

Agrarian Struggles

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THE last two decades of theoretical research and political practice have led to the realisation that there is nothing in the world as fascinating as the agrarian history and politics of India. The history defies summarisation and the politics defies an easy consummation. Just as many more tons of paper and ink will undoubtedly be expended before we get a clear picture of India's agrarian history, much more struggle, sacrifice and suffering will be undergone before its blood-stained pages reach their *finis*.

A R Desai's compilation, a successor to his "Peasant Struggles in India", is an attempt to record and briefly analyse the story of agrarian politics from 1947 to the present. Some of the articles are selected from journals; some are excerpted from books; some are reports, both official and unofficial; and some are written especially for this compilation. The articles are divided into two parts, one containing some theoretical pieces on 'Agrarian India after Independence' and some reports purportedly giving an 'all India' picture of agrarian struggles; and the other consisting of articles giving a 'regional' picture of agrarian struggles. The division is somewhat arbitrary as is the arrangement of the pieces in part two. If they had been arranged in the order of historical evolution of agrarian struggles—or at least in chronological order—the compilation would have made more sense; instead, for instance, the report on the Srikakulam struggle is 9th in the volume whereas the excerpt from Sumanta Banerjee pertaining to the Naxalbari uprising is placed 23rd. And the volume ends with an out-of-place account of the Kakdwip peasant insurrection from the Tebhaga days. The fact that no article contains the date of its original publication confounds this confused arrangement further. An opinion or even a statement of 'tact' makes no sense unless one knows when it was made; coming from a person of Desai's experience and seriousness of purpose, this carelessness must be considered unfortunate.

Theoretical Issues

The editor's General Introduction, his remarks in the separate introductions written to the two parts, his article entitled 'Changing Profile of Rural Society in India', Sumanta Banerjee's (excerpted) chapter entitled 'The Rural Scene' and Gail Omvedt's 'Caste, Agrarian Relations and Agrarian Conflicts' are the wholly theoretical portions of the volume, which set out to conceptualise the social structure of rural India, though practically all the articles contain a certain

amount of theorising regarding agrarian relations. The most remarkable thing about this selection is that it completely ignores the protracted debate on 'mode of production in Indian agriculture' that excited many economists in the seventies. While I suspect the exclusion is because the editor's *a priori* theoretical position (which may be broadly described as Trotskyist) forecloses all debate on the question, the omission is nevertheless well-deserved; an equal and related blessing is that Desai has resisted the temptation to treat his readers to yet some more exegesis of the third volume of Lenin's Collected Works.

Instead, his analysis of agrarian relations starts with an analysis of the Indian State. The nature and intentions of the State are central to his understanding of the agrarian scene; in his own words: "I will go on to discuss the changes that have taken place in Indian rural society as a result of the multipronged measures adopted by the Central and State governments of the Indian Union to transform agrarian society politically, economically, socio-institutionally and culturally!" This perspective makes his analysis much superior to the 'mode of production' debate with its empirical concentration on landholding patterns, and statistics about tenancy, tractors and tubewells. The stark difference between the Tsarist State and the modern Indian State would make any imitation of the method employed by Lenin irrelevant for understanding agrarian relations in India.

Desai's understanding of the matter starts with the presumption that the Indian State after 1947 set out to consciously develop agriculture along capitalist lines. The abolition of revenue intermediaries and other land reform measures are said to have led to the consolidation of a broader class of rural rich, a class that the State is seen to have deliberately created in order to hasten capitalist development in agriculture. There will be general agreement with his statement that "[land reforms] sliced off a bit of the old land-owning classes, those that owned enormous estates, and incorporated a small upper section of the tenants in the land-owning group, thus creating a broader strata of landowners. . . ." This is a succinct statement of the genesis of the rural gentry of independent India; the difficulty is with the concluding clause that "[this class] would actively take interest in developing agriculture on capitalist lines". There are two separate issues here: one is what the Indian State intended to achieve, and the other is what it actually achieved. It is by no means

clear that the two are the same, nor that either of them is the "creation of profit-maximising capitalist agriculturists". The Indian Constitution is formally, and impeccably, bourgeois. So are most of the institutions of the State. To Desai it follows straight from this that the Indian State deliberately set out to promote capitalism, within and without agriculture. An alternative perspective would be that the Indian State that came into being in 1947-50 inherited the responsibility of holding together a diverse bunch of propertied classes, and of attracting to itself the loyalty of a terribly restive mass of peasantry and workers. It further had to enrich the ruling classes and to create the institutions necessary for this enrichment. There is no logic by which this multiple burden necessarily results in the conscious promotion of capitalist enterprise. We are not living in the eighteenth century. Many of the institutions created by the Indian State are formally, but only formally, bourgeois. The Indian polity is socialist in its ideology, bourgeois in its formal structure, but an assorted *melange* of social relations in its real content. The quickest and easiest way of executing its task was to subordinate itself in a *comprador* relation to imperialism encourage not so much entrepreneurial capital as a parasitical capital sponging upon the State (*Bureaucrat* capital) and upon imperialism, create an industrial and infrastructural base for the capital to sponge upon, and safeguard the property and dominance of the newly consolidating class or rural rich, while simultaneously modernising the technological means of their exploitation. The resulting configuration of class relations is not exactly the evolution of profit maximising capitalist farmers at one pole and an agrarian proletariat at the other.

How MUCH DIFFERENTIATION?

Seen thus, the class analysis of rural India provided by Desai leaves many questions unanswered. The premier point of doubt is how much of the differentiation that he (and not only he) discovers among the rural rich is real and how much is a product of *a priori* theoretical reasoning. In one breathtaking sentence Desai manages to speak of rich farmers, kulaks, feudal lords and the rural bourgeoisie; others speak of feudal landlords, capitalist landlords, semi-feudal landlords and kulaks. With due respect one is tempted to challenge Desai to walk into any village of his choice and exhibit for our edification individual specimens of these well-defined classes. Does such a differentiation really exist within the microcosm of

a village? The *ensemble* of social relations that define the rural rich have not differentiated into distinct classes; all that exists is a variation in the composition from region to region, the variation being determined by soil conditions, irrigation, history and politics. The reason why no across-the-board differentiation has taken place is precisely the comprador and bureaucrat nature of Indian capital. If Indian capital had had to depend upon its internal strength and dynamism for its self-expansion it would have been forced to contend with and destroy, or at least totally subsume, the pre-capitalist relations. But since it is not so constrained, and since its expansion is provided for by the State and by imperialism, it has never found it necessary to rid itself of pre-capitalist qualities. There has not been a single instance of 'profit-maximising capitalist farmers' fighting feudal landholders in the history of post-Independence India. There have only been agitations of *all* the rural rich for a greater share of the resources the State has borrowed from abroad or generated for itself. All said and done, class is as class does. The poor can be a class-in-themselves without being a class-for-themselves but the rich are so class-conscious that if they are not self-consciously a class, they cannot materially be a class. If the so-called kulaks and capitalist landlords have never fought the (equally so-called) feudal landlords then either one of the two classes does not exist (it is the virtue of Gail Omvedt's position that she takes this stand) or the differentiation that is read into the rural rich is entirely imaginery. The latter has been the stand taken by the CPI-ML movement, which takes the entire rural rich to be one rather heterogeneous class which has not undergone the differentiation inherent in its heterogeneity precisely because Indian capital is comprador and bureaucrat. This is one important meaning of saying that agrarian relations are semi-feudal. It is a caricature of the CPI-ML position to say that they identify an object called 'semi-feudal landlords' and fight that class to the exclusion of other sections of the rural rich. It is necessary to clarify this point since it has become customary for superior intellectuals to sermonise on the supposed theoretical idiocy of the CPI-ML groups while patronisingly patting them on the back for their sacrifice, militancy, etc. (In Desai's introduction to part two he even manages to hold up the Bhojpur struggle, led by the CPI-ML, as an example that disproves the CPI-ML's own alleged strategy of fighting only 'feudal landlords' or overcoming only 'semi-feudal obstacles'!)

It is perhaps necessary to go a little deeper into the matter. Desai is right in putting the State at centre-stage in the drama of agrarian change; he is also right in seeing the centrality in the role assumed by the State in socio-economic transformation. The objection, however, is to his acceptance of

formal appearance as real content, which is no better than the CPI's celebrated acceptance of ideology as reality. The real content of the State's role in agrarian change lies not in the promotion of capitalist agriculture but in the overall bureaucratisation of capital, especially agrarian capital. This was paralleled by the spread of the very singular phenomenon of Parliamentary and Panchayat politics of India. The meshing of the two in Panchayat Raj institutions and their role in development strategies, in co-operative institutions and their role in the sharing of political spoils, within the overall context of State-sponsored and imperialist-supported technological modernisation of the forces of production, has created a situation where the newly consolidated class of rural rich lives in painless harmony amidst a welter of what would otherwise be serious contradictions. This is the rural gentry, the class of landlords against whom the agrarian struggle is directed.

Just as it is impossible to differentiate the rural rich into 'feudal' and 'capitalist' landlords, it is equally impossible to differentiate the rural poor into the capitalistically exploited agricultural proletariat and the feudally exploited landless peasantry. A labourer who works for daily wages this year may need money for whatever purpose next year and get bonded on that account and remain bonded until he repays the loan to the satisfaction of the landlord, with an amount of labour that is in no sense the value-equivalent of the loan amount plus any predetermined interest. Then again he becomes an 'agricultural proletariat' until he gets bonded once again. Now either one declares that it is all capitalism since the product is sold in the market either way, or one preserves one's theoretical sanity by realising that one is searching for a non-existent differentiation.

It is also necessary to deal with the 'rich peasant question' on which again patronising sermons are frequently read out, especially to the CPI-ML groups. Part of the confusion stems from the way the term 'peasant' is used; it is frequently used as indiscriminately as the Mughal and British revenue administrators used the terms *raiyyat* or *ryot*. If the term is restricted to landholders who actually involve themselves in cultivation, set hand to plough so to say, then there is no question of the rich peasantry as a class being the principal target of agrarian struggle. Any such understanding would be suicidal. But even so, the question of unity between labourers, poor peasants, middle peasants and at least one section of the rich peasants remains problematic. It is not the principle of unity that is objectionable but the vantage point from which one desires it. One can seek the unity from the standpoint of the rich peasantry or from the standpoint of the poor. This is the essence of the difference between the CPI and CPI(M) on the one hand and the CPI-ML groups on the other. When the CPI(M)

accuses the naxalites of setting 'labourers against peasants', or even (as happened in Khammam district of Andhra recently) goes to the shameful extent of conducting meetings denouncing some foreign-funded voluntary agencies which are filing cases against the middle and rich peasants under the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act for maintaining annual farm-labourers in some degree of bondage, the nature of the 'peasant unity' the party seeks is clear. The dilemma of that party in this respect is well brought out by N Krishnaji's discussion of the CPI(M)'s strategies (Chapter 16).

Putting it this way makes it appear simple, but to seek unity from the standpoint of the poor—especially when the 'caste question' intervenes—can be painfully difficult. The unity is to be sought, not by sacrificing and weakening the interests of the landless but precisely by strengthening their position and class unity to such an extent that the middle and rich peasantry see no future for themselves except in a—howsoever unwilling—class alliance with them. The difficulty of realising such a strength is one of the principal problems facing the CPI-ML groups today, and the intractability of the problem is one of the reasons for the brutal repression they are facing. But it is a real problem that has got to be faced frontally and cannot be wished away by pretending that the naxalite groups are so stupid they do not themselves know what they are doing, a presumption that both Desai and Gail Omvedt are guilty of.

HISTORICAL DIMENSION

If Desai's theoretical standpoint throws much light on the agrarian question by putting the State at the centre of analysis, Gail Omvedt supplies another important dimension missing from usual discussions on the 'mode of production' question. That is the historical dimension. Lenin's analysis of the development of capitalism in Russia starts with pre-capitalist Russia as its point of departure; our economists' analysis starts with Lenin as the point of departure. And when history is thus thrown out caste also goes out with it. I suspect that it is the reluctance (universal among our intellectuals) to look caste in the face that impels them to ignore history. A peculiar caste-blindness affects Indian intellectuals, especially the Marxists, who will even pretend they have no caste if you allow them to. When an Indian Marxist (like any other Indian) meets a new acquaintance the first thing he does is to guess his caste from his name, his surname, his bearing, his mannerisms and his language; but in public he primly pretends that caste does not exist. This unreal attitude has resulted in a most ahistorical social science, which is a pity since India has nothing if not a history. There is no other country in the world which has as much history as India—not merely in the sense that many things happened here in the past, but in the sense of *living* history, the un-

broken continuity of the precipitation of the past. The only Indian Marxist to realise this was the great D D Kosambi, and it is no accident that caste occupies a central position in his analysis of Indian history, nor that his analysis has a distinctly Indian texture. Even when you disagree with Kosambi you know it is India and Indian society he is talking about, whereas with most of our Marxist social scientists, even when you are in full agreement with them you are not very sure which country they are talking about; they could as well be talking about Afghanistan as of India. Unfortunately, Kosambi's legacy has been given a silent burial by his own professed admirers.

It has therefore—and quite paradoxically—been left to foreigners (the prevalent climate forces me to hasten and add that I do not use the word pejoratively) like Daniel Thorner and Gail Omvedt to supply a historical and specifically *Indian* perspective to the analysis of agrarian relations. It is not merely a question of throwing in caste as one more 'variable', but the historical study of the evolution of agrarian relations, and the location of agrarian struggles within this evolution, Gail Omvedt's article 'Caste, Agrarian Relations and Agrarian Conflicts' is a good example of what such a study could be like.

However, her contention that upper caste feudal landholders (maliks) have been replaced by middle caste capitalist farmers (kisans); and that the anti-feudal conflict of the middle caste tenants against upper caste landlords has been replaced by the anti-capitalist struggle of the dalit poor (mazdurs) against the kisans—for all its enchanting simplicity—merely underlines the inadequacy of our understanding of agrarian history, and of caste as a part of it. Notwithstanding the uncommon unanimity among social scientists in the use of the expression 'middle caste', I have never been able to understand what it means: middle of what? If it is the *Chaturvarnya* of the Brahmins then (apart from the arithmetic difficulty that the number four has no middle) it is firstly irrelevant to agrarian analysis, and secondly makes nonsense of nonsense. The Yajurvedic *Chaturvarnya* died a natural death 2000 years ago with the birth of the 'self-sufficient' village economy, and feudal society with this village at the base. The elaborate caste (what North Indians call *jati*) system that developed subsequently had little relation to the *Chaturvarnya*, there have been no Kshatriyas properly speaking in the feudal period (but only pretenders); the Vaisyas ceased to be cultivators and became traders; and the term Sudra ceased to refer to a real class as in the past but became a juridical-ideological expression and a term of brahminical abuse; the Brahmin, the lynchpin of the system, was the only element of continuity from the pre-feudal *Chaturvarnya* to feudal caste; it was only his celebrated incapacity to let go of anything howsoever dead that kept the *Chaturvarnya*

alive, and it required all the sophistry of Manu with his theory of *Varna Sankarya* to keep the pretence of continuity. Now our rural sociologists want to dissect this mummy to discover something called a 'middle caste'.

It is not just a matter of terminology, however. What do (I quote from Gail Omvedt) Mats, Kurmis, Yadavs, Ahirs, Marathas, Reddys, Kammas, etc', (without prejudice to whoever else is included in that, etcetera) have in common? Or (I now quote from Desai) 'Marathas, Patidars, fatts, Ahirs, Kunbis, Bhumihars, Reddys, Nairs, Vokkaligas' for that matter? There have been not only cultivators but also kings, f-datories, barons, overlords and revenue intermediaries among the Reddys, Nairs, Marathas and Jats; the Bhumihars, far from being a 'middle caste', have brahmin pretensions; the Ahirs and the Yadavs are yet to fully consummate their transition from a pastoral community to a cultivating caste; the Kammas are predominantly cultivators but for the last hundred years their ranks have always included a segment of overlords. These castes have nothing real in common, but a theory which says that they are all 'middle caste' cultivators who were once upon a time tenants of 'twice-born' upper caste (Brahmin, Kshatriya) landlords; I hate they took the lead in anti-feudal struggles; and have now become capitalist, profit-maximising kisans exploiting low caste and dalit labour. This neat theory appears to be an uncritical extrapolation from the reality of certain parts of UP and Maharashtra (in admitting this much I am accepting at face value the assertions of Gail Omvedt, and of Rajendra Singh writing on the land grab movement of parts of East UP). In truth the correspondence between ritual *varna* hierarchy and caste, and between caste and class, has never been so simple, nor are all castes internally so homogeneous or so homogeneous with respect to the political economy that class relations can be discussed exclusively in terms of caste relations. Indeed, in many parts of the country, to identify the medieval rural communities with either the *varna* hierarchy or with today's castes would be very difficult. It is a mistake to believe that today's castes have always been there; many of them have evolved as castes or caste complexes through the transformation and crystallisation of diverse communities. The misleading permanence of the spurious *Chaturvarnya* is here attributed to the continuously emerging and evolving phenomenon of caste. To speak of Andhra, where there are no Kshatriyas (except the self-anointed Rajus of the north-coastal districts), and the Vaisyas have never held much land, the class of feudal landholders did not consist exclusively or even principally of 'twice-born' castes but included along with the Brahmins many non-Brahmin communities which are not always easy to identify with today's castes but whose descendents count

themselves today among the Reddys, Kammas and Velamas. Certainly, in the British and Asafjahi territories of 19th and early 20th centuries, it was landlords of these communities who constituted along with the Brahmins the bulk of the feudal gentry. The anti-feudal peasant revolts were aimed as much against these landlords as against the Brahmin *srotriyam* and *agraharam* holders; and often people of the same caste were ranged on either side of the struggle: Kamma cultivators against Kamma *zamindurs* in parts of coastal Andhra, and Reddy cultivators against Reddy *deshmukhs* in Telengana. This duality continues to this day, so that the Reddys for instance count among their numbers haughty feudal types who would not deign to touch a plough, as well as hard working small cultivators. Which of these are the middle caste capitalist kisans we are asked to discover in rural India?

Let us leave our collective ignorance at that.

II

Agrarian Struggles

There are about 20 articles and reports in the volume dealing with agrarian struggles in various parts of the country. The selection can be described as eclectic or catholic according to one's prejudices. Since this is no time for being sectarian, let us agree to call it catholic. There is an impartial selection from struggles led by the CPI, CPI(M), CPI-ML, the Socialists, and various organisations like Kashtakari Sanghatana, etc. And at least one article, Jan Breman's piece entitled 'Mobilisation of Landless Labourers: Halpatis of South Gujarat' takes its place in the volume as the dialectical opposite of the volume's theme; it is not a report on an agrarian struggle but on how agrarian struggles are stifled by organisations floated by the ruling classes, for it deals with the immobilisation of landless labourers by Gandhian politics. If the inclusion of this article testifies to the editor's dialectical understanding of history, then the inclusion of a report on Naga and Mizo struggles, which have nothing agrarian about them in an empiricist sense, indicates that he understands his theme politically and not merely sociologically. For India's agrarian revolution, however one understands and conceptualises it, cannot be complete without meeting the nationality aspirations of the people of the north-east. And it would be a piece of gratuitous presumption to compliment Desai on distancing himself from the mechanical understanding of the two major communist parties which view all nationality struggles primarily in terms of India's unity, integrity, and 'foreign conspiracies'.

But it is precisely because of the editor's evidently dialectical and political understanding of the theme that one feels a little let down by the end product. Not all the con-

tributors he has chosen are motivated by a like spirit; a few of them are even quite snootily distrustful of politics even as they are excited by mass struggles. Swasti Mitter, for instance, while writing about the CPI(M)-led peasant struggle of Sonarpur (Chapter 24) manages to say that she did her field trip in search of ordinary peasants who had joined the movement not because of 'political indoctrination' but out of a desire to 'seek redress against social injustice' and to obtain 'some immediate gain'. This separation of politics (seen pejoratively as something that is indoctrinated, injected into the people from above and outside) from their desire for social justice and material gain, which is sometimes elevated to the status of a theory of historiography, offends the spirit of the editor's introductions. It is no doubt very exciting to uncover what the masses themselves think of their struggles, but if one is interested more in changing the world than in interpreting it, one cannot but give central importance to politics, and one cannot but view politics as a concentrated expression of the economic and social desires of the people, rather than as something injected externally into them. The question would still remain whether a given politics really expresses the desires but then that it is a matter for concrete analysis, not pre-judged pronouncements.

A similar contribution is the somewhat misleadingly titled article 'Agrarian Dimensions of Tribal Movements' by K S Singh, an ex-director of the Anthropological Survey of India, whose argument actually is (hat whereas in left-led movements the peasants fought for agrarian issues, the tribal struggles had a more than agrarian dimension; that there was no real tribal participation in left-led tribal movements; and as usual that the naxalites who led tribal movements did not know what they were talking about. (The universality of the belief that the CPI-ML groups are stupid is quite remarkable. It stretches all the way from bureaucrat-intellectuals to activist-intellectuals and intellectual-bureaucrats. It no doubt has something to do with the fact that the ML groups have confined themselves largely to the poorest of the poor whose inarticulacy is axiomatic to urban intellectuals.) Singh's conclusions contrast rather sharply with the detailed accounts of Tarun Kumar Banerjee on the Srikakulam Movement (Chapter 9) and Sumanta Banerjee on the Naxalbari uprising (Chapter 23).

The contention is not that such a viewpoint is worthless and therefore should not have been included in the collection. Viewpoint apart, these articles are quite interesting and informative in details; even when they do not inform you about the purported subject they inform you about the writer, which is an equally valuable thing. Every writer is a member of a socially defined genus, and the taxonomy of intellectuals is as necessary for social and historical studies as that of animals is for Zoology. But

if Desai believes, as I have no doubt he believes, that it is more important to change the world than to interpret it, and anyway that you can properly interpret the world only in the course of changing it, then I believe he should have, and could have, chosen a more apposite selection of articles.

Such a selection, if necessary with more analytical introductions to the two parts, would have revealed not merely some kind of a cross-sectional picture of agrarian struggles but a dynamic and let us say a historical picture, for which one has to now search painstakingly through the volume.

What is the picture that emerges?

The period covered by the volume can be divided provisionally into two parts. One possible classification is the pre-Naxalbari and post-Naxalbari periods; or, less provocatively, the period prior to the drought years of the mid-sixties and the subsequent period. The National Labour Institute's report (Chapter 10) on post-Independence peasant movements in Andhra divides the period into the pre- and post-green revolution parts. This understanding would perhaps find approval with most of our social scientists. But, as I will argue below, the severe drought of the mid-sixties and the reverberations of the unfinished business of the 1964 split in the CPI (and perhaps even the Chinese Cultural Revolution) had much more to do with the change in the nature of agrarian struggles than the 'green revolution'.

The first period is characterised by low level of agrarian struggles, lack of political direction to these struggles, the landed-peasant rather than landless-labourer character of the struggles, etc. It is quite striking that there is only *one* article in the entire collection that has anything sizable to say about 'agrarian struggles' in the first period: this is the NLI report on Andhra mentioned above; and its compilation of 'agrarian struggles' is rather laboured. Three others who make an attempt, N Krishnaji for Kerala (Chapter 16), B D Talib for Punjab (Chapter 20) and Gopal Iyer and Vidyasagar for Tamil Nadu (Chapter 21), discover that they have nothing much to report on the first period, and fill up the space with a discussion of land reform acts and the topography of the land.

All the agrarian struggles proper belong to the second period; and this would in no way be altered if Desai had not decided (quite properly) to exclude the agitations of the better-off landholders for remunerative prices and subsidised inputs. Sharad Joshi *also* belongs to the second period, and not the first.

THE UPSURGE AND ITS ROOTS

What is the reason for this sharp change? It has been customary to regard the green revolution as the cause of the change as well as the demarcating line. This opinion is uncritically accepted since it fits in with the thesis of growth of capitalist agriculture promoted especially by the green revolution

technology, and resulting in heightened tensions in villages. I suspect it also fits in with a vulgar understanding of historical materialism in which tractors and tube-wells belong to the 'objective conditions' but conscious human practice does not. In any case, the understanding does not fit in with facts: Naxalbari, Srikakulam, Dhanbad, Dhulia and Warli, the areas of tribal-peasant struggles reported in the volume were not—and to this day are not—green revolution areas. The same is true of Purnea and Madhubani, Bihar, whose *bataidari* struggles are graphically described with a wealth of historical detail by Nirmal Sengupta and his colleagues (Chapters 12 and 13). Bhojpur had its IADP development but that dates back to the year 1960 and is not a specifically green revolution phenomenon. (Manju Kala, R N Maharaj and Kalyan Mukherjee, Chapter II.) Neither the Socialist parties' land grab (report from *Mankind*, Chapter 4) nor the CPI's land grab (Chapter 6, by Giriprasad—Guruprasad is surely a misprint?) took place in green revolution areas. Other than the Punjab, the only green revolution area reported in this volume is Tanjavur district of Tamil Nadu (Chapter 21 by Gopal Iyer and Vidyasagar) but the agrarian struggles of Tanjavur has had a long history predating the green revolution.

The real reasons for the upsurge after the mid-sixties are much more complex, but they can be gleaned from a careful reading of the reports included in this volume. In Naxalbari, Srikakulam and Bhojpur it was plainly a political decision, inspired by the disenchantment with what was perceived as the CPI(M)'s unwillingness to thoroughly consummate the 1964 split, as well as the heroic call of the Chinese cultural revolution (Sumanta Banerjee, Chapter 23); with the *bataidars* of Purnea and Madhubani, as described by Nirmal Sengupta and others* it was the realisation of the fraud played in the name of land reforms, coupled with the famine-like conditions of the mid-sixties. In tribal Bihar, it was the culmination of a long history of land alienation and usurious exploitation brought to a pitch by drought, and shaped into an organised political form by leaders like A K Roy, with whom again it was a political decision born of disillusionment with the CPI and CPI(M) to organise the rural poor militantly. These three elements—conscious political decision, severe drought, and the popular realisation of the worthless character of agrarian reform legislation—are behind all the agrarian struggles that broke out from 1967 onwards. It is a different matter if it is argued that the immiseration of the rural poor and the strengthening of the rural rich which came about as a consequence of the entire strategy of agrarian development from the back-drop against which drought and the radicalisation of left politics worked themselves out.

The upsurge had many consequences, some inspiring and some amusing. One way

the pseudo-radicalisation of the old left—especially the CPI and the Socialists, who hurriedly organised land-grab movements in many parts of the country. This unaccustomed activity, like an epileptic fit, left them exhausted at the end of one season. They had not an inkling what to do after some land was grabbed. CPI's Giriprasad ends his report, enthusiastically titled 'The Great Land Struggle', with the statement that 'the most significant achievement of the land struggle was the appointment of the Central Land Reform Committee by the Central government'. The proud proclamation is not so much a conclusion as an epitaph.

A fresh bout of land reforms was itself among the consequences of the upsurge. Ceilings were sharply lowered (at any rate on paper) in many States, and most of the surplus land that has at all been taken possession of was taken in this period. Another consequence was the shift of political focus to the landless and poor peasants, who had contributed most of the militancy to the upsurge. Desai, whose theory was all along waiting for someone to recognise and organise the 'agricultural proletariat', is so touched when the CPI forms the Bharatiya Khet Mazdur Union (BKMU) that he readily compliments that party on being the first to recognise the separate existence of and organise the landless labourers. He certainly knows better. The formation of BKMU was a genuflection to those heady times. That organisation has never led any systematic struggles for land redistribution or implementation of minimum wages legislation, unless one counts election time agitational activity. In villages where both the labourers' union and the same party's farmers union exist, the former is subordinate to the latter. It is only where the farmers are aligned with the Congress (and again only when the CPI is not at the moment pro-Congress) that the CPI's labourers union exhibits some militancy. And where the farmers are pro-CPI and the labourers are organised by the CPI-ML groups, the environment is one of hostile confrontation. The same is true of the CPI(M), which has exhibited such hostility even towards foreign-funded voluntary organisations organising landless labourers. (I hold no brief for these foreign-funded organisations, and I believe that whatever the intentions of the people working for them they will ultimately do more harm than good to the people of our country, but it must be recognised that this confrontation is one of the reasons why the CPI(M) is mounting a campaign against foreign-funded and denominational voluntary organisations.)

But, apart from these tangential by-products thrown up centrifugally by the upsurge, what happens to the upsurge itself? Militancy is only militancy, and not politics all by itself. And it is evidence of a heart in the right place that one is inspired by the coming to the fore of the struggles of the wretched of this land, the agricultural labourers and tribals. But meaningful

politics requires something more than a heart in the right place.

It is, I think, a major failing of Desai's commendable effort that it provides no answer to this question. The reason is that the compilation really ends with the Emergency years, though some of the articles and reports have a long tail stretching into the 1980s. The story of agrarian struggle in post-Independence India really divides itself into three periods, not two. The first is upto the mid-sixties when there were no struggles worth the name; the second is the period from the mid-sixties to the lifting of the Emergency, during which there were widespread struggles but which were either spontaneous or when organised were hesitantly finding their feet; and the third is the post-Emergency period during which the organised struggles reached greater extent, sophistication and understanding, faced a rapidly altering situation, and were rewarded with a mixed bag of consequences in the confrontation. Bihar and Andhra Pradesh have been the major theatres of the discovery of solutions to old problems and the existence of a bunch of new problems. It is sad that post-Emergency Bihar and Andhra find no place in the volume. Since the editor can be accused neither of hostility nor ignorance one is non-plussed at the omission. Not much material, it is true, is available in English to give a comprehensive account of these struggles but enough is available to give a glimpse. The pages of this journal themselves have carried many reports; and the booklet issued by 'People

for a New India' from which Desai has borrowed the piece on Naga and Mizo struggles, also contains material on post-Emergency Karimnagar, the theatre of one of the most widespread agrarian struggles in recent times. And Desai, who has long taken active interest in the Civil Liberties movement, has in his possession many reports of civil rights teams on Andhra and Bihar. Perhaps then the omission is because even as Desai believes that the CPI-ML groups have 'elevated the movements of the rural poor from being bogged down in pure economism and reformism to a new heightened political level' his theoretical and political prejudices blind him to the crucial strategic and tactical lessons learnt by them, which has taken the 'heightened political level' one step higher. The contention is not that the naxalite groups alone arc in search of the path that will put an end to the long history of blood and pain that defines agrarian India; many others—from doubting Marxists to dissident Jesuits—are also seeking, but there can be no comparison between the two in terms of political significance. This is where Desai's catholicity begins paying diminishing returns.

It is impossible to end the review without paying a heartfelt compliment to the editor's undying spirit, which appears to be immune to all the demoralising pressures of our age of despondency in politics and pedantry in thought. The best tribute one can pay is to hope that he will be around long enough to edit one more volume, this one on agrarian struggles in the post-Emergency period.

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