TOWARDS AGRARIAN REVOLUTION

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Poems from the recent dalit movement such as *Comrade* express a spirit of self-confidence ("Now I have awakened/ I am moving in blazing sunlight") and a process of extending the meaning of revolution ("what will happen/ from simply waving the red flag / over the many colours of reality") that are in contrast to the mood of gloom and retrenchment found in most of the established left as we enter the 1990s in a turmoil of unprecedented change.

How do we characterize this "turning point of time ?" "Seize the time!" was a major slogan of the Black Panthers in the U.S., but one has to know the time to be able to intervene. How do we know it?

I would characterize it as: "the proletarian state has fallen, long live agrarian revolution!" But this requires a vastly expanded understanding of the meaning of "agrarian revolution."

Soviet Model /Nehru Model

What exactly has "fallen"? The Soviet model was an effort to build a socialist society on the basis of capitalist forces of production, that is, building a centralized, fossil fuel-based industrial economy on surplus extracted form the peasantry and from low-priced natural resources. It gave birth to an exploitative state managerial class; to a command economic system at first powerful in extracting resources and mobilizing vast labouring masses for development, then ultimately inefficient, squandering its wealth of labour and energy; to a system of privilege culminating in corruption; and to a vast plundering of the environment—an over-centralized, exploitative, ecologically destructive system. We need not mourn its demise.

But what of its pale Indian counterpart, the "Nehru model", also fallen? Unfortunately, the Left , in opposing the sellout to imperialism, is mourning for it; for while all may agree (in words used in various EPW articles) that the system was "sordid, bloated, corrupt, tyrannous, parasitical, gangster-ridden, sanctimonious", still most left and Gandhian intellectuals seem to think that its origins were far different, that it was a system originally progressive but hi-jacked by a new privileged class. The established leftists are becoming the biggest supporters of the Nehru model today, and whether it is trying to hold the line on public sector jobs, or valiantly defending "secularism" against the BJP. Or calling for "national integration," their posture is primarily defensive.

The new social movements (referring primarily to the dalit and anticaste movement, the women's movement, environmental movements and the farmers' movement) are not on the defensive. From the beginning they saw the Indian system as fundamentally exploitative and oppressive, though they did not always use conventional Marxist and terminology: as brahmanical, patriarchal, ecologically destructive, anti-peasant. If anything, the movements are on the upsurge today. Dalits and low castes, while facing murderous attacks that in turn are a backlash to their new assertiveness at the village level, are pushing forward on Mandal Commission reservations and moving to formulate broad claims to land, water and resources. The farmers' movement—especially the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra but to some extent other organizations such as the BKU-Punjab and Khedut Samaj - Gujarat—is welcoming the weakening of the state which was holding crop prices down and moving towards low-input diversified forms of agricultural production. The women's movement, though fragmented and confused, is still seeing such rural developments as women making claims to land, and associating themselves with environmental, drought and water issues. Environmental movements are getting close to seeing such gigantic projects as Tehri and Sarder Sarovar halted; they are formulating new models of development with claims to local autonomy, as exemplified in slogans such as *hamara gaon, hamara raj*, "our village, our rule."

Together, in fragmented but converging ways, we are coming close to a new understanding , a new thrust of agrarian revolution.

The Dalit Anti- Caste Movement

From its earliest period under the inspiration of Jotiba Phule in the 19th century, the anti-caste movement had four major thrusts: (1) a complete destruction of the caste system, of jatis and varnas, through the unity of dalits and shudras against Brahmanism; (2) a defence of the peasant community against bureaucratic–brahmanic exploitation (what Phule called the "bhatshahi"); (3) a commitment to the liberation of women; and (4) an effort to reinterpret the meaning of the com-

munity / nation with the assertion that there would be no "national unity" based on brahmanic, high-caste symbols.

Phule, and the dalit and non–Brahman movements after him, have praised the role of the *rakshasas* such as Bali Raja and Ravana, have indentified themselves with Shambuk, Ekalavaya, and Sita rather than Rama. The Ramayana has been seen as a history of conquest, of Aryans against Dravidians (the DMK), Hindus against Buddhists (Arun Kamble), patriarchy over matriarchy (Sharad Patil). For very broad sections of Indian masses, how could Rama–the killer of Shambuk, the first to toss away his wife on the grounds of a mere accusation–be a symbol of the nation?

Babasaheb Ambedkar carried forward the movement from the standpoint of the most oppressed section, the dalits. To the peasant question he added the necessity of giving dalits a major share in village resources, sometimes fighting for "forest" lands for cultivation, sometimes arguing for separate dalit villages, at one point calling for the "nationalization of land." Most important, the necessity of dalit / shudra, dalit / non–Brahman unity remained the base of his politics, in spite of his occasional periods of skepticism about its possibility; he sought always to form a political front of peasants and workers against the Congress which to him was inevitably the party of capitalism and brahmanism.

In the last twenty years the dalit movement has shown a new upsurge, seen in (a) the fight against atrocities; (b) the continuing challenge to all forms of brahmanic culture; and (c) working for dalit - shudra unity. The Mandal Commission has helped in giving a material basis for such unity. However, it is becoming clear that reservation in organized sector jobs may help in breaking down high-caste monopolies but are not sufficient to achieve the basic equalitarian goals of the movement. "We must becoming a ruling community" was Ambedkar's frequent formulation; dalits must have political power, and there is an increasing conviction that this has to be from below, from the village level. The right to land - and with it the right to water, to resources, entitlements in the village - have to be the basis of a collective move forward for the community as a whole.

The Women's Movement

There have been three important contributions of the post-1970 women's movement in India: the pinpointing of "patriarchy" as a specific form of exploitation; the insistence on autonomy of organizations, and an expanded interpretation of labour and exploitation: labour is not just "wage labour"; exploitation under capitalism also means exploitation of non-wage labour, including nonpaid domestic labour and petty commodity production remunerated through the sale of products. At the same time, the domination of this movement– at the level of leadership and ideological interpretation– by two major networks, the urban feminists and the party women's wings–has hampered its growth.

Today, the women's movement in India is taking rural roots, and with this it is bringing forward a claim to such fundamentals as land and political power and a new questioning of the path of development. Almost spontaneously, women have in scattered villages put up "all -women panels" for village elections; in Maharashtra, ten villages have elected such panels. Similarly, beginning with the Chhatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini in Bihar in 1982 and moving to the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi's "Laxmi Mukti" campaign (giving land rights in the names of women) in 1990-1991, rural women are claiming land. Along with this major campaign for the rights of the women of peasant families, we can see cases of Dalit women claiming their share of *watan* (inam) land, and mahila mandals (village women's -based development projects.)

Along with this is an interesting new debate on cultural issues. The women's movement before independence had identified with Sita and the ideal of *pativratya*; after 1975 there was a firm rejection of these "Hindu" symbols, but the dominant networks of urban feminists and party women veered to an anti-religious abstract secularism ("All religion is patriarchal"). Today however on one hand the *Manushi* group is trying to challenge this as alienated westernization and calling for a "defence of our dharma" and a reinterpretation of Rama (perhaps based in Delhi- U.P. they feel a greater need to defend Rama), while more southern and rural trends are beginning to use mother-goddess imagery. For example, while Sharad Patil had interpreted Sita as *bhumi-kanya*, the daughter of earth enslaved by Rama, the land-for -women programmes of the Shetkari Sanghatana used the name of "Laxmi Mukti" and began to describe process of farming the lands given in their names through in natural, no-cost and subsistence oriented methods, as "Sita fields."

Environmental Movements and Farmers' Movements: Peasant Movements in the Periods of Contemporary Capitalism

Environmental movements and the farmers' movement are both peasant movements of protest against the current path of fossil fuel-based heavy industry - oriented statist development. The one is a movement of immediate victims of this development, of peasants whose land is being lost to projects or who are threatened by misery and displacement through drought. The other is a movement of the supposed beneficiaries of development, the peasants who are increasingly producing for the market but are finding themselves trapped and exploited by the "green revolution trinity" of HYVs, fertilizers and pesticides, falling into debt in the face of rising costs of inputs and inadequate prices for crops produced by their labour.

Unfortunately the left has not recognized these as "peasant movements." The real problem is that "agrarian revolution" cannot be easily understood by upper-caste urban leftists, who tend to reduce it a dogma, thinking of "redistribution" only when the question of land is brought up, forgetting what is grown on the land and how, whether the land is getting water, what concrete social relations (including those of caste and patriarchy) have to be taken into account, the relationship of crop land to forest and pasture, the relationship of village to industry and state. Left intellectuals have endorsed the planners' strategy of "cheap food" and extraction of surpluses from agriculture as the necessary adjunct to development and equality. They have ignored crucial issues of production, and reduced exploitative relations of production only to intra-village relations, peasant versus landlord or agricultural labour versus rich farmer. And thus the farmers' movement is characterized as a "kulak" movement, while environmental movements are seen as "tribal" movements. The one is condemned, the other romanticized, but the meaning of both is lost.

Energy Use and Development

What kind of development has created these new movements?

In building up the public sector, heavy industry and planning, it was taken for granted that agriculture is primarily a source for accumulating surpluses. As Sukhomoy Chakravorty has written:

> "In actual fact, the planners strategy boiled down to the traditional thesis . . . . that during the early stages of industrialization it was necessary for agriculture to contribute to the building up of a modern industrial sector by providing cheap labour and also cheap food."[1]

And when the planners came to the strategy for agriculture the thrust was also clear: peasants / farmers were backward producers who could do nothing for themselves, the state had to be the driving force of development.Thus a "liberal" planning orientation stressed "increased investment for agriculture" ("50% investment" in the era of Devi Lal). Few have remarked on the fact that this investment has centered on the two things most questioned by environmental movements, irrigation projects (primarily big dams) and chemical fertilizers. And neither Communists nor socialists have questioned this, except to say that land reforms must precede the application of "Green Revolution" (GR) technology.

But how effective, really, is GR technology? We know that there are declining rates of return to the use of chemical fertilizers and other inputs, ie. it takes more and more applications just to keep up the growth rate, while any peasant will testify to the continual spoiling of the soil itself. The fabled productivity of GR agriculture rests on increasing application of external petroleum-based and chemical inputs, which are becoming increasingly costly. It has been estimated by French scientists that contemporary U.S. and European agriculture requires 6 to 9 calories of energy to produce one calorie of food; and if these standards of production prevailed throughout the world, it would require the whole energy output of the world entirely for agriculture.[2]

> K.R. Datye, a Bombay engineer, has used the concept of "primary productivity" (output of glucose, the primary product of plant process, evaluated in terms of bioenergy production measured in units of wood-equivalent bioenergy) to show that traditional agricultural systems of "natural ecosystems" were more productive in terms of water use than the command areas of large irrigation systems, for example producing 20 to 50 kg/hectare / meter as compared to an estimated 5 kg / ha.mm. in sugarcane and about 8 kg / ha.mm. for summer paddy in penninsular India and kharif paddy in Punjab.[3]

GR agriculture is not more "productive"; it only applies more energy to agriculture, in a way that India cannot afford.

There are basically two kinds of technologies—energy - extractive technologies which make more and more energy available for use; and energy - saving technologies, which increase the efficiency of energy use. Probably for most of human history, energy - saving technologies were dominant as agricultural production developed in a way that harmonized with the natural evolutionary processess of our planetary system. The processes of imperialism and industrialism brought development based on extracting energy in the form of fossil fuel resources (first coal and then petroleum) to create "growth" in a subsystem of human society. This growth—which used both fossil fuel and bioenergy (crops, timber, foodgrains) extracted from throughout the world from the beginning of the Columbus era—not only involved the super - exploitation of third world human labour, it drew on the energy stored by the planetary system and began to do so in a way destructive of nature itself. This gave birth to what "ecological Marxists" now have begun to call the "second contradiction of capitalism"— ie. between the production process (including both forces and relations) and the very conditions of production itself.

Today the U.S. has available to it about 7-8000 kg. of coal-equivalent fossil-fuel energy per person; Europe has slightly less; India has 400 kg per capita.[4] To think that India could develop by siginificantly increasing fossil-fuel energy through energy - extractive technologies is an illusion. Development must be through a major increase in the efficiency of energy use. In fact radical engineers and activists in Maharashtra have argued that 3 acres of land can produce enough subsistence goods for a family, including its cash needs, on only minimal water and other inputs; to put it another way , it is estimated that in addition to 2 T of fossil fuel (400 kg x 5) available per family another 18 T of biomass could be produced to satisfy fundamental needs from fuel, fodder and food to the generation of energy.[5]

But, while an energy- efficient, needs - oriented development is technologically possible, it cannot be done by bureaucracies which subsidize inefficient energy, whether in the form of chemical fertilizers or massive dam projects. It can only be done by drawing on the traditional knowledge of peasants and other producers in cooperation with the best insights of modern technologies. The state that claims to be benefiting peasants by providing them with irrigation water from Sarder Sarovar and Tehri and subsidized fertilizers is standing in the way of a true development.

In other words we come back to the important Maxist thesis that ultimately relations of production are determinative. Energy - extractive and environmentally destructive technologies have been fostered by centralizing, exploitative relations of production in the processes of colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and imperialism; they have been based not only on private property but also on the violence of states; they have been associated with the enslavement of women, the dispossession of peasants, the genocide of tribals, the loot of third world resources. Alternative technologies (development of the wealth of biomass resources) must be linked to decentralized, egalitarian, casteless, nonpatriarchal, systems of human organization. Local ownership and control of resources by the village community, with the right of all inhabitants of the village to a share in these resources; access of all to education, science and technology; retention of surpluses created by human labour primarily at the local level are all crucial not simply for achieving equlity but for a true development, if we use the term "development" in its sence of "unfolding of potentialities." The technologies of this development will not be created by engineers or experts sitting on Delhi or Bombay but by men and women working in the field in alliance with the upgraded skills and knowledge of the actual producers. This requires a defeat both of the brahmanic forms of knowledge which despise manual labour and create "experts of the texts" and of the Mughal - imperial traditions of Delhi which make science and planning into a rigid framework imposed from above. Science and technology must be in the hands of — not simply for—the basic producers, dalits, women, peasants, tribals, and whatever their internal contradictions, the need for an alliance for democracy and alternative development is greater now than ever.

"Agrarian Revolution" for Today:

* "Land to the tiller" expanded to include a

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right to resources for all, especially for the historically deprived groups (women, dalits, other nontilling shudra castes);

- A new way of development, based on energy - saving technologies in harmony with the planetary system;
- An agro - industrial development centered on biomass production and a nature-centured agriculture, ecologically sustainable and equalitarian;
- Relations of production that include a mixture of individual ownership (generalized to all) and collective ownership, in which the latter can be seen in the ecological term of "common property resources" with some of these owned / controlled primarily at the village level, somre at district, state or higher levels.
- "Community" defined and localized in terms of natural regions and the lives of the people producing in them; "nation" as a federation of communities.

What is "agrarian revolution"? In a poem entitled "Push Back the Catastrophes" the Black feminist poet Jayne Cortez writes,

"Enough of the missiles
the submarines
the aircraft carriers
the biological weapons
No more sickness sadness poverty
exploitation destabilization
illiteracy and bombing
Let's move towards peace
toward equality and justice
that's what I want
To breathe clean air
to drink pure water to plant new crops
to soak up the rain to wash off the stink
to hold this body and soul together in peace
that's it
push back the catastrophes."

The linkage of equality and social justice with ecologically sustainable, needs-oriented production: that is "agrarian revolution."

Footnotes

1. Sukhomoy Chakraborty, *Indian Planning*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 21.
2. See Jean-Paul Deleage, "Eco-Marxist Critique of Political Economy" in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 3, November 1989, pp. 18-19.
3. K.R. Datye, "Ecosystem productivity, Sustainability and carrying Capacity" (1991); "Role of Renewable Energy in an Eco-Development Strategy for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development," Paper presented at MIDS and ICSSR workshop on Management of Renewable Resources, Hyderabad, June 1991. For and early description of the process of the evolving strategy of Datye and colleagues, in the context of local people's movement, see K.R. Dayte and Suhas Paranjpe,
4. A survey on "Energy and the Environment" in *The Economist*, August 31, 1991, give s the figures of 1- 2 barrels of oil per year for the developing countries, 10 - 30 barrels in Europe and Japan, and 40 barrels in the U.S. One barrel of oil = 2kg. coal.
5. See Datye, "Sustainable Development Alternatives in water Resources and Energy Sector, "Paper given at Symposium on Large Dams / Small Dams, New Delhi, December 2, 1991; "Large Reservoirs— Environmental Loss or Gain?" (unpublished paper, 1992); see also the paper by the Mukti Sangarsh Team, 'Village Ecosystems: Suggested Microplanning Approach and Examples" (1991).