of the Gonds of Adilabad grow cotton in their (often illegal) black soil holdings in the forest highlands.

Therefore, remunerative prices for cash crops is a general problem of concern for the peasantry at large and not just the rich peasantry. It will perhaps become a bigger problem as drought conditions increase in extent and intensity. It is not very convincing that the terms of trade are generally in favour of agriculture against industry, as is argued by some people. In any case the debate is vitiated by the misapprehension that the terms of trade determine the level of prosperity for all classes in villages. However, on the contrary, the prosperity of the rural rich would be affected much more by a drop in government expenditure on rural works, on maintaining and running rural institutions, and a shift in the policy concerning rural contracts, transport and marketing. Yet the rural rich do have a serious stake in the question of 'remunerative' prices.' Partly, of course, it

is because they themselves have land and often grow lucrative crops; partly it is because low prices for marketed output affects the savings of the peasantry and thereby the accumulation of the rich since they control and handle the savings through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms; but more than anything else it is because the cause of 'remunerative prices' is the cause of the 'village' and they are and must be seen to be the natural leaders of the village.

There is no other way they can legitimise their claims for a greater share of state-controlled resources, a claim that they frequently assert against urban capital. 'Middle' peasant movements which talk of village vs town, or unorganised sector vs organised sector, play into the hands of this class whether they like it or not. This truth may seem unkind at first but it becomes evident and the moment the rural rich themselves step in to organise the 'peasantry'. Then it will appear in starkest light and thereby reveal the essence of the matter. And here, as in all matters concerning the politics of the rural rich, N.T. Rama Rao's Andhra Pradesh is already taking the lead.

Recently the state government has constituted a body called the Karshaka Parishad. It is funded by the government and is supposed to look after the interests of the farmers. Members are enrolled at the village level and office bearers are elected. Its President is, of course, the Chief Minister's younger son-in-law, Chandrababu Naidu, who was born in a poor peasant family but owns more than a hundred acres of land and palatial house in Hyderabad. The Karshaka Parishad, of course, talks the language of 'Bharat', and indeed a delegation is reported to have gone to the different states to study the farmers' movements of those states.

It is necessary to realise the potential, if not actually present, domination of all the farmers movements by the same class. It is not a matter of the subjective honesty and Gandhian simplicity of the leaders, whether real or put on. So long as the matter is analysed in terms of the conflict between capital and peasant production, between organised industry and unorganised primary production, between capital intensive production and labour intensive production, the danger will remain inherent. The only way the farmers' movements can avoid co-optation by the rural rich is to recognise class as an oppressor on par with urban capital.

Very few peasants need to be told this since they suffer the oppression, exploitation and swindling of this class in their day to day life, but it needs to be recognised conceptually and integrated into a political line of struggle. It is much more difficult to fight this class than it is to indulge in rhetoric - or even rasta roko agitations - against urban capital, but there is no other way one can organise a genuine peasant struggle for better farm prices. And this is where it also becomes possible to unite the struggles of the landless for wages and land, and against social oppression of the rural rich, with the struggles for better prices for agricultural produce. For the oppression of the rural is a fact of life for the mass of the peasantry as much as for the poor. In any real life village it is in truth impossible to separate the problems and the rural poor. It takes a shoddy methodology and political sleight of hand to achieve the miracle.