

*Agrarian Structure, Contradiction and  
Mobilization: A Framework for the Analysis of  
Emerging Rural Power*

I

Agrarian mobilizations are a persistent phenomena of the Indian rural social system being manifested in different parts of the country over a long period of time (Gough 1974; Iyer and Maharaj 1977; Mukherji 1978; Desai 1979; Hardiman 1981; Sen 1982; Balgopal 1982; Das 1982; Sengupta 1982; Gill and Singhal 1984; Dhanagare 1983; Guha 1983; Sahasrabudhey 1986). The portrayal of Indian peasantry as fatalistic, docile, unresisting, superstitious and passive (Barrington Moore Jr., 1966) has been proved to be without much foundation (Desai, 1979; Gough, 1979). During the British period, the Indian rural scene bristled with large scale protests, revolts and militant struggles by the peasantry involving several hundreds of villages and lasting for years together. Peasants conducted a relentless struggle against feudal oppression and played a significant role in the freedom movement (Kumar 1979; Bhalla 1983; Mehta 1984 etc.). Large scale agrarian mobilizations continue to surface at present times and have acquired varied organisational identities. Political parties, *Sabhas*, *Sanghas*, *Sanganthanas* and *Unions* have become the organisational expressions of the contemporary agrarian unrests and mobilizations. What do these organisations and parties project? To our mind, they serve a two-fold purpose:

(i) they identify the existing structure(s) of power towards which their conflict is directed; and (ii) they project a new loci of power (pressure groups) in the regional and/or national political scene.

In this paper we note that the agrarian mobilisations and movements taking place are of different kinds. These can then be related to the changes taking place in the agrarian system. A conceptualisation of the feudalistic and capitalistic agrarian system, proposing a framework for the analysis of agrarian change is undertaken. We argue that the major agrarian mobilisations taking

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place arise out of the contradictions embedded in these agrarian systems. And finally, we attempt a resolution of the conflicting interpretations of the class and ethnic dimensions of mobilisations.

## II

The phenomena of agrarian mobilization in contemporary times present a far from uniform pattern. On the one hand we have movements such as in the 'flaming fields of Bihar' and the 'Peoples' War' phenomenon in Andhra Pradesh. On the other hand, large scale mobilizations of the so-called farmers' movements are taking place in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab (Nadkarni 1987). These movements have different objectives, goals, strategies, vastly different ideologies and nature of leadership. It is not surprising that movements of the Bihar and Andhra types are not taking place in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab, and vice versa. A question such as, 'Why does not Sharad Joshi<sup>1</sup> take up the cause of agrarian problems in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh?'—is as redundant as the question, 'Why does Kanu Sanyal<sup>2</sup> not take up the cause of agrarian problems in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab'. For, these two varieties of mobilizations arise out of different agrarian contexts and perceptions of contradictions. The fact is that the agrarian context in Bihar and those of Maharashtra or Punjab are not quite the same. Therefore, one cannot expect the militants of one side to swap places with the activists of the other. A Kanu Sanyal or Vinod Mishra (Naxalites) cannot change positions with a Sharad Joshi (Shetkari Sangathana) or a Bhupinder Singh Mann [Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU)]. It can be stated,

- (a) that the agrarian context has been changing in India;
- (b) that the change is far from even; and
- (c) that agrarian mobilization arise out of the contradictions embedded in these contexts.

It can be observed that through the period of British colonialism upto present times there has been a certain continuity, particularly in the more backward states of India, where the agrarian system still continue to be 'feudalistic.' In contrast, the green revolution belts are witnessing monetisation of their agrarian economy. This system is becoming 'capitalistic'. By and large the former context has given rise to anti-feudal struggles by peasants and agricultural labourers, and the latter, the so-called new phenomenon of farmers' movements. The anti-feudal struggles indicate the presence of entrenched feudal power structures on the one hand and the emergence of a new locus of rural power in conflict with it seeking a change of the agrarian system. The

farmers' movements demonstrate the consolidation of rural power in the hands of more well-to-do farmers who are different from the feudal landlords. It is therefore necessary to analytically distinguish between the feudalistic and the capitalistic agrarian systems, in order to assess the nature and quality of agrarian change and the changing contradictions which have given rise to the agrarian movements in the present times.

### III

The main structural features of the feudalistic agrarian system are the following:

- (a) the existence of a landed class with substantial landholdings, for whom the principal source of income is from land given in *rent* to *tenants*. This is the rentier-class of *landlords* who could be resident or absentee depending upon where they normally resided. In addition to income through rent, the landlord class is often associated with earning through *usury*;
- (b) the system is pervaded by the phenomenon of '*attachment*'. Thus, there are attached labourers, bonded labourers and tenants, who are '*tied*' to the landlord generally through (i) usury (consumption loans), (ii) homestead and/or land allotment for personal residence/cultivation (of the attached labourer). These in many cases, result in the phenomenon of debt bondage, often running into generations of inextricable servitude (Patnaik and Dingwaney 1985);
- (c) such ties generally demand unrestricted utilisation of time, *unpaid labour* involving customary non-legal exactions, and sometimes even claims over women of attached labourers and tenants for sexual gratification;
- (d) inter-personal behaviour between the landlord and the class categories to which he is related is characterised by diffuse non-economic obligations guided by respect and deference to his status;
- (e) the system is based on the model of a '*patron*'-landlord exploiting the other agrarian '*claint*' categories;
- (f) the decision regarding crop(s) to be grown by tenant vests with the landlord.

The *zamindari* system under the British colonial dispensation was the archetype of the feudalistic agrarian system, all the peasant classes were related to the landlord class as tenants. With the abolition of *zamindari* (and introduction of ceiling on land) the occupancy tenants were freed from the nexus of the landlord-tenant relationships. They acquired independent peasant status. However, the landlord class or the element of landlordism in the peasantry has continued to survive in the form of income through rent from land

leased-out to tenants for cultivation, and through usury. As a result, attachment and bondage continue to be features of the changing feudalistic agrarian system even at the present times.

The peasant class was earlier identified with the self-cultivating, subsistence, small farmer cultivating household (Shanin, 1971: 238–245). But now the generally accepted view is that the peasantry is differentiated into rich, middle and poor peasant classes<sup>3</sup>.

In comparison, the capitalistic agrarian system is characterised by the following features:

- (a) here the cultivator is the *farmer* and the land which he owns and/or controls constitutes his *farm*;
- (b) he makes his *decisions* regarding what to grow and in how much of his area;
- (c) this decision is based on the *profit* criterion taking into account the prevailing and projected *market prices* of different crops;
- (d) accordingly he makes judicious *investments* in implements and inputs;
- (e) here the market is completely *monetised* and all services and inputs have to be purchased in the money market. The farmer is forced to compute *his cost of cultivation*;
- (f) there is an element of *risk* in such investments, hence the farmer calculates the amount of *risk taking* and *risk averting*, he is going to do.

In the capitalistic system the farmer is unlikely to lease-out land to tenants, for he would much rather grow his own crops on his land. If he leases-out land it is to share the risk rather than make his earning through rent (Minhas, 1990). The tenancy structure in this system is qualitatively different from what obtains in the feudalistic system. He is more likely to utilise his family labour and/or employ casual wage labour and/or engage monthly farm employee or even, annual farm servant under his direct supervision or supervisory arrangement. He is unlikely to be 'tied' to other agrarian categories as in the model of exploitation and patronage. Instead, he acquires membership in secular economic interest-groups and develops '*associational ties*'. If he leases-in land, which could involve large areas, this is likely to be on a money rent contract in which he exercises his own decision making rights. In short, in an important sense the farmer is 'free' to pursue his investments and crop choice unrestricted by 'obligations' to other agrarian categories. The relationships in the simplest form acquires a two tier system of the farmer and the farm labour. Its further elaboration would mean the introduction of supervisory/managerial staff under the employment of the farmer.

It is being suggested that the landlord-peasant-tenant-labour configuration of agrarian relations, characterised by diffuse ties of customary obligations is 'feudalistic' in structure. In comparison, the

farmer-farm labour-under-supervision, characterised by contractual terms and conditions is 'capitalistic' in structure. The big farmers in the Marxist terminology are the enterprising rural bourgeoisie or the *kulaks*. Unfortunately, the native term *kisan* disguises the distinction between the 'peasant' and the 'farmer', and hence tends to blur the change processes in the agrarian society. A '*peasant-kisan*' may over a period of time get transformed into a '*farmer-kisan*'. It will be clear that a landowner will be identified as 'feudal' or 'capitalist' depending upon the system of production in which he operates.

This rather simplistic typification of the 'feudal' and the 'capitalistic' agrarian systems is only meant to serve as a *heuristic* device to give us some idea about the nature of a given agrarian system and the kind of change it is undergoing. These concepts should not be considered as reificatory. In any given concrete agrarian context the elements of both the systems could coexist giving expression to new social formations. The important thing to note is that the erstwhile landlord dominated economy characterized by rent and usury, based on loyalty and dependence to a patriarchal authority which could be tyrannical and oppressive in the extreme or benevolent and enlightened, is undergoing significant changes ever since the abolition of zamindari and other forms of landlordism imposed or generated by colonialists.

#### IV

That the typology of the 'feudalistic' and 'capitalistic' agrarian systems can at best be accepted heuristically is amply demonstrated by our discovery of bonded labour in the green revolution belts of Karnal and Panipat. The features of this system as we have come to understand through our limited field experience is as follows.

- (1) the labour takes a heavy consumption loan (for marriage, etc.) of say Rs. 3000 to Rs. 5000;
- (2) the condition of the loan is that he has to serve as the 'annual farm servant' of this creditor-landlord;
- (3) the annual remuneration is fixed at Rs. 3000 or so, which is less than what he owes to the creditor-landlord, which is capital plus interest @ 2 per cent per month;
- (4) the labourer therefore, receives no wages in hand, they all stand pre-adjusted;
- (5) he is given meals or its equivalent in grains, daily;
- (6) he is given firewood and other tit-bits free of cost;
- (7) he may be given a buffalo calf to tend, with fodder provided by the master, which when it reaches the milching stage is sold at a high premium—the price which it fetches is supposed to be split 50–50;

- (8) whatever other requirements of the labourer's family, like salt, pulses, sugar, etc. can be obtained from a specified shop on the master's account, which when cleared by him enters the 'khata' or debt account ledger of the labourer;
- (9) when the labourer family indulges in some ceremonial revelry, or has to play host to his kins, the expenses including that of drinks and other items enter the *khata*;
- (10) the labourer is provided with clothes, petty medical assistance, etc, but his wife's and family's requirements enter the *khata*;
- (11) each day's absence entails entry of a day's market wage in the *khata*;
- (12) if the labourer has to marry his son or daughter, loans upto Rs. 5000 are advanced, this too swells the figures in the *khata*;
- (13) at the end of the 'annual contract', he is left with a massive debt, which again compels him to enter into another annual contract and so the never-ending cycle continues.

The labourer, in return, is usually at the tube-well pump house day and night. The major task is to irrigate and keep watch. He has to operate the pump. When water fills up in one plot he has to divert it to the next. There are specific timings for watering which have to be maintained. For this kind of job, casual labour is not suited. Nor are salaried servants available for such tedious round-the-clock tasks. This posting at the tube well is the most critical of all the other jobs, as in proper and timely irrigation lies the success of a crop. The grip of the master on the servant is therefore fiercely strong.

In Karnal-Panipat, two variants of such bondage were found. One was the classic *long term generational bondage*, in which one bond master and his kins (who are also landlords) between themselves, draw into bondage other members of an already bonded family. As the sons of the bonded father grow up, get married through fresh debt-bondage, they enter the rank of their father, into the extended family of the master of their father. That is one bond master, unable or unwilling to keep more than a specified number of labourers in bondage, reproduces new labourers for supply as bonded labourers through debt bondage for their 'needy' landlord kins. This case was associated with a wealthy non-cultivating, upper caste landlord extended family.

The other form was in the nature of *serial bondage*. The labourer enters into debt-bondage. He is unable to clear his debt. Another landlord requires a tube well posting. He approaches the bonded labourer. Offers him slightly better terms. The bonded labourer agrees to work for him. The new bond master clears his debts with the old bond master. The labourer resumes his bonded existence in a new setting. Such parallel mobility in bondage was found to be quite prevalent in the Panipat areas, amongst Sikh employers. There is

some kind of a market in trading of bonded labour, as bonded labourers prefer to move from one bond master to the other with marginally better wages and conditions of work, in an effort to reduce the debt gap. In Panipat also, as in Karnal, we found a similar pattern of successive induction of male adult members of the family into bondedness. The conditions of work for the bonded labourer in Panipat is similar to those in Karnal.

The debt-bondage phenomenon in Karnal and Panipat is far from a feudal appendage. This structure is consistent with a capitalistic agrarian system, in which considerations of profit maximisation through investment and cost-effectiveness provide the rationality of a system. The farmer *invests* in the labour through advance of unrepayable loans. He provides for him sufficiently to exist at a satisfactory level of subsistence. He pitches the loans upto around Rs. 10,000 which is unrepayable. This is cost-effective considering the amount of labour he extracts out of him.

#### V

It has been already observed that the nature and variety of agrarian mobilizations are essentially related to the changing agrarian situations that give rise to them. Generally speaking the agrarian mobilizations we witness today fall in one or the other of the following categories:

- (a) those arising out of the contradictions embedded in the feudalistic structures of the agrarian society;
- (b) those arising out of the contradictions emerging from the capitalistic penetration in agriculture.

In the former situation, the major contradictions can be located *within* the feudalistic agrarian system, and in the latter this is to be found as between the agrarian and the urban-industrial systems. Thus, movements relating to security of the tenancy cultivation, against unfair crop share and usury, against bonded labour etc. are principally anti-feudal struggles. In contrast, movements directed towards reduction or abolition of electricity charges, water charges, agricultural taxes, waiver and deferral of institutional loans, reduction in the input charges, demand for remunerative prices etc. define the complexion of the farmer's movements in the agrarian belts which have witnessed capitalistic penetration (Nadkarni 1987).

It is in this context that the emergence of new loci of power has to be understood in the feudalistic and capitalistic systems. The emergence of several groups in the Jharkhand belt,<sup>4</sup> the dozen or more groups of naxalite persuasion in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, parties such as the Indian Peoples' Front, and non-party organisations like the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini,<sup>5</sup> and many more voluntary organisations and

groups, indicate the growing political ferment at the grass roots of the feudalistic agrarian systems. Correspondingly farmers' organisations such as BKU,<sup>6</sup> Farmers' Federation of India etc. demonstrate the resurgence of organised rural power in the areas of capitalist market penetration. In the former situation, caste, class and ethnic contradictions are sharpened and the conflicts are expected to overcome and resolve these contradictions. In the latter, the whole rural community is sought to be homogenised ideologically, projecting the main source of all rural ills as emanating from the exploitative nexus between the urban and the rural, between the state and the rural masses.

It is not infrequent that a 'given movement' is interpreted by some as a class movement and by others as ethnic. For example most caste and tribal oriented movements in the rural areas have been subjected to such conflicting interpretations. This source of confusion needs to be examined and resolved.

It is proposed that any social system is constituted of the structures of discrimination, exploitation and oppression in their inter-relationships (Mukherji 1987, 1609). Each of these are structures of asymmetrical relationships which give rise to contradictions. Whether a conflict of scale is basically ethnic or class in character depends upon whether the primary contradiction is located in the asymmetrical structure of discrimination or exploitation (or both). But no matter whether the primary contradiction is located in the structure of discrimination or exploitation, it is most likely to have an interface with the other. Thus, in the Naxalbari movement, for instance, the predominant militant participation of the Santhals, Oraons and Mundas, did not mean that the movement was of ethnic orientation. This is because these communities were responding to the contradictions in the agrarian structure of exploitation as peasants (P. 1613-14). Nevertheless, this class response to an asymmetrical structure of exploitation had an unmistakable ethnic interface. Likewise in the Gorkhaland movement, the main contradiction hinged on the discrimination against the Nepalese in the matter of their citizenship, questioning their basic identity (Mukherji, 1989). Thus, this movement was basically an ethnic movement. However during the course of the movement the economic exploitation suffered by the Nepalese community also became a vigorous part of the movement campaign.

It is not necessary that the primary contradictions giving rise to conflict will continue to persist in the same structure of asymmetry. The primary contradiction can oscillate between different structures of asymmetries. Thus, for instance, in the Darjeeling Hills during the Gorkhaland movement there was an almost wholesale shift of CITU members in the tea plantations to the Gorkha National Liberation Front. This did not make them class unconscious, rather they were

responding to the primary contradiction located in the structure of discrimination where the question of Nepalese identity had acquired predominance over the issues of class exploitation (P. 19). Subsequent to the resolution of the ethnic contradiction, class issues could regain their original significance.

It is within this framework that, an alternative analysis of the emergence or organised peasant power in the rural areas can be attempted.

#### NOTES

1. A prominent leader of farmers' movement
2. A prominent leader of the peasant and agricultural labour movement.
3. The class differentiation among the peasantry is made on the basis of two important criteria; (a) the extent of land owned and (b) use of family labour to cultivation. The *rich peasant* household is one which possesses land in excess of what is possible for it to exploit fully through its own family labour and may lease-out its excess land to tenants much like the landlord household. In contrast, the *middle peasant* is a self cultivating household which cultivates its lands almost entirely with the help of family labour and employing casual wage labour only during brief peak seasons of harvesting or transplanting. It is left with little or no surplus. The *poor peasant* household is left with excess labour power, which it either sells, or it leases-in land from a landlord or a rich peasant. Production from its own lands being in deficit of its household consumption requirements, it has to participate in the tenancy or the labour market or both. A poor peasant can also be a landless tenant cultivator-cum agricultural labourer (See Patnaik 1976; Bardhan 1979; Rudra 1978).
4. In a conference convened by Jharkhand Coordination Committee (JCC) during the beginning of 1990 under the leadership of Dr. B.P. Keshri, Head of the Department of Tribal and Regional Language in Ranchi University, as many as 48 organisations and groups including the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, All Jharkhand Party, Indian Peoples' Front etc. attended.
5. The Chatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini was established by Jayaprakash Narayan who in his last years gave a call for Total Revolution in India (1974). The Vahini was established as a non-party political youth vanguard of the movement practising satyagraha as a form of militant nonviolence (See Mukherji 1989).
6. Bhartiya Kisan Union is emerging as the national front for the various regional farmer's associations such as the Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangam, Shetkari Sangathana (Maharashtra), Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha, Punjab Khetibari Zamindar Union and so on (the last has merged with the BKU).

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