

KEYNOTE LECTURE DELIVERED DURING THE FIRST P SUNDARAYYA MEMORIAL LECTURE HELD ON MAY 23

P SUNDARAYYA ON THE AGRARIAN QUESTION

I consider it a privilege to be asked to deliver the first P. Sundarayya Memorial Lecture in Delhi organized by the P. Sundarayya Memorial Trust.

P. Sundarayya made the biggest contribution to the CPI(M)'s understanding of the agrarian question in India. The two most important documents of the CPI(M) in its early years, the agrarian section of the Programme of the Party adopted in 1964 and the *Tasks on the Kisan Front* of 1967, which is a classic report of that period, bear his imprint. The latter was co-drafted with M. Basavapunniah.

Sundarayya believed that a concrete study of agrarian relations at the village level was necessary to arrive at a correct understanding of the nature of agrarian situation. This has to be done from a Marxist analysis. In 1974, PS organized two landmark surveys of two villages –Ananthavaram and Kaza in south coastal Andhra. It is from these surveys that PS analysed the nature of land ownership, concentration of land among landlords and the differentiation of the peasantry on the lines of rich peasants, middle peasants and poor peasants. He also drew conclusions about the agricultural workers and the extent of their exploitation.

This study was published as a short book *The Land Question* by the All India Kisan Sabha in 1976.

Sundarayya made a significant contribu-



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tion to the study of classes in the countryside. The results of his village studies testify to this. However, the lessons to be drawn cannot be a mechanical reproduction of his empirical conclusions, but a consideration of Sundarayya's viewpoint and method – that is, using Marxism to study the actual level of the growth of the productive forces and the relations of production involved in agricultural (and non-agricultural) production and rural economic activity.

The basic contours of Sundarayya's analysis in this regard are readily available in *The Land Question*, in his writings on the Andhra Pradesh surveys, in *Tasks on the*

Kisan Front.

The three main socio-economic class strata in a village were the landlords, agricultural workers and a differentiated peasantry.

Landlords have the following main characteristics. They own the most and the best land in the village. Landlords do not work at the major manual operations on the land, and cultivate it by means of tenants or hired workers. Landlords generally belong to families that have historically participated in the land monopoly in the village. Landlords as a class dominate social, economic and political hierar-

chies in the village. Landlords also dominate opportunities for other forms of income-bearing activity in a village.

Agricultural workers spend most of their working time on and earn most of their incomes from work as hired labour. They are, generally speaking, free from ownership of the means of production, though they may own or operate small plots of land.

The peasantry is not a single, homogeneous class, but stratified into rich, middle and poor sections. All peasant households have members who actually participate in manual work. The criteria for stratification of peasant households are threefold: the extent of ownership of the means of production, the exploitation of labour (i.e., the relationship between family labour and hired labour on the peasant farm), and the surplus that accrues to a household.

There are also classes in a village not directly engaged in crop production, and these are to be analysed and classified separately.

There are two preliminary caveats to the scheme. The first is that such a framework is location-specific: the precise criteria have to be modified according to the agro-ecological and socio-economic conditions in a village or region. Secondly, the criteria have to be understood in a historical context. Landlords cover a historical range and a wide combination of precapitalist and capitalist characteristics. The category of rich peasantry could also cover, theoretically, a wide range of socio-economic characteristics: from a rack-rented old-style rich peasant whose contradiction with landlordism is deep and antagonistic, to a rich peasant who is himself a nascent rich capitalist farmer or landlord. Similarly, the category of agricultural labourer could cover a wide spectrum, from bonded labour to proletarian, with many possible shades of grey (or combinations of the features of both) in between. Once again, PS had no patience with schemes for the classification of the peasantry that were inflexible with regard to historical and geographical position.

The physical extent of land owned and operated by a peasant household is, of course, not a sufficient (and, if taken in isolation, can be a misleading) indicator of socio-economic class. Nevertheless, within different agrarian regimes, PS generally suggested that students of agrarian relations work out broad indicators of the actual extent of the land owned and operated by different classes, particularly landlords and rich peasants.

CHANGES IN AGRARIAN RELATIONS

We have to now consider the changes since Sundarappa's time with regard to the class formation and differentiation of classes.

From what basic phenomenon do the changes in class formation in the countryside arise? From the fact of the comprehensive development of capitalism in the countryside. While important elements of the archaic, and of pre-capitalist institutions remain, feudal relations of production and the web of economic interdependencies in the village based on feudal production relations, have all but disappeared.

1. Changes in landlordism: The major features are fusion of the class of rich capitalist farmers with the class of capitalist landlords. The strength of this class and its economic dominance is based on land, but extends to (i) sources of surplus beyond agricultural production (and including procurement, trade, marketing, non-agricultural production, real estate, etc.); and (ii) beyond the bounds of a village, from rural areas to local towns, and further. The economics and politics of this class, its role in preserving the present class order and in perpetuating the comprehensive backwardness of the countryside, needs deep study and understanding.

A key – and, in the past, much discussed – formulation in the Tasks document is the following:

“The surplus value the new-type landlord and the well-to-do peasant is garnering

today is determined mainly by virtue of their title to the land, rather than as returns on the invested capital in farming as such.” (Tasks on the Kisan Front, para 9).

Any evaluation of this formulation in contemporary times must recognise three salient features of the present situation. First, returns on invested capital play a much greater part in the surplus value gained by the dominant classes in the countryside today than in the past. With the advance of capitalist relations in the countryside, such an enhanced role is inevitable.

Secondly, although the path played by re-investment in total surplus value is greater, it is crucial to understand that there is still much life in the formulation in the Tasks document. Simple measures of concentration of land ownership show concentration in many parts of India to have remained very high indeed – more than four decades after the Tasks document was written and since the 1974 surveys were conducted. The Tasks document, quoting the Programme, says that the top 5 per cent households in rural areas owned some 37 per cent of the land. Village surveys conducted by the Foundation of Agrarian Studies show more intense concentration of ownership in many of the villages studied. In this context, a further important feature of the rural situation is that even where the personnel of the ruling class in a village has changed (that is, new households and families have come to dominate the village, and some or many of the older ruling families have fallen away), land concentration as a phenomenon remains intact.

Thirdly, land is not, of course, the only resource controlled by landlords and big capitalist farmers, nor is it their only source of wealth. Many are also involved in lucrative business activities, including, for example, moneylending, grain mills, dairying, trade and speculation in foodgrain and other agricultural, horticultural and silvicultural commodities, cinema theatres, real estate, petrol pumps, lodging houses, transport, the sale and lease of agricultural machinery, receiving incomes from financial assets, and so on.

Landlord and big capitalist farmer families seek entry into the institutions of state power – panchayati raj institutions (elected institutions of village-block- and district-level government) and the higher legislature, the bureaucracy and police, and the legal profession – and are generally the first to take advantage of opportunities for higher education and modern organised-sector employment. Nevertheless, even where the main source of income of landlords and big capitalist farmers is not agriculture, and even where they are in debt or running a balance-sheet loss, the basis of their power in rural areas is their control over land.

When the CPI(M) Programme was updated in 2000, it is this new reality which was recognized and described as follows:

“Most of the rural areas have seen the rise of a powerful nexus of landlords-rich peasants-contractors-big traders who constitute the rural rich. They dominate the panchayati raj institutions, co-operative societies, rural banks and credit agencies except in the Left-dominated states, and control the rural leadership of the bourgeois-landlord parties. The surplus extracted by these sections are ploughed into money-lending, speculative activities, real estate development and also to establish agro-based industries. The dominant class in the rural areas utilise caste affiliations to mobilise support and resort to violence to terrorise the rural poor into submission.”

2. Agricultural workers: Difficult today to separate the class of purely agricultural workers from the larger group of rural agricultural and nonagricultural workers (and, indeed, from the vast and mobile force of migrant rural workers who travel to work in rural, semiurban, and urban locations, while maintaining organic links with agriculture in their villages of origin). Note: almost all proletarians in the village spend some time on agricultural tasks. Nevertheless, almost all have to work at other tasks for their subsistence.

3. Peasantry: The end of a peasantry in its classical form. Consider Marx’s description in the *XVIII Brumaire*, in which he wrote of the small-holding French peas-

antry that their field of production, the small holding, permits no division of labour in its cultivation, no application of science, and therefore no multifariousness of development, no diversity of talent, no wealth of social relationships. Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient, directly produces most of its consumer needs, and thus acquires its means of life more through an exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. (Marx 1852; emphasis added)

Such a peasantry has long ceased to exist. The peasantry has been engulfed by capitalism, and, in many parts of India, the “peasantry” is a misnomer [for example, in many parts of India, family labour does not predominate in any farm – among rich, middle or poor cultivators.].

In general, the character of rich peasants has changed. The prevalence of a rack-rented rich peasantry, deeply in debt to the landlords, and thus a potential ally of the movement led by the poor peasantry and agricultural workers, has receded. In other words, the contradiction between the rich peasants and landlords and big capitalist farmers is blunter than it was in the 1970s.

Perhaps the most rapid and important transformation among the peasantry has been proletarianization in the countryside, which has been on a scale qualitatively different from PS’s time.

Two aspects of this proletarianization – the expansion of the reach of the labour market – have an important bearing on practice. First, every section of cultivating farmers has to hire labour, including poor farmers, particularly those growing irrigated crops. Secondly, participation in the market for hired labour extends to all sections of farmers, including the poor and middle sections, who seek wage work in the village and elsewhere when there is no work on their farms. [Completely at variance with PS’s definition which envisaged that the mark of a middle peasant was that he did no labour out, and of a poor peasant, that he did not hire in labour.]

The present situation with respect to pro-

letarianization can be summed up thus.

In a discussion of the “significance of these masses of proletarian ‘farmers’ in the general system of agriculture,” Lenin notes that, in the first place, they represent historical continuity (or “kinship”) between pre-capitalist and capitalist systems of social economy. In the second place,

the bulk of the “farmers” owning such insignificant plots of land that it is impossible to make a living from them, and which represent merely an “auxiliary occupation,” form part of the reserve army of unemployed in the capitalist system as a whole. It is, to use Marx’s term, the hidden form of this army. It would be wrong to imagine that this reserve army of unemployed consists only of workers who are out of work. It includes also “peasants” or “petty farmers” who are unable to exist on what they get from their minute farm, who have to try to obtain their means of subsistence mainly by hiring out their labour.

In India, although there are continuities between the era of globalization and liberalization and preceding periods, it is clear that, since 1991, State intervention and the part played by imperialism in the countryside – that is, the class policies of the State in rural India – have taken qualitatively new forms. The rural poor, particularly manual workers and poor and middle peasants, continue to be, however, the great reserve army of labour of capitalism in India. If the agrarian question in India is to be resolved in a progressive and democratic way, these sections of the rural working people must also be the vanguard of social change in the countryside.

And yet the crisis of the countryside is relentless – we need to form alliances, lead struggles to alleviate the suffering that this multi-aspect crisis causes. This is a crisis,

- of low incomes for all but about 10 per cent of the rural population,
- of stagnation in the development of productive forces
- of inadequate schooling, health and housing
- of caste and gender discrimina-

tion, and sectional deprivation of different oppressed social groups

- of a failure to develop scientific temper and the absence of the development of the means of progressive cultural development

There is no doubt that as long as the present situation – in which capitalist landlords and big capitalist farmers dominate the countryside – persists, these problems will not be solved, the agrarian question will continue to be unresolved, and rural misery will persist.

CORPORATE INTERVENTION IN AGRICULTURE

Interesting recent research (also reported at the AIKS All India Conference) shows that corporate intervention in India in agriculture is mainly with respect to the production and distribution of agricultural inputs – fertilizer, seed, plant protection, machinery – and in agricultural marketing, retaining agricultural products and different kinds of value-addition activity, including the establishment of agro-based industry. For many sociological and other reasons, corporations have not taken over land on a large scale – their intervention is mainly in respect of inputs and post-harvest economic activity.

The fact that land is no longer the sole, or even dominant, source of income and economic activity for the class of landlords and big capitalist farmers has important implications for our movements, particularly for the struggle for the seizure and distribution of landlords' land. The study group report suggests that we need fresh thinking on how to fight a class enemy of this type. In a situation where the hegemony and dominance of landlords and big capitalist farmers derives from their overall control of a wide range of economic activities and institutions in villages and their surroundings (and not solely or mainly from village-based exploitation), we cannot fight this class on the issue of land alone. While recognising the centrality of the land question, and the importance of the demand for comprehensive land reform, we also recognise that even the demand to identify, occupy,

and redistribute ceiling-surplus land has become a demand that is not immediately realisable -- for a variety of subjective and objective reasons -- in many areas at the present moment.

CASTE, TRIBE, GENDER

The issues of caste, tribe, gender and other forms of social exclusion and discrimination based on hierarchies of status are intrinsic to the agrarian question in India.

Exclusion and discrimination by social group can take different forms. Such discrimination may take the form of direct violence, killing and physical harm. Exclusion and discrimination can take the form of direct discrimination, when there is a direct attack on the freedom of victims of social discrimination in day-to-day life.

As pervasive as direct discrimination is deprivation based on generations of exclusion and neglect, leading, for example, to systematically lower levels of education, health, housing, work, and social status of members of oppressed groups.

The mass organisations and party must be champions of struggles against social discrimination and must be identified by the people as being the organisation to which the people turn whenever and wherever there is an act or episode of social discrimination. At the same time, we must also be in the forefront of the struggle to combat other forms of social deprivation -- legacies, for instance, of underprivileged educational, health and housing facilities, and of the consignment of people of victimised social groups to specific (and often pre-ordained) places in the work force and the division of labour.

The struggle against group discrimination and deprivation has to be pro-active and uncompromising. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the need to build unity among the working people, a task made infinitely more complex by the fact that members of intermediate and other castes who are also among the working people are often social oppressors. In a country riven by medieval forms of social differentiation, only the Communist

Party can provide a clear alternative to the disruption of people's unity brought about by identity politics, while simultaneously fighting against social discrimination.

POINTERS TO NEW FORM OF STRUGGLES

Although the land and class questions remain relevant, it is also clear that we shall have to seek new forms and forge new instruments of struggle to resolve them. It is difficult to mobilise and sustain long-term struggle to seize and occupy land. It is also not easy to conduct prolonged wage struggles for higher agricultural wages against landlords and big capitalist farmers. Wage struggle for rural non-agricultural tasks – construction, brick making, etc. – appear more achievable.

How can the class struggle in the countryside be developed in these changed conditions? This requires a class alliance of the poor peasants, rural workers (both agricultural and non-agricultural) along with middle peasants to fight the rural rich nexus. I am not competent to suggest the new slogans and forms to develop the struggles against the big-bourgeois led State and their representatives, the rural rich. This must be a collective effort by the leaders of the Kisan and agricultural workers fronts based on their direct field experience.

But I will stick my neck out and propose a new fighting organization which encompasses all rural workers. There is a need for forming a rural workers' union or federation. Such a union will draw on workers of all types and occupations in the countryside, taking up a range of issues – including those of livelihoods and living standards, including wages and employment, and of caste, gender, and other forms of social exclusion and oppression. These struggles will bring them in confrontation with the state as well as its major representative in rural areas, the landlords and big capitalist farmers and other sections of the rural rich.

WORKER-PEASANT ALLIANCE

PS in all his writings on the agrarian ques-

tion stressed the need to build the Worker-Peasant alliance. The alliance between the working class and the peasantry was the foundation on which the Peoples Democratic Front was to be built, and such an alliance envisaged direct support by the working class to the struggle for the class demands of the peasantry and rural workers.

The slogan of worker-peasant unity was observed more in a symbolic manner in the earlier decades and there were only sporadic instances of joint worker-peasant struggles. This has changed in the last few years. The proliferation of capitalism in the countryside and the neo-liberal policies which affect both farmers and workers opened up new possibilities for worker-peasant united action.

This saw the direct support and participation of the trade unions in the historic kisan struggle against the farm laws. There is growing coordination between the kisan, agricultural workers organisation and trade union front on common demands.

The attack of the Modi government in the form of privatisation has seen convergence of interests of the organised movements of workers and farmers, such as the joint opposition to the Electricity amendment bill which seeks to privatize distribution of electricity. Such joint struggles need to be taken forward.

COMPLETING THE TASKS OF THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

The CPI(M) Programme adopted in 1964 and the tasks on the Kisan Front of 1967 saw the completion of the democratic revolution mainly in terms of complete liquidation of the feudal and semi-feudal relations in the countryside even though in some respects it is directed against capitalist forms of exploitation. The emphasis was on breaking the fetters on the productive forces. The focus has to shift now.

The present State in India cannot end landlordism and the group of the rural rich or solve the problem of social and

economic inequalities in rural India. Without the end of landlordism and the distribution of land we cannot expect the establishment of women's equality in India's villages. The continuation of this form of State power means the continued existence of the caste system and caste oppression. It means the continued existence of a level of wages in the countryside that has nothing to do with productivity and bears no relation either to need or to the level of wages in urban (organised-sector) occupations, of child labour, of usury and debt bondage, and of different forms of extra-economic coercion. All of these are accompanied by what can be called the absence of a general democratisation of rural life, and of the absence of scientific thinking on a general scale.

The completion of the democratic revolution of which the crux is the agrarian revolution should lead, in the wider sense, to the democratic transformation of agrarian relations and rural society.

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Sundarayya's legacy of analysing agrarian relations through concrete study, his pioneering work in organising agricultural workers and leading the historic Telangana peasants' armed struggle and his formulation of the agrarian strategy for the revolutionary movement are all to be cherished and carried forward. Let us learn from his method and practice.

I am indebted to Dr. V.K. Ramachandran for providing me with much of the material on which this lecture is based.




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Memorial Trust

Named after P Sundarayya, the legendary freedom fighter, Communist and peasant leader, the Trust is committed to carry forward the revolutionary legacy of P Sundarayya. The core objective of the trust is to advance scientific research into the agrarian question in Indian context.

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