

Agrarian Struggles in Contemporary India

Prof. Anuradha Jaiswal

Abstract

The entire history of agrarian struggles after independence is a long history of severe repression against the organisation and its workers. But none of the sacrifices have gone waste. Each ounce of blood, energy and time, given has strengthened the body and the soul of the organisation. The Kisan Sabha which we see today, with its large membership and an elaborate network of units reaching down to the village level is a product of this history. It was founded to play a distinct role in the history of the country, For an assessment of the role played by the organised peasant movement in the years after independence, it is essential to understand the actions of the peasantry.

Key words- Struggle, Benami, Demand, Repression, Struggle, Taxation

In the first six years of the post independence period, the agrarian struggles had to face severe repression at the hands of the Government . Afraid of the tempo of the growing revolutionary movement it unleashed repression making the functioning of various units impossible. The All India Kisan Sabha was not able to hold any session till April 1953. But inspite of this the Kisan Sabha was busy organising the resistance of the peasantry especially the question of evictions and militant fights were put up in many States.¹ Subsequently various governments were forced to take measures of land reforms such as ceiling legislations security of tenure and rent reduction, consolidation of holdings etc. but all failed to fulfil the declared objectives. On the other hand the period witnessed a large scale eviction offensive throwing millions of tenants into the ranks of agricultural workers.

In the late fifties the Kisan Sabha fought many struggles on the issues of land fair prices for peasants produce, debt relief, in defence of the rights of tribal people and on the issue of the burden of heavy taxation. The most important of these struggles was the heroic struggle of the Punjab peasantry against imposition of the betterment levy tax in the beginning of 1959. This was the most important struggle fought under the flag of the Kisan Sabha after the epoch making Telangana struggle. The peasants defied lathicharges, beating and all type of repression. In all the peasant unity forged during the struggle was unparalleled, when peasant united irrespective of their political difficulties. The movement ultimately forced the Government to withdraw the tax amounting to 136 crore.

The agrarian crisis further aggravated in the 60s. By the mid 1960 stagnation in agriculture and the consequent food crisis worsened. The bourgeois-landlord classes began losing their hold over the mass of the peasantry with the result that in the 1967 the Congress monopoly of power was broken in eight states with West Bengal and Kerala giving victory to the left and democratic force among which the CPI(M) played an important role. Powerful peasant struggle took place in different States on different issues. In Kerala and West Bengal these struggles were most widespread and became intimately connected with political issues. When the Central Government dismissed these, hundreds of thousands of peasants actually joined the struggle for democracy in West Bengal combining this with the struggle for defending their land and crops.

Mid term elections gave a bigger victory to the United Front in West Bengal and the peasant movement attained wider sweep. Millions of peasants all over the State unleashed an unprecedented struggle with the backing of the United Front Government, for recovering benami land for possession and distribution of surplus lands for loans in kind and for checking boarding and blackmarketing. In this period more than three lakh acres of land were located taken over and distributed among the landless through village land committees. Many peasants lost their lives in the battles fought on this issue, but it gave a big impetus to the kisan movement and the All India Kisan Sabha spread to all districts.

In Kerala the peasants conducted a state wide movement for agrarian legislation and debt relief legislation for the rights on the Government lands against threat of Central intervention. As a result of the campaign one lakh pattas were distributed to erstwhile unauthorised occupants of the land, The ceiling was revised downwards and made family based, many exemptions were withdrawn and hutment dwellers were given rights on land on which they lived. Tens and thousands of agricultural labourers conducted powerful and successful struggle for better wages and living conditions.

The discontent found powerful expression in other parts of Indian states. In Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Tripura etc. widespread struggles took place for occupation of forest or government lands and against eviction from these lands. In Punjab and U.P widespread agitation took place on the question of sugarcane prices. Militant struggles of agricultural labourers took place in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. This period also witnessed two splits in All India Kisan Sabha one from the Right and the other from the Left. While it did a lot of harm to the Kisan Sabha, it not only survived these attacks but also advanced further. By 1978-79 it was able to give a new orientation to its policy, which led to its big advance. Membership of the Kisan Sabha, which had never gone beyond ten lakhs till 1968-69 after 1978-79 jumped by millions and now stands more than 84 lakhs.

Land to the tiller and total abolition of landlordism have been the basic slogans of the Kisan Sabha since its inception. The farmers' movements burst onto the national political stage in 1980 with the road and rail roko agitation in Nasik in Maharashtra led by the Shetkari Sangathan of Sharad Joshi. Nearly 200,000 farmers blockaded road and rail traffic on the Bombay-Calcutta and Bombay-Delhi route on November 10 demanding higher prices for onions and sugarcane. Thousands were arrested, two killed in police firing, and prices of onions and cane enhanced. The leader was an ex-UN official, Sharad Joshi, who articulated the ideology of the movement in terms of India versus Bharat or urban, industrial India versus rural, agricultural Bharat. In 1986, in Sisauli village in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, Mahinder Singh Tikait, presided over a gathering of lakhs of villagers before which the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh had been forced to appear in person to announce his

acceptance of their demand for reduction of electricity charges to the old level. These were only the more dramatic moments in what had emerged in the 1980s as a widespread grassroots mobilization of rural dwellers. Led by the Vivasayigal Sangam in Tamil Nadu, the Rajya Ryothu Sangha in Karnataka, BharatiyaKisan Union (BKU) in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, KhedutSamaj and Kisan Sangh in Gujarat and the ShetkariSangathana in Maharashtra, farmers in thousands and lakhs, at different times for different demands,

Thus the years since independence have seen agrarian struggles of wide range from the Telangana peasant movement and the PEPSU tenant's movement which continued from pre-independence years to the Naxalite or Maoist movement in the late 1960s and the new farmer's movement of the 1980's to current times. All this shows the tremendous possibilities of agrarian movements to gain momentum and ultimately for respective governments to yield towards their genuine demands.

References.

1. Bipin Chandra, "*India after Independence*", pp 421-422, Penguin Books, New Delhi.
2. A.R Desai, *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence*, OUP, Delhi, 1986.
3. Shantha Sinha, "*Maoists in Andhra Pradesh*", Delhi, 1989.
4. Mridula Mukherjee, "*Peasant Resistance and Peasant Consciousness in Colonial India*", "Subalterns and Beyond, EPW, 1988.
5. Sunil Sahasrabudhey, "*Peasant Movement in Modern India*", Allahabad, 1989.
6. Thomas R, Land, "*Landlords and The British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century*", Berkeley, UCP, 1976.