

A Deadman Talking

India is now synonymous with farmers' graveyard. Recently a peasant of Vidarbha region in his suicide note urged people not to vote for the ruling Congress-Nationalist Congress Party combine as they virtually forced him to commit suicide to escape debt. One more death due to Bt-cotton induced debt trap! Suicides by peasants are being regularly reported in the media, albeit the persons in authority have taken it granted as if they have nothing to do other than voicing concerns. Though cotton growers are the major victims of indebtedness, peasants of non-cotton states are equally vulnerable to the same menace—usury. Between 1995 and 2010 more than 2,50,000 farmers are said to have committed suicide—a record in itself. Peasants are under attack from all sides as globalisation has brought innumerable players of different hues to destroy whatever remains of peasant power in India's fragile rural economy.

Multinationals doing agri-business globally are coming in a big way with their high-end technology and its abuses as well to ruin India's traditional agriculture and people dependent on agriculture while domestic big business houses are just accelerating the process of pauperisation of the peasantry by collaborating with foreigners having dubious distinction of killers as Monsanto does by way of aggressively marketing genetically modified seeds.

The point at issue is how to define the peasant question in the changed context of land utilisation and its judicious management as the age-old leftist concept of peasantry is crumbling. In truth most of the grass-roots level people's movements that are now going on across the country are essentially stemming from the unresolved peasant question. Be it anti-nuclear movement in Kudankulam or anti-chemical hub movement in Nandigram—it is in essence a broad-based peasant movement dominated by middle-peasant households. And tragically enough, the left, barring in one place or two, is not in the leadership role. And it is the peasant question that the communist left has been dodging for long only to find themselves in a bind while peasants are committing suicides in thousands every year. In the north-east what is generally dubbed as ethnic unrest is in reality a peasant issue. Also religious fundamentalism that challenges the state with a reactionary world view basically depends on peasants for its nourishment. In other words if peasants refuse to toe the fundamentalist line it won't survive as a political project for long.

Peasants are fighting in their own way with specific characteristics of the locality they live in for sheer survival. Self-immolation is a form of protest in many Buddhist countries and in India suicide by farmers is a form of protest against market tyranny and government apathy.

Communists once mobilised peasants in their thousands with the slogan—'land to the tiller', with the avowed objective of changing ownership of land-relations in favour of small peasant economy and curbing the unchallenging authority of the rural lords. It is not yet clear whether they have abandoned the slogan completely advocating a rich peasant economy in its place. The man of Vidarbha whose suicide note was a bit political, thought that a regime change

would be enough to halt the silent death procession of his tribe. No, that is unthinkable for political establishments of all hues.

When it is the question of economy both ruling and opposition parties, including left parties, echo the same line of argument with some variations in degree. Given the euphoria over 'reforms' prevailing in the country, a regime change through vote could hardly make things better for the indebted peasants who have forgotten to aim high though things were not that desperate despite stagflation in the '70s and '80s.

Just a few months ago fight for regime change swept the Arab world and created mass upheavals as never seen before in a number of Middle East countries with iron-heel authoritarian rule. But euphoria didn't last long as in most cases those who replaced the old guards were no less ruthless and brute to maintain the status quo and turned revolutions into counter-revolutions in no time after so much sacrifice. Then the 1% vs 99% movement is so directionless that even a regime change by the opponents of the existing dispensation is unlikely. So the farmers in Vidarbha and in Punjab and elsewhere in the country, who are suffering may not vote for Congress and its allies because this is the only available weapon at the moment at their disposal to express anger but vote cannot stop gradual erosion of land rights and traditional agricultural pattern.

Now solution comes in packages and only parts are considered in isolation. And there ends the matter. Only the far left—or the broader naxalite spectrum—continues to cling to the old idea of 'land to the tiller' but they too seem to have lost the course in the middle. The authorities are not worried about the farmer's suicide. Nor will any political party come forward to offer innovative plans and opportunities related to the core issue of peasants. And the deadmen will continue to talk day after day, week after week, month after month. □□□