

An Ideology for the Provincial Propertied Class

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I WAS reviewing a book and not the activities of the Shetkari Sanghatana (*EPW*, September 5-12). I do not think I referred to that organisation even once in the review; Sharad Joshi is mentioned only because there is an article of his in the book and my comment was only on his article, and not on the movement he leads. What I was trying to convey in the review is that we are witnessing the consolidation of a certain class in the 'districts', the class which I have, with deliberate vagueness, called the 'provincial propertied class' as I do not wish to use the more usual variant, the 'regional bourgeoisie' because of all that the expression conveys in the light of European history. And I was trying to say that the opinions expressed in the articles under review collectively constitute an ideology that perfectly suits the consolidation of this class. This is not, by itself, a comment on the "farmers' movements", though there is much that one can say about those movements in the light of this understanding.

However, I will not try to evade with this statement the obligation to put on record my political views regarding the important points raised by Gail Omvedt and Chetna Galla (*EPW*, November 7). Moral obligation apart, it is necessary that we discuss these issues because they are central to any breakthrough in the stagnant conditions of the Indian revolution. (The fact that I say *the* Indian revolution is itself a political opinion and not just a conventional expression, as Omvedt and Galla will be the first to point out.)

CONTRADICTION AMONG THE PEOPLE?

To begin at a convenient point, I do not think that Karamchedu represents a 'contradiction among the people'. The point is not proved by counting the number of the dead and the raped; that fact that six men and three women suffered these fates, respectively, does not by itself mean that it is not a contradiction among the people. I am aware of this. But, equally, the point is not proved the other way around by computing the landholding statistics of the assailants. It has always been the poor who have fought the battles of the rich. All the world's armies have been made up of half starved men who have left half starved families behind. That these foot soldiers are not enemies of each other is obvious in the case of mercenary and professional armies, but it is equally true of men who have gone on a rampage under the thrust of a conviction, whether the conviction consists of religious bigotry, caste arrogance or feudal attachment to a landlord.

In other words, it is true that most of the assailants of Karamchedu (and all Karam-

chedus) are what one may loosely call 'middle peasants'. That this should not happen that they do not belong to the other side, is a point on which we are all unanimous. But how to bring them over to this side is a question that, to begin with, hinges on our understanding of what they are doing on the other side in the first place. There are two possible answers to this: one, the middle peasants, exploited through unequal terms of trade and uneven investment of resources by the urban capitalists (including the imperialists) and the state, take it out on the dalits by beating them up and killing them once in a while. In Karamchedu, for example, unremunerative tobacco cultivation can be said to have caused the killing. The analogy which Omvedt and Galla draw with the oppressed worker taking it out on his hapless wife is apt as far as it goes. If we take *this* as the essence of the matter - and only if we do—it becomes a contradiction among the people. It becomes a peasant vs labourer contradiction, and any other class that may exist in rural India is irrelevant to our understanding of these conflicts. It is also irrelevant that whereas tobacco is grown all over Guntur and Prakasam districts, the only two villages where murderous attacks have taken place in recent times (Karamchedu in Prakasam and Nccrukonda in Guntur) are native villages of rich and influential men in the state's power structure: NTR's son-in-law in one case and a minister of his cabinet in the other.

And then, of course, the only political line open to us is to unite the peasants and the labourers against big capital, the stale and imperialism. Of course, there can still be differences on many other questions: do we envisage a revolutionary alternative or a more humane settlement of the terms of existing social relations? If the former, then what is the nature of the alternative we seek? What is the strategy of the struggle? Under whose (class) leadership the struggle will take place? and so on. But, whichever we choose, there will be a general de-emphasising of wage and land struggles, because they tend to divide rather than unite the landless and the landed. Instead, issues like remunerative prices—with the promise that labourers will get better wages once the farmers get better prices—for agricultural produce, anti-state issues like irrigation, drought and social amenities, and anti-capital issues like high cost and inappropriate technology, deforestation and destruction of the environment, will be taken up. And attempts will be made to overcome existing divisions between the landless and the landed; for instance, casteism will become a 'central question' as Omvedt and Galla emphasise.

This is one possible answer to our dilemma. To seek a second answer is not to reject the importance of any of the individual issues enumerated above; it is not the issues of agitation that we are quarrelling about, but the political perspective of the agitation. To seek a second answer, then, we should first stop thinking of rural India in terms of peasant and labourer. It is not enough to modify this by identifying an 'upper section' of the rich peasantry, or granting magnanimously that there do exist landlords in benighted places like Bihar. We have to look at what is a very real class, which cannot be called 'peasant'—rich or super-rich—by any stretch of one's imagination. This class cannot be specified exclusively in terms of landlords, though it has emerged through a further development of the landlord class. To this day a major part of its interests are in landholding but it straddles the rural and the non-monopoly urban economy.

This class is finding itself starved of avenues and means of enrichment (not necessarily investment). Profitable cultivation, without which it is deprived of resources, both in the form of its own surplus accumulation in its own fields, and in the form of rural 'household savings' which it handles through a variety of formal and informal, legal and illegal, financing arrangements, is a matter of concern to this class. Its other concern is with the resources superintended by the state, which are perceived as being employed lopsidedly for the benefit of monopoly capital, both because of the closeness of dominant sections of the Congress party to the monopolists and because of the very nature of our economic structure.

The natural constituency of this class is the village. It is only if it can consolidate the village behind it that it can win its battle against monopoly capital and the state. It is felicitous in the use of the peasant idiom, it is heir to a feudal tradition of a leader's role in the village, and some of the peasant concerns are of concern to it too. The better-off sections of the peasantry therefore fall in line, aided further by the fact that caste usually functions as a common link between the two classes, though there are plenty of conflicts between them, too. But the real difficulty comes with the rural poor—landless and poor peasants. Their concerns are different and distinct from those of the rural rich and often in conflict with them, to boot. Caste acts as a further dividing factor. This is where the need for the ideology of village unity comes in, and this is where the need to put down the rural poor brutally once in a while comes in. The feudal subordination of the middle peasantry to the provincial rich, links of caste, and a partial commonality of economic interests, help in creating an army of foot soldiers from out of the middle peasantry to put down the poor. *This is the essential meaning of the Karamchedus of contemporary India.* These are not conflicts among the people, but politically necessary

assaults upon the rural poor in the course of the consolidation of the dominance of a major fraction of India's exploiting classes.

If this answer is accepted, how do we face the situation? How do we build the alliance of popular forces? Do we build them at all and why? These questions have no meaning, let alone an answer, outside a political framework. I have to state my framework, not because it is new, but because it probably answers to the description of the 'one-point programmes' which Omvedt and Galla are critical about. It is the traditional Marxist framework of capture of state power by the working people in order to build socialism and transform society towards the stage of communism. In India's context, 80 per cent of the revolutionary masses will be the rural poor and landless peasants. When we talk of alliances, it is alliances for their revolution and alliances for them that we mean.

ENEMY OF THE MASSES

The class of the provincial rich is an enemy of the masses along with imperialism and big capital. And the rural poor, the core of the revolutionary masses, must be organised first and foremost against this class in the struggle for their liberation. All other struggles of the rural people—like for instance the middle peasantry's struggle for more equitable terms of trade—must be structured strategically and tactically into this struggle. It is only through the struggle against this class that the masses will meet with and contend against big capital and imperialism in a revolutionary way. Any other way of organising the poor directly against big capital and imperialism will be either an infructuous attempt or at best a reformist programme. In plainer language, you cannot organise the rural poor directly around issues like drought, deforestation or exploitation by urban capital in a revolutionary way. These issues have to be built into a struggle that is structured around a fight against their immediate oppressors, the landlords in their present manifestation.

To my mind, this is one of the principal ideas taught by the CPI-ML movement, and one of the many crucial points that distinguish it from the 'grassroots radical movements' that are being heralded a lot today. And whatever else of the Naxalbari heritage that we may like to discard, this much cannot be discarded. The question still arises: how does one structure the middle peasantry's demands into this line, how does one form an alliance with it, and how does one prevent the middle peasants from acting as foot soldiers of the provincial rich? How to breach the caste barrier is part of this question. If I may be allowed to coin an aphorism, caste cannot be fought by fighting caste. Nor can it be fought by the idealistic inculcation of secular values, which is—at best—the method tried by the two parliamentary communist parties. Caste—and I say this at the risk of sounding terribly old-fashioned—can only be fought through class struggles.

Rather than go on like an oracle, let me

try to elaborate on the basis of the (admittedly very limited) experience of the CPI-ML groups in Andhra Pradesh. I must add (since some people have described me as a spokesperson for the CPI-ML groups) that these are my observations and I do not know whether the groups would agree with me. The groups have been functioning basically in two kinds of areas—plains and forests. In the plains areas they have faced this problem of uniting the rural poor and the middle peasants, often transcending the barrier of caste. In the forests, where a sizeable number of non-tribal small peasants have settled down alongside the tribals, they have faced the problem of uniting the tribals and the non-tribal poor. Whatever success they have achieved has been obtained, not by taking up directly middle class peasant issues like remunerative prices in parallel with landless labourers' issues, nor by fighting 'caste', but (i) by building a widespread and militant movement among the poorest classes, demonstrating this strength in actual struggles with the rural rich and the state and thus, on the basis of their strength, winning over the middle peasantry; and (ii) by educating and organising the middle peasantry to take up the fight against the landlords, who oppress them through feudal social dominance and through the control over rural credit, marketing and the political and economic structures of 'development'. The fight against big capital and the state has been generally taken up as a further development of this fight against the rural rich. This, it seems to me, is the only revolutionary way of winning over the rural middle classes to an 'alliance of popular forces'. In view of the brutal repression on the CPI-ML movement in Andhra Pradesh, and the intervention of caste carnages in Bihar, the feasibility of this line except to a limited extent and in a limited area, is being questioned.

I have no ready-made reply, except to reiterate that there is no other revolutionary way of handling the situation, though there probably are many meaningful ways of reacting to it if one is willing to settle for something less than a revolution. And perhaps, instead of searching for admirable qualities of democratic organisation in middle class movements, our time would be better spent if we sought for the right tactics, forms of struggle and forms of organisation for sustaining a militant movement of the rural poor until it reaches the strength required to attract the middle classes to itself, and for sustaining a struggle of the middle peasants against the provincial rich, which is much more difficult than building anti-capital and anti-state middle peasant movements. The failure of the CPI-ML movement is the failure to find the right answer to this question, and it has not been helped by the large-scale desertion of intellectuals who hailed it to the skies when the weather was fair.

FARMERS' MOVEMENTS

We can now conclude with the 'farmers' movements'. I will take it that we are talking

of the movements of those peasants to whom the quotation from "The Civil War in France" given by Omvedt and Galla applies. The quotation has no relevance whatsoever to the provincial rich, I will grant for the sake of debate that the Shetkari Sanghatana represents such peasants.

That these peasants have a genuine cause, and that it deserves the sympathy of all democrats, is beyond argument. But that is to say nothing about how one reacts to them politically. There is a middle peasant class, but there can be no middle peasant politics. What appears as middle peasant politics is an ephemeral phenomenon that has got to choose sooner or later between the rural rich and the poor. And so long as their outlook is that 'the main exploiters of the peasants are the urban capitalists and the state' the class is naturally impelled to choose the former. On the other hand, the middle peasantry that is exploited by the urban capitalists through unequal terms of trade is oppressed in many ways by the provincial elite which dominates not only the village society but also the regional trade, marketing, credit and business. But the feudal hold this class has over the middle peasantry makes a struggle against it difficult. A farmers' movement that obfuscates this reality by exclusively focusing on agricultural prices and costs is a farmers' movement that is ready for being co-opted into the elite's army. That farmers' movement is against the 'alliance of popular forces'. It is from this perspective that one is critical of the farmers' movements. Not everyone may agree with me, but it seems to me that the question "where is the 'rich peasant' leadership and where is the 'proletarian' leadership" is settled by analysis at this level, and not by forms of organisation or the attitude adopted towards women. Even there, if the Shetkari Sanghatana has taken a stand in favour of equal property rights for women and the Rytu Coolie Sangham (RCS) has not, that is only a reflection of the nature of the classes they organise. To most members of the RCS, property rights are a largely irrelevant matter. They fight for land, but their fight has not had the kind of success where they have to discuss who will inherit the land. Actually, wherever they have managed to wrench some land from a landlord or the government they have been cultivating it in common by co-operative effort.

The right question to have asked at Warangal would have been whether the RCS is fighting for equal wages to men and women for equal work. The answer is mixed. For work of the same type they have fought for and got equal wages, but they have not been able to articulate and establish the principle that work of the same duration must get the same wage. As a consequence, work that is done predominantly (but not exclusively) by women, like transplanting and weeding paddy fields, is paid less than work that is normally done by men. And a legitimate critique would lie here.

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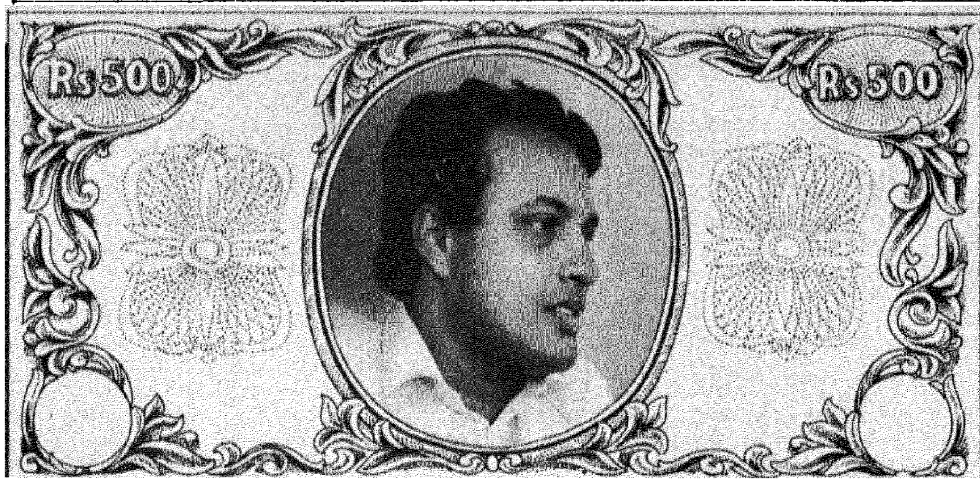
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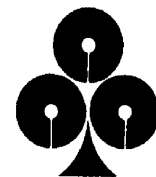
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