

Agrarian Revolution, Not Wage Increases

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GAIL OMVEDT and Chetna Galla (July 2) agree that what needs to be discussed is revolutionary strategy, but they themselves refuse to do so. The class character of the rural poor" is that they have an objective interest in expropriating the rich, smashing the existing state and social structure and building a new society based on collective labour and collective appropriation. This is precisely what is *not* the objective interest of the most vociferous sections of the movements for 'remunerative prices'. And that marks a genuinely Marxist class division of the rural people. If the rural poor are to be described empirically then one has to take a variety of conditions into consideration. The class certainly includes all of the agricultural labourers (between 25 and 30 per cent of rural families); equally certainly it does *not* include those of the 'middle peasants' whose cultivation is characterised by dependable irrigation and capital infrastructure, whatever marketing and pricing problems they may have. The rest of the peasants with self-sufficient family holdings must be judged by these characteristics to decide whether they can be included in the class of the rural poor or can be counted as neutral elements. This is not an economic division based on income but a class division based on the existence of an *irreconcilable* conflict with the system. The conflict is irreconcilable because the developments of the last forty years have shown that the system is incapable of meeting the needs of the rural poor, though it has done—and is going to further do—a lot for the landlords and the better placed peasantry, and has the capacity to further co-opt a few more into the latter section.

We are told that the entire peasantry has a fundamental interest in the overthrow of capital. To put it this way, while saying that it is revolutionary strategy that we need to discuss, is to beg the question whether overthrow of capital is an adequate description of the revolution we seek. But is even this statement true? In the first place, to lump together the two-thirds of the rural population "who make their living primarily through family labour on their own fields" as a "middle peasantry" is misleading in the extreme. Some among them exploit substantial amounts of the labour of others and have a well developed infrastructure for their cultivation, apart from the non-agricultural business and other interests they have. They should properly be called rich and not middle peasants. It will be said that all these does not constitute a class difference, but to see what *does* constitute a class difference we only need to know how many among the peasantry really have an objective interest in

a revolutionary transformation of existing relations of property and exploitation, or even just the overthrow of capital, and how many have an objective interest merely in arriving at a better arrangement of terms with capital. That all the 'middle peasantry' want remunerative prices is no more 'anti-capitalist' than workers asking for higher wages is 'anti-capitalist'. Workers become anti-capitalist by asking for an expropriation of capital. As a Hindi song popular in radical circles puts it,

When we the working masses
claim our share

It will be neither a field nor a plot
but the whole world

Do all the 'middle peasants' as defined by Gail Omvedt and Chetna Galla want 'the whole worlds or only their share'?

There is a certain amount of ingenuousness and a fair amount of duplicity in the tears that are copiously shed over the 'oppressed peasantry'. 'Primitive accumulation of capital' is no doubt going on world-wide and it does entail (among other things) unequal exchange between agriculture and industry, but this does not mean today the same thing that it meant a hundred years ago. It is no longer a one-way traffic of buying agricultural products cheap and selling cloth and bicycles dear. It is a two-way traffic where capital supplies improved inputs and technology to agriculture and exchanges the extra produced thereby against the inputs it has supplied, as well as consumer goods, both of them overpriced, but no so much as to eat up the whole of the extra produced. The landholders are *also* benefited roughly in proportion to their asset holdings, though they suffer the privations inherent to capital: anarchy of the markets, inappropriate and ecologically disastrous technology, importation of capital's accumulation crisis into agriculture, etc. The better endowed among them take these crises in their stride and enrich themselves to a degree without precedent, but the poorly endowed suffer. It makes no sense to lump all of them together. Here is a good illustration: about 30 cultivators of cotton committed suicide in Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh last year because of crop failure and consequent indebtedness. Some observers said the crops failed because of adulterated pesticides, some said it was because of drought, and Sharad Joshi—with the admirable single-mindedness that marks him out as the Datta Samant of the peasantry—insisted during his visit that it was not crop-failure but unremunerative prices that led to indebtedness. Teams of journalists, ministers, officials, newspaper editors, film stars, and the top executives of Andhra Bank

and Syndicate Bank visited the area and clicked tongues and shed tears. None of them thought of laying that the wealth generated by the very same tobacco and cotton cultivation in the canal-irrigated tracts of old Guntur district has produced, through further reproduction and multiplication in urban finance, contracts, business, real estate, cinemas and politics, some of the richest and most powerful people in the state. Nor did any of these luminaries—including Sharad Joshi—visit Anantapur and Mahbubnagar districts where surely more than 30 people have died more or less due to starvation during the last three years of drought. The politics of exclusive opposition to capital is a politics of commodity fetishism: if what you produce is not a commodity beyond the local market—or you do not produce anything at all because your lands have dried up—then your death is not an issue. You have to be subsumed by capital to become a human being. Since everything is already declared to have been subsumed by capital, that which is not does not exist. By a strange paradox, what does not interest capital does not interest its opponents either. And yet there are many people—and regions—that are of only marginal interest to capital: people who produce for their subsistence, or a little paddy, sesamum, jowar, bajra, castor or groundnut for the local market. To say that they are also interested in remunerative prices because they also sell something or the other is tautological.

It is not remunerative prices but land, water and work that are the problems of the rural poor. The agricultural labourers who constitute between 25 and 30 per cent of the rural population, are either landless, or if they have land it is not enough to provide the whole family with work to do and food to eat. Apart from being small in size their plots are usually poor in quality; and there is no visible sign of improvement. For them work and land are the major problems. As for the self-sufficient middle peasantry, many of them—and almost all of them in many areas—do have enough land to keep the whole family occupied when cultivation is going on, but that is not frequently enough or fruitful enough to give them a decent livelihood. Irrigation—water—is their main problem. Barring rich and middle peasants in canal-irrigated areas (and in tank or well irrigated areas, those whose land-holdings and infrastructure are good in quality and favourably located) for the rest of the rural working people land, work and water are the main problems. Many of them may—and do—sell a part of their produce in the market and will certainly respond favourably to demands for 'remunerative prices', but that demand constitutes neither the beginning nor the end of their worries. In badly drought-hit Rayalaseema, for instance, 32 per cent of the sown area is

under groundnut, and therefore any movement for remunerative prices for that crop will, in theory, attract attention. But apart from the fact that no such movement has taken root, if one talks to the cultivators their principal wish is that the poorly utilised waters of the Godavari should be diverted to the Krishna and the Tungabhadra and used to irrigate Rayalaseema, so that they can stop growing groundnuts and grow something they can eat. And once the water is assured, the landless—who do not show much enthusiasm for land struggles today—will demand a share of the huge land-holdings some of the Reddy landlords possess.

And these rural poor do have an irreconcilable conflict with the system, the kind of irreconcilable conflict that the better-off peasants do not have even with capital, let alone with the system as a whole. The state has systematically sabotaged land reforms and has created a situation where bold people now tell us that land reform is a mythical dream of the urban radical; regular and well-remunerated work is almost universally unavailable for the poor in most part of the country; the norm is that they work for less than half the days in the year and for less than the statutory minimum wage, not to speak of a decent wage; as for water for irrigation, hardly 40 per cent of the irrigation potential of the country has been lapped, and the nature of property relations in the country do not allow for efficient soil conservation and land management, leading to a devastation of the potential itself. This situation, in which there is no sign of a possible improvement, is an essential consequence of the nature of the agrarian policy of the Indian state. It coexists with the enrichment of the well-endowed peasantry and of the landlords, through the medium of agrarian measures like electrification, irrigation, improved seeds, machines, fertilisers, pesticides, etc, supported infrastructurally by financing and marketing institutions. The wealth produced by these means is left untaxed and allowed freely—and again with infrastructural and financial support from the state—to reproduce itself in contracts, politics, trade and the tertiary sector in general. It is from this dimension of the state's agrarian policy that the cream of the agitators for remunerative prices are coming forth, and we are asked by Marxists to recognise this as the voice of the Indian village.

But it is necessary to go beyond this and ask whether capital is a sufficient reference point for discussing revolutionary strategy. And this political question turns around a methodological question: whether capital as a concept is adequate for understanding Indian society and state. Most people seem to think it is. One starts with imperialist and Indian capital, its monopoly character, its appetite for extended reproduction and consequent crises, its markets, technology and finance. Then one follows up the consequences all this has for various social classes,

ignoring (naturally) those whose existence is inconsequential for capital. The trouble with this method is that it presupposes what it triumphantly discovers at the end, and most of its truths are tautologies, the distinction between the two being obliterated by the unbridled use of mathematics, that most fetishistic of all subjects. Contrary to this method favoured by academics, Communist Parties have generally followed a different method: that is to identify the principal social classes by the mode and extent of their property or the mode of their labour; proceed with the presumption that propertied classes will try to enrich themselves and to preserve and protect their property and power by whatever means that are historically and socially viable, and that the working people will equally try to protect and improve their livelihood. The state is seen as an agency that helps the propertied classes to accumulate and protect their property; its fiscal policies, its development strategies and its law and order machinery are seen as instruments serving this end. This method has an open mind as far as capital is concerned, and sees it and its role for what it is. In a situation where capital does not merely gobble up whatever comes its way but has the voracity to transform the whole world 'in its image', the two methods may lead to the same conclusion, but in the late twentieth century post-colonial world, where

capital has no need to transform the world to make profits for itself, it is necessary to keep an open mind as far as capital is concerned.

A tempting illustration is Carol Boyack Upadhy's article on the 'Farmer-Capitalists of Coastal Andhra', published in the July 2 and 9 issues of this journal, it is no doubt unfair to pick on a researcher for the topic she chooses to research; and certainly, it is a legitimate exhibition of curiosity to desire to know what happens to the surplus generated by the canal-irrigated agriculture of coastal Andhra. And yet, considering the certainty that nobody is going to research the farmer-capitalists of, say, Nellore district, one is tempted to suspect that we are researching whatever our methodologies allow us to research. We have a theory which says that capitalism in agriculture leads to accumulation of capital, which can then be invested in urban business to make further profits, and which finally takes the form of industrial capital, the whole process being typical of the 'development of capitalism'. But firstly, any uninitiated person living in coastal Andhra would find it rather strange that the researcher goes all the way to Visakhapatnam to find out what is happening to coastal Andhra capital, and would realise that she does so only because she is burdened by the faith that just as any pious soul ultimately enters a Brahmin's body, all

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capital must ultimately enter industry, and Visakhapatnam is the only place where there is any industry. If she were not so burdened, the uninitiated person would tell her. she could as well (for instance) have gone to the Telangana districts where some of the farmer-capitalists of coastal Andhra have taken re-birth as liquor barons complete with armies of goondas whose job is to murder and rape tribals and preserve their master's, liquor monopoly, some of the goondas and a few of the masters themselves getting killed in retaliation by naxalites in the process; and since the excise revenue of the state government equals the total expenditure on public administration, this is nor a frivolous suggestion; or else she could have gone to Madras to find them immersed in the production, finance and distribution of third rate entertainers; or she could have found (hem in Vijayawada and the other coastal Andhra towns, involved in trade, real estate and much more shady affairs; and since the share of trade, hotels and restaurants in the state's net domestic product has been consistently higher than that of manufacture, this is not a frivolous suggestion either.

Secondly, this obsession with capital leaves us with no 'model' tot studying the Marner-capitalists' of any cither than a few regions like coastal Andhra. In today's Andhra Pradesh, for instance, within the class of really rich and powerful businessmen, some of the Reddys of Nellore district are providing a stiff though unsuccessful as of date competition to the rich Kammas of coastal Andhra. They too were landholders once upon a time, but their lands have had little irrigation; the soil of the district is sand where it is not gravel and stone where it is neither. Capital can find little of interest in the land and yet a section of the landholders of the district has grown into a strong group of multi-millionaire businessmen, to rival the coastal Andhra lot. They have built themselves up almost exclusively on public works contracts. It will probably be argued that the public works-roads for instance—are used by capital to transport goods and by peasants to transport goods to be exchanged against capital, but most of the roads are laid in summer and get washed away in the monsoon and between summer and monsoon there is little time for capital to use them. Joking apart, it is cantankerousness of a particularly painful kind to argue that anything that is used by capital came into existence exclusively in the interests of capital.

This is not meant as an aside. Agrarian relations cannot be discussed without giving central place to the Indian state's agrarian policy, and without recognising that the policy has never been merely the subordination of agriculture to capital. In devising its policy the state can be said to have had four interests in mind: (i) to protect to the extent possible the prosperity and powder of the class of landholders who emerged dominant in the villages after the abolition of zamindari type of tenures; (ii) to provide a variety

of fresh avenues (depending upon the natural endowment of the respective regions) for their enrichment, through its administrative, fiscal, political and developmental strategies, and also infrastructure for the transfer of their wealth to non-agricultural activities; (iii) to consolidate a Broad support base in the villages for the state, and a broad market for capital, by co-opting a section of the peasantry through tenancy reforms, and infrastructural measures like provision of electricity, irrigation, rural banking, procurement, and subsidies for costly inputs; and (iv) to keep the rural poor quiet through promises and welfare half-measures, and in case that fails, to put them down brutally.

All these cannot be captured by viewing 'the village' as an *object* for capital in India's development or underdevelopment. Not only the 'landlords but also the substantial peasantry have also been a *subject* of the Indian state's policies. It has not modernised agriculture—-to the extent it has—just to aid capital, but *also* to enrich the propertied classes of rural India; it has not introduced co-operative financing of agricultural activities merely to lubricate agrarian production to suit the interests of capital, but *also* to provide cheap access to public funds for the landholding classes as well as a new source of power for the landlords; its marketing institutions, excise contracts, public works contracts and panchayat raj structures cannot be understood merely in terms of the subordination of agriculture to capital, without taking into account the deliberate enrichment and entrenchment of the rural rich, and the co-optation of a section of the peasantry into both the market and the polity as a support base. There was perhaps a time and a clime 18th and 19th century Europe—when capital by itself could have achieved all these changes. Today it cannot. And all the third world states, therefore, even as they serve the interests of capital and allow and protect its expansion, also adopt all other means historically and politically viable to enrich and protect the propertied classes and suppress the poor. And that is why they cannot be fully comprehended by capital-obsessed methodologies, whose inadequacy is clearly evident when they take the extreme form of centre-periphery dependency theories. Nor can they be overthrown by capital-obsessed strategies.

It is the whole structure that emerges as a consequence of this development that needs to be overthrown by the poor. The rural poor must expropriate and take over all the land of the rural rich, who today have one foot on agriculture and one foot in politics or the tertiary sector; impose a strict (subsistence) ceiling of a family holding on the better-off peasantry; divide the land among the landless, initiate co-operative/collective cultivation so that available resources are conserved and centralised, and ensure that of the surplus (which is today a tax-free gift to the rural rich who take it mostly out

of the village), barring only the part that goes for the overall industrialisation and administration of the country, all the rest is employed in rural areas to develop irrigation, improve land management and soil conservation, and expand rural works and industries. This is the essence of the agrarian revolution, which the CPI-ML groups since Naxalbari have seen as the axis of the new democratic revolution; and with the agrarian revolution is integrated the struggle against capital, with which the agrarian structure has a symbiotic relation of mutual dependence.

Finally, there is no merit in taking extreme positions to prove a point. It is perilously close to nonsense to say that wages of agricultural labourers have never risen due to wage struggles but only when the prosperity of the peasants has made a rise possible. In Andhra Pradesh, wherever anybody (mostly the communists, but also a few non-communist groups and voluntary agencies) has bothered to organise the labourers there has been a steady and widespread increase of wages, even in areas which are not agriculturally prosperous. The same must be true of other states where the communists have been active. It is good to know that the Shetkari Sanghatana is demanding higher wages for labourers than radical organisations dare to. Wages of labourers obviously increase the easiest when those who pay them decide to increase them, and such employers must be reckoned intelligent people, but what is the point that is sought to be proved? Is there any historical or philosophical reason for believing that those who achieve high wage increases have any interest in the revolution or, contrariwise, that those who cannot obtain wage increases are incapable of making a revolution'?

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April-June 88 issue out
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