

# Excerpt from an Introductory Essay to Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States

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(Contd. from the previous issue)

## 4. Caste and Class in Post-Colonial India

A close look at the notorious "atrocities against Harijans" that seem to be going on everywhere today will reveal the significant changes that have occurred in Indian agriculture since independence. The cases of Kilvenmani, Belchi, Bajitpur, Pipra may appear to be feudal in the violent, goonda nature of the onslaught, but the very ferocity of the attacks shows the growing rural tensions and the degree to which dalit labourers are beginning to challenge the village power-holders. In the case of Kanjhawala, Marathwada, and now Gujarat, a new phenomenon is evident : along with ryots and pogroms, are sustained organized campaigns, demonstrations, mass-oriented slogans designed to win over the caste Hindu toilers against the dalits. And everywhere a simple question reveals a crucial difference from the feudal, pre-independence period : who is attacking the dalits? Now it is no longer Brahmans, Rajputs, Deshmukhs, Vellalas or high-caste landlords, but most often the middle castes, the new rich farmers, those who were once middle peasants and tenants fighting against landlords and who now still call themselves *buhujan samaj*, *kisan* and *Sheikari*. Those who were once allies of dalits in the anti-feudal struggle now appear to be the main enemy.

These attacks themselves show the coming of capitalist relations in agriculture. They indicate that the main lines of conflict are no longer between middle and low-caste peasants on one side and high-caste landlords on the other, but are now between the rich farmers and the agricultural labourers-poor peasants. And they show that caste structure of rural India has changed in this new emerging class struggle, caste is one of the strongest weapons which the rich are using to divide and attack the rural poor.

The process of change in agricultural relations of production and in the relation between class and caste has taken place in a highly uneven fashion throughout India. Therefore we will first outline the broad character of this change, and then in the final section try to deal briefly with the regional variations which form the background for the various papers in this volume.

With independence, a new bourgeoisie came into power in the Indian state, and after the repression of the peasant revolt in Telangana and other waves of popular discontent, it began to implement land reforms designed to change the agrarian structure in the interests of the bourgeoisie. Throughout the 1950s, the major demand of the Kisan Sabha

movement, the demand for the abolition of zamindari, was implemented, though in a slow and halting way. Intermediaries were abolished in the former zamindari areas (though they were always left with enough land and compensation to survive as big farmers) and tenancy acts in the ryotwari areas served a similar purpose of removing a major basis of power of former non-cultivating Brahmins and other high-caste landlords though they hardly touched the lands of the “cultivating” castes (e.g. Maharashtra). These laws laid the basis for the former rich peasants and big tenants to emerge as the main landholding elite in the villages, and put pressure on big labourers to farm their lands “directly”, that is by hired agricultural labourers, rather than giving it out on tenancy. As a result tenancy declined significantly between 1951 and 1961, and while it has more or less stayed at the same level since 1961 (by 1971/17% of rural households were taking land on tenancy and 9.25% of land taken on lease) much of this is capitalist tenancy in which the land is taken by middle and rich farmers (See Table 1). (While some of this decline in tenancy may be an underestimation due to new motives for “concealed tenancy”, village studies do not show much more actual tenancy). Similarly the percentage of the rural work force who are agricultural labourers has risen from 16% in 1951 to 31 % in 1971; the change has been most dramatic between 1961 and 1971, and this does not include people who work part time as labourers and slightly more on their own land (Omvedt, 1980).

The process of actual proletarianization in agriculture — of poor peasants and artisans losing their land — has undoubtedly been a slow one. For it is taking place in a post-colonial country caught in the grips of imperialism in which industrialization has grown only very slowly and in a capital-intensive way that is incapable of absorbing labour-power displaced from the land. It is within this context also that we have to see the various land-ceiling acts (passed mainly in two waves, 1961 and 1971, and implemented very haltingly) and other measures claiming to meet the demands of the landless for land by providing forest land, cultivable waste and other land to the rural poor. Unlike the Zamindari Abolition measures, these are generally taken to be failures; certainly only a small proportion of the estimated surplus land has been distributed. Unlike the Zamindari Abolition Acts also, these are not classic bourgeois reforms in the interest of capitalist agricultural development, but rather go against the immediate interests of all big land-owners, capitalist and feudal alike. Nevertheless, it may be argued, that such measures have played a role in slowing down absolute proletarianization (and so also in pacifying the readiness to revolt of the poor), for the number of rural families who do not *own* land (according to NSS statistics) has dropped, from 22% in 1953 to 9.6% in 1971. Nevertheless proletarianization is going on in a somewhat different fashion, for the number of families who do not *cultivate* land has risen, by the same statistics, from 11% to 27%. These families include landless labourers, landless artisans, and those working in other rural wage-earning jobs (contract work, construction, truck-driving, etc.); many rent out the small plots of land they own or give them to relatives, but only about 1.2% own enough land to survive as non-cultivating landlords. In addition, there are an even larger number of agricultural labourers, small artisans and other rural workers who both cultivate their tiny plots and work for wages. Thus the type of proletarianization that is developing in rural India is one in which most rural wage earners own or cultivate small

plots of land, maintain milk buffaloes and cows or have other auxiliary sources of income – all of which serve to maintain them on the land in a period in which industrial jobs are not sufficiently available, and to cheapen their labour power.

Along with this process, the ending of the jajmani system in large sections of India, the ending of the previous forms of dalit bondage (the “village work” such as carrying away dead cattle and other services for the big farmers) in many areas, the greater mobility of large numbers of poor families in search of work (from village to village daily, seasonally in the case of many jobs including construction, migrant harvest work etc.), even the ending of debt-bondage of “contract labourers in many areas – all this has meant that gradually the relationship between the labourers and the rich farmers has become more and more commercialised, less and less feudal and patronage-oriented and more and more one of open capitalist exploitation.

Concurrently, the bourgeois state has taken a number of measures to promote technological development in agriculture and insure credit and other infrastructural facilities to the rich farmers. The promotion of irrigation (by 1978 this covered about 30% of the land area), agricultural extension programmes, the promotion of co-operatives, steps taken to insure credit facilities (most notably beginning from the bank nationalization in 1969) and the whole set of measures including new seeds and fertilizer facilities associated with the “green revolution” have all been part of this process. And these have all helped the new rich peasants to emerge as genuine capitalist farmers producing for the market and earning a significant profit from their land.

In the villages of the more “advanced” states in particular, the rich farmers have been aided in consolidating and modernizing their power by an associated set of government measures – setting up and supporting new gram panchayats, village cooperatives, new educational associations, dairy societies and a whole set of village associations which have generally been controlled by the rich farmers but have served as reservoirs of patronage and other powers by which to maintain their dominance over the lower castes, poor peasants and labourers.

Indeed, the democratic rights given in the bourgeois constitution as well as the welfare measures of the bourgeois state – education, reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and many “Backward Castes” measures like the Untouchability Offences Act and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, measures giving land to the poor, the right to vote itself – have had a very complex effect. On the one hand, they have served finally to disassociate “caste” from the near-absolute correlation it had previously with class – now small middle class sections developing in all the low castes had some opportunity to consolidate their position and move ahead. Now indeed even significant sections from among the dalits and labouring castes might make use of anti-untouchability acts, measures giving them land or cows or other facilities for tiny gains, this in turn gives a base for the view that the state is indeed a “neutral” body, standing above society, even standing above their local class oppressors and occasionally helping them. This in fact has been the base for the continued appeal of the Congress and Indira Gandhi to the rural poor. But at the same time the fact that very few members from low castes are

in a position to take advantage of their rights, the fact that many forms of untouchability remain universally throughout rural India (separate living quarters and separate water), the fact that caste remains the major unit within which marriage and social relations take place, the fact that members of the middle-caste landholding “peasant” castes are much better placed to take advantage of education, employment and government facilities — all of this meant that caste continues to have a high correlation with economic position. Most dalits and adivasis and most members of artisan castes, are as poor, and as low in the social-economic hierarchy as before, and the rural bureaucrats (members of panchayats, cooperative societies, government officials, the police etc continue to be drawn mainly from the rural elite.

These processes have had important effects on caste organizations. During the colonial period when “caste” began to emerge as a separate social phenomenon, the middle class and educated members of almost every *jati* had become involved in the formation of “caste association” — organizations which tried to unite the different sub-castes within the *jati*, to reform accepted behaviour along sanskritized lines, to promote education and generally fight for a higher place within the social hierarchy. These caste associations had always existed alongside the more radical anti-caste movements of non-Brahmans and other. Now in the post-colonial period such caste associations if anything intensified their activity. Social scientists now began to stress the emergence of castes as “competing groups” of caste-linked “vote banks” in the countryside, and they began to observe the ways in which the bourgeoisie kulak members of various castes were appealing (to caste identity to keep members of their “own caste” lined up behind them and split away from forming class solidarity with toilers of different castes. In the pre-independence period broad semi-caste organizations of the middle castes (e.g. the non-Brahman movements), and the dalit organizations both had a radical anti-feudal direction. Now among the middle castes the radical element has vanished, only the conservative caste associations and caste appeals remains, while only among the dalits do certain caste-based organizations (e.g., Dalit Panthers, Dalit Sangarsha Samitis, even Republican Party) continue to have a dual character and radical and liberationist thrust. The reason is that only the dalits and similar groups remain almost entirely proletarianized (their middle class section was primarily one of petty bourgeois employees, rather than property-holding exploiters of labour power), while among the middle castes economic differentiation are now qualitatively different : aside from the employed sections some have become capitalist farmers, many are middle peasants, while large numbers are poor peasants and labourers. The rich farmer sections no longer have any radical or anti-feudal interests at all.

In very general terms, ignoring regional variations for a moment, we can define the new shape of agrarian classes and their composition (see Omvedt, 1980 for empirical data). First about 15% of all rural families can be classed as rich farmer families, including capitalist farmers, capitalist landlords, a minority of feudal landlords existing in more backward areas, and families who also include merchants and rural employees. In caste terms this section includes both the traditional feudal classes (Brahmans, Rajputs, Vellalas, etc.) as well as the middle *kisan* castes. But it is the *kisan* castes who are now dominant among them (there

are only a few, minute proportion, a family from artisan caste or dalit background in this class) especially in the more capitalist, regions where Patidars, Marathas, Jats, Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Kammas, Reddis etc, seem almost equivalent to the new kulak farmers.

These rich farmers have an ambivalent, almost dual political character. On the one hand, the proportion of ex-tenants and peasants among them, the fact that they have a heritage of struggle against landlords and the upper castes; allows them to take on a surface appearance of being "peasants" (*kisans, shetkari, bahujan samaj*) and leaders, not simply oppressors, of the rural masses. Their role in the new capitalist institutions of dominance (gram panchayats, co-operative etc.) the fact that they are now largely educated, their ability to exercise a sophisticated, cooping form of rural power in which some patronage is dispensed and some members of low castes are given a place, is part of this. But on the other hand, their own background as village power holders and their readiness to take on even the most brutal feudal traits of the classes they once fought against means that they are also ready to exercise their power in the most corrupt, violent and gangster forms. Similarly, their relative caste homogeneity in many regions means they often are able to put on an appearance of being less "casteist", but this is the section that most strongly uses caste associations and caste appeals to rally people behind them, that relies on kinship and caste ties for "influence" in education, employment and other concessions, and gives the strongest support to all the religious and cultural institutions that uphold casteism. Their specific class interests lead them into a dual political battle, facing the urban industrial bourgeoisie on the one hand in claiming more credit and higher prices (though here their contradiction is non-antagonistic) and facing the rural semi-proletariat on the other. Generally they attempt to use a rhetoric of "peasant unity" to win over middle peasants and sometimes poor peasants to their side, but with this also they use caste ties and appeals to win over the poor peasants and agricultural labourers of their own caste in dividing and concentrating their attack on dalit labourers.

Middle peasants, about 25% of all rural families, are again primarily of kisan caste background but include a small but significant proportion of artisan castes and other allied castes and even some dalits. Though they are continually threatened with problems of unemployment, price-rise, and with the corruption and bossism of the rich farmers, their own aspirations as petty-property holders and their caste ties with the rich farmers at present mainly lead them to tail after this class.

Finally, the poor peasants and agricultural labourers, the proletarianized rural majority, perhaps (0% of rural households, are the *most divided in caste terms*. They include not only dalits and adivasis, but Muslims and other minorities, and members of all the former Hindu shudra castes; both artisans and the traditional kisan castes. In capitalist areas (such as western Maharashtra) one can find that not only are the "dominant" caste like Marathas fully differentiated in class terms, but in each village practically every *clan* of this caste may be equally differentiated, including both rich farmers, middle peasants and landless agricultural labourers. On an all-India basis, the 1974-75 Rural Labourers Enquiry showed that of 30% of households classed as - rural labourer families (meaning that over half their income came from agricultural or other wage labour), some 37% were Scheduled Castes,

10% Scheduled Tribes and the rest others – and that these were almost equally likely to be land or landless.

Thus a large “Semi-proletarian” section is emerging that cuts across caste lines – but these divisions run deep. Though it has the greatest objective *need* of all the rural classes to destroy casteism, its history and material conditions make this difficult. Both dalits and savarnas may be agricultural labourers, but there is a difference. Dalits who are wage labourers have most often risen out of a position of even worse feudal bondage and have done so through their fighting anti-feudal movements. Savarnas (whether former artisans or former peasants) in contrast have often experienced a *loss* of economic position that is upsetting in a different way; they infact still have some material benefits from living within the village and having social and kinship relations with middle peasants and rich farmers, and in the face of their poverty and the economic crisis this makes them vulnerable to the propaganda of casteism which tells them their problems come from the dalits who are going ahead and getting all the advantages. Thus there is a material base also for the hegemony of the rich farmers and their ability, to use “caste as a weapon”.

Among the rural poor toilers, the continued existence of caste divisions and the continued, if varying forms of the special oppression of dalit labourers means that a struggle against social cultural oppression and an anti-caste struggle is crucial part of their general battle for liberation. But this is no longer a simple anti-feudal struggle as before. For one thing the main enemies now are the rich farmers, including capitalist farmers, and the bourgeois state as such, for another, the dalits can no longer find their allies as the ex-shudra peasantry fighting against the “twice-born”. Now the question has become one of uniting the dalits – and *breaking* the false, cross-class “caste unity” of the middle castes in order to bring the middle-caste toilers into alliance with dalits; it is now a question of a dalit liberation movement along with the formation of a broader militant class unity among the rural poor under the slogan of “dalit-shramik unity”. So far, however, this has barely begun.

With the growth of capitalist relations particularly from the 1960s the rural poor agricultural labourers and poor peasants began to break loose from the domination of the rural elite (which had earlier been partly in alliance in the areas of more militant struggle) and to assert themselves independently in a variety of forms, under agricultural labourer organizations, in dalit organizations, sometimes under “caste- influenced class forms” (as in Thanjavur where the form was that of the CPI (M) led-Kisan Sabha but the content was provided by the caste Panchayats of the Paraiyans and Pallans), sometimes with hardly any leadership at all except local contacts. Politically this class had – and still has – no party of its own on a national basis : the RPI is limited to only its dalit sections in a few areas, the CPI (ML) though based mainly on this class has also been limited to pockets and in the more feudal and backward areas and has been facing heavy repression, and the CPI and CPI (M) though leading a number of struggles have been objectively more the parties of the middle peasants and rich farmers in the countryside. In this condition the independent assertion of the rural toilers has necessitated a new kind of political appeal by the broader national parties, an appeal based on ideological (both class and caste) factors going over the heads of the rural elites – and it has been the party of the industrial bourgeoisie, the

Congress-Congress(I), which has been most successful in making this appeal. After fostering the growth of the kulaks by their policies of limited land reform, credit etc., the urban bourgeoisie found it handy to check the upsurge of this class as well as to throw a few crumbs as to the rural poor in terms of a tiny bit of surplus land, minimum wages, rural house-sites etc. And in the over-all absence of any revolutionary party of its own the rural poor has mostly responded to this appeal.

The capitalist farmers, in turn, began to emerge as a state-level power-holding class 10-20 years after independence. By this time, the old politics of parallel and inter-linked tenant-landlord and non-Brahman-upper caste struggles were coming to an end in the more capitalistically developed areas. In these areas, in South and West India, the new kulaks came to power under a variety of political forms, including the Congress in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra and Gujarat, the DM in Tamil Nadu, even in a partial form with the Communists in Kerala. But their discontent with the Congress policies of concession to the rural poor and their conflicts with the urban bourgeoisie over prices and credit were growing, and in the northern states where feudal tendencies were stronger and where the Congress at a state level remained controlled by upper caste laments, these were enough to drive this class into opposition. So by 1967 most of this section in Bihar, UP, MP and later Gujarat went to the Congress (O), and Akali Dal, the BKD and BDL, and finally by 1977 and the end of Emergency into the Janata Party. The southern kulak class has also tended to go into opposition (Urs Congress) but the weakness of the political opposition has driven many of them back to the Congress (I). A more recent result has been the formation of "non-party" class organizations – the various Farmers' Associations – through which they have tried to assert their interests against the industrial bourgeoisie and re-establish their rural hegemony outside of the political parties, but also within them. At present, though many of the traditional bases of their power are crumbling, though in some areas they are still fighting their landholding "feudal" enemies and everywhere they are facing the new rising organizing efforts of rural toiler, this class is the power-holding class in the country side.

### **5. Regional Variations**

Generally it has been the development of commercialization, proletarianization and capitalist relations of agriculture that has determined the shape of the new caste-class confrontations in the rural areas. But these developments have taken place very haltingly and, above all, unevenly. The regional variations in India have roots both in the pre-British period (hill states, border and jungle regions and peripheral areas have all had their special characteristics) and in the uneven effect of colonial rule.

A regional classification of the state can at best be only a broad and tentative effort. First, data on tenancy is partly questionable due to efforts to conceal it by both landlords and intimidated tenants; and in addition tenancy by itself can be "capitalist" as well as "feudal", depending on how much investment is made by landlords, and even more, on whether tenants themselves farm it capitalistically using hired labour and selling crops in the market. Second, while the proportion of agricultural labourers in the work force is one of the best single indicators of the degree of capitalism in relations of production, by itself this data does not really show whether the labourers are immobile and essentially tied down to

one plot of land or to one big farmer, perhaps through debt bondage (in which case they are really more similar to unfree serfs), or whether they are mobile and “free” (if exploited and semi-starving) wage labourers. (Data however tend to show that concealed tenancy is not very important and that relatively few labourers are debt bonded.

Finally, there are important variations *within* the different states, for example between the Jharkhand region and others in Bihar; between East and West Uttar Pradesh; between the desert and plains regions of Gujarat between the coastal and inland regions of Orissa, Karnataka and Maharashtra; between the Telangana and coastal regions of Andhra. These differences are erased in the state-wise data, though there is a limited amount of regional data available to help assess their extent.

Because state wise variations are crucial an initial effort is made here to give a regional classification. (It should also be remembered that organization of the oppressed rural masses is taking place mainly on a state or regional basis, and the specific local peculiarities of these regions very often influence the broader, supposedly “all-India” view of different left organizations). This is not intended to be a final “definitive” classification but rather to supplement more intensive regional studies.

First there is the *semi-feudal eastern peripheral group*, including Assam, Manipur, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh (and here with hill regions – and now Nagaland, Mizoram – of Assam and Manipur show less tenancy; i.e. their essential tribal economy was less touched by British colonialism as compared with tribal regions internal to India). These show high tenancy (25–33% of households and 12–30% of land area) and most of this is “feudal” tenancy, i.e. the majority of land is taken on lease by poor households, and such tenanted land adds significantly to the holdings of poor households. These states also have only a low proportion of agricultural labourer households (though here also Assam and Orissa both show a growing and significant proportion evidence that capitalist processes are taking place here also). Among these there is about an equal proportion of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and “others”, and the landholding labourer households slightly outnumber the landless. In these states it may well be that generally the main contradiction remains between peasants as a group and landlords, since rich peasants have scarcely begun to consolidate their position as kulak farmers.

Second, a group of states, including Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jammu-Kashmir, might be classed as backward *semi-capitalist*. They have moderate rates of tenancy and again it is mainly more “feudal”, that is the poor households take more than their share of tenanted land. Agricultural labourer households are moderate (UP and MP) or low (Jammu-Kashmir and Rajasthan) in their proportion in the population. They include slightly more Schedule Castes and Tribes taken together) than caste Hindus or others, and the proportion of landed and landless households among such labourers is about equal. In these states, as in other states where the proportion of labourer households is relatively low, over half of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the population are not agricultural labourers – i.e. they may be poor peasants, tenants or into other occupations.

Third, West Bengal and Bihar should probably be put in category by themselves as *mixed semi-feudal, semi-capitalist* i.e. there is both a high degree of tenancy held both by poor



and better households) and at the same time a large percentage of labourer households and some evidence of the growth of rural capitalism. The labourer households include again both caste Hindus and others, and both landed and landless. It seems in these states two sets of contradictions (between landlords and tenants, and between agricultural labourers and kulak farmers) are intermingling, though they have very different forms because of the different political histories of the two states. In Bihar in particular, the largely conservative political domination has meant both an extremely corrupt and caste-oriented administration, as well as a frequent very open caste-form to politics. In Bengal in contrast a strong left history has meant that the class aspect of rural organizing – especially anti-landlordism – has been brought to the fore. (It might be added here that Naxalbari is in the Himalayan region of Bengal which has one of the highest degrees of tenancy in India as a whole).

Punjab and Haryana also have to be put in a separate category, as the *high tenancy-capitalist north-west*. Both states in fact have a very high degree of tenancy, about this is to a large extent capitalist tenancy in which the majority of tenanted land is held by middle peasant and rich farmer families. At the same time, both have a relatively low proportion of labourer households (especially in Haryana) but there is some evidence that this may be an underestimate since both the 1971 Census and the 1971 AIDIS survey show more landless labourer and agricultural labourers. And both states have a very unique structuring of labour relations, as can be seen in our tables. Though there is a high proportion of absolute landlessness, i.e. 40% and 57% of all rural households do not cultivate land, the agricultural labourer households are almost entirely Scheduled Caste and almost entirely landless – there are almost no landless caste Hindu agricultural labourers. It appears that landless caste Hindu (mainly Jats) either take enough land on tenancy so that they don't have to work as labourers (and for poor households tenanted land adds significantly to total holdings) – or else they lease their land to other and take other jobs, in rural auxiliary industries, as truck drivers, etc. The dalits in contrast seem less able to get land as tenants. Thus Punjab and Haryana seem to be the only two states, where the common cliché that landless – agricultural labourers – dalit holds true.

Finally, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh might be classed as the *low tenancy capitalist southern and western states*. Historically these were areas of mainly, but not entirely, ryotwari settlement, as well as the states where the middle-caste, peasant-based non-Brahman movements were the strongest. Within this group Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, with higher rates of tenancy, are transitional. But on the whole these have relatively low tenancy, and this is mostly capitalist tenancy; the poor households have less than their share of the tenanted land (usually less than half) and rich farmers have a significant proportion. Except for Tamil Nadu, the tenanted land held by the rural poor makes little difference to their overall landholdings. At the same time, there is a high proportion of agricultural labourer households. These labourer households include both landed and landless, but the landless labourer households are more in number and their is overall a high proportion of landlessness (.e. households not cultivating land) in these states (an exception is Kerala, but this is in part a bogus statistics since most of the

land held by labourer households is house-site land which is not used for cultivation; of Mencher, 1981). Those non-agricultural labourer rural households either do other rural labour, are artisans or migrate (perhaps to urban areas) in search of work. In these states, agricultural labourers include Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and caste Hindus, but the latter are more in number since the proportion of agricultural labourers has gotten so high that the middle castes have been very strongly affected by the processes of proletarianization. Even as it is, the number of Scheduled Caste agricultural labourers in these states is about equivalent to the percentage of Scheduled Castes in the population as a whole, showing that almost all of the dalits as well as a high proportion of middle castes have become proletarianized.

By and large, in these capitalist states as well as in the semi-capitalist regional of Punjab, Haryana and Western UP the main contradiction is between agricultural labourers – who are both, dalits, adivasis and caste Hindus – and the kulak farmers who are mainly caste Hindus from the middle or *kisan* castes. Strikingly it is in such states that the most sustained anti-dalit campaigns and mass ryots have taken place (Kanjhawala, Marathwada and Gujarat). Here in contrast to the more semi-feudal Bihar where sections of the new kulaks also make demands for reservations and protest the caste domination of the high-caste landlords, the capitalist farmers are openly giving a call to end caste-based reservations in education and jobs and have reservations only on the basis of economic backwardness – a call which is nothing but desire to turn the clock back to a time when their labourers had no educated leadership and they themselves, openly, dominated every aspect of village-level politics and, bureaucracy. It is also striking that it is these states – and definitely not the semi-feudal ones – which are giving birth to the new “farmers organizations” which are talking about “uniting all the peasantry” on the basis of demands for higher prices for crops and lower prices for inputs, a demand that itself, shows the degree of commercialization of agriculture that has taken place. Unfortunately, the biggest left parties (CPI and CPM) have tumbled quite enthusiastically into this trap (perhaps because their main rural cadres continue to be middle peasants and rich farmers) and are throwing their energies behind this kulak based “so-called peasants’ movement” rather than behind the organizing of the rural proletariat. In the process of doing so, they have neglected in practice the task of dealing with the rural caste obstacles to organizing.

It has long been said that capitalist development in Indian agriculture exists only in enclaves and that it is, ham-strung and surrounded by semi-feudal remnants and limitations. It is true that a good deal of semi-feudal relations and remnants continue to exist. But the “capitalist enclaves” are very big ones indeed, and they are growing. In many ways it is in these regions that the new themes of Indian rural politics – the rich farmers’ lobbies, the organized anti-dalit mass campaigns, the caste riots – appear at their strongest. Here the caste issue cannot be understood simply in “semi-feudal” terms, rather a much more computer analysis is required: Up to now the left (including the revolutionary left) has had its strongest basis in the more backward, feudal, forest and border regions in India, and these regions have provided the framework from which they have intended to interpret all of India. Such a base and experience should not be overlooked, but it is no

longer sufficient and it is necessary for the organizing of the rural poor to take up the challenge that is also thrown down in the more developed regions, where the conflict between agricultural labourers and rich farmers, with all of its caste complications, is reaching new heights.

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