

‘Small Is Not Beautiful’

Almost all political parties, left and right alike, seem to have run out of ideas to rescue the peasants from a hopeless situation. Neither the Congress—or the Communist Left and Progressive academics that often set the tone for ‘alternative’ economic policies—have been able to come up with solutions to save the perennially neglected farm sector where impoverished millions toil for sheer survival. Prospects of economic recovery for rural economy are extremely dim in India, notwithstanding periodic noises made by the cheerleaders of global culture, about the swan song of magical growth rate. Ever since the advent of multinational onslaught in Indian economy in the nineties, the ruling cliques and the Opposition, have been deliberately discouraging ‘uneconomic’ agricultural activity while virtually giving marching orders to millions of small and marginal farmers to make enough space for the captains of the corporate world. As for the right, the less said the better because what all they want, somewhat shamelessly, is massive mechanisation of Indian agriculture, contract farming and unrestricted entry of American agri-business. Though political parties of all hues routinely talk of balanced approach to industry and agriculture, stepmotherly attitude towards agriculture, rather traditional farming which is after all, is sustainable, is all too clear. Farmer’s suicide is such a regular phenomenon that nobody now bothers about it. Nor does the government think it is worthwhile to keep a suicide roster.

Small peasant economy is no longer sustainable, they say, because of massive in-road made by big business, both domestic and foreign, in rural economy. Then the rich peasant economy that thrived on green revolution strategy seems to have reached the dead end. A conspiratorial policy, maybe, framed elsewhere to make sustainable farming unsustainable has long been in operation to force small and marginal farmers to abandon their tiny plots to pave the way for large-scale extensive cultivation. Contract farming is a calculated step for concentration of land-holdings and changing the crop pattern as well to suit the market. Already vigorous efforts to develop bio-fuels with grain and increase areas for such purpose, have resulted in a shrinkage of cultivable land, previously used for food grains production and making a sizeable segment of peasants landless in real terms.

For the left the peasant question is no longer an area of immediate agitation. Nor they have any long-term perspective to address the peasant problem in its entirety. The issue of ‘land to the tiller’ does not exist anymore. It’s the issue of how to deprive the tiller of his right to land. Partial land reforms measures that the Congress party initiated in the fifties and sixties, as per the recommendations of Kumarappa Committee, remained unimplemented in most states. The ruling elites do not know whether to follow the Japanese model or something else to resolve the unresolved land dispute. The left, however, once billed land reforms as the panacea, having the potential to resolve the mounting unemployment problem. No more. They too are in a dilemma as to how to address the peasant question in the changed context. They are no longer interested in identifying ceiling surplus lands and distribute them to the tillers.

Migration of labour to different states in non-agricultural sectors, has again created a paradoxical situation of shortage of farmhands in some eastern states where agricultural practice is intensive. For all practical purposes Indian rural economy is at a cross-roads—the half-hearted strategy of sandwiching between small peasant economy and rich peasant economy cannot deliver. It is likely to create more problems instead of resolving them.

For the official left the dilemma is eternal. They are not in favour of small and marginal peasants toiling for sustenance. But they are not yet ready to embrace large-scale mechanisation and big investments in agriculture. As a result their peasant agenda does hardly get reflected in their electoral campaigns. Some vague notion about development is all that gets currency and there ends the matter.

Also, the Maoists with their declared objectives of capturing power through anti-feudal struggles and armed campaign against the ruling authorities look equally indecisive in raising popular slogans that could mobilise peasant masses in their millions. Their ‘New Democracy’ is basically aimed at establishing rich peasant economy

and they never analyse why their political appeal to broad peasant masses, not to speak of urban people is so limited in depth and breadth. They are no less vague about food security and concrete measures to be taken at this juncture to combat it. Not that land alone could be a rallying point for peasant masses. There are many reasons for the continuing spike in food prices, in recent years but gradual shrinkage of farmland coupled with the massive destruction of small peasant economy with not even remote possibility of returning to the original state of affairs, is one major reason. It's also directly related to alienation of peasants from land and inter-state labour migration. The Maoists are yet to grasp with the changing reality and their total dependence on guns, not raw statistics, cannot pay dividends all the time. □