Peasantry and national integration

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I. Agricultural class structure in the colonial period

Colonialism brought about momentous social and economic transformation during which centuries old social and economic relationships and institutions were dissolved and replaced by new relationships and institutions. In the realm of agriculture too, new agrarian relations and class structures made their appearance. New classes, absentee landlords and money lenders at the top and tenants-at-will, share croppers, and agricultural laborers at the bottom, came into being. A new agrarian structure was born that was neither traditional, nor feudal, nor capitalist. There occurred a growth of tenancy and a hierarchy of intermediaries between the state and the actual cultivator on a scale unprecedented in Indian history. By 1931, one-third of the rural population was landless and most of the remaining two-thirds were tenants-at-will, share-croppers and petty peasant-proprietors. Not that exploitative elements were introduced afresh. Economic inequality, political and economic oppression by zamindars, maliks, etc., status differences, and caste domination had prevailed in ample measure earlier. But the pattern of such domination and exploitation was now transformed. Moreover, old institutions and relationships were not consciously overthrown, rather attempts were made to superimpose on them. Consequently, they disintegrated and along with them disappeared some of the social protection of the lower castes and classes provided by mutual help and enforcement of custom, though within the limits of the old structure.

New relationships were evolved by the interaction of the old with the new; but what occurred was change without social revolution. Consequently, the new social basis of agriculture was not more conducive either to economic development or to economic welfare. The point
here is not whether the new structure was better or worse, nor that the old society disintegrated, but that what came in its place was as, if not more, regressive and as much of a strait-jacket on the development of agriculture. The new structure or relationships of forms of surplus extraction and utilization (a) did not provide incentives or opportunities to any class or stratum engaged in agriculture in any position to make modern improvements and (b) led to the siphoning off of resources from agriculture and the agriculturist.

Broadly speaking these changes came as a result of the introduction of new land systems, the heavy land revenue demand, legal and political changes, the destruction of indigenous industries, the disintegration of the age - old union between agriculture and industry, the integration with the world capitalist economy in a subordinate position, and above all the fact that the Indian economy and agriculture underwent a commercial revolution which was unaccompanied by an industrial revolution. More specifically, Indian agriculture was commercialized without any change occurring in its technical base or productive organization.

One major consequence of the colonialization of Indian economy and agriculture was stagnation in agricultural output, decline in productivity, fall in the per capita availability of food and, in general, the increasing impoverishment of the cultivator. However, here we are not interested mainly in the poverty and misery of the peasant but in changes in the agrarian class structure in the recent colonial and then the post-colonial period.

We have discussed these changes in very broad outline, often ignoring regional differences. It is rather awkward to generalize about the entire country when wide differences in pattern came into being because of the varied and prolonged colonial historical process. However, we have done so because the general elements of colonial agriculture and class structure came to be similar all over the country. At the same time, statistical data and other evidence from particular parts of the country have often been given because of the paucity of much necessary data and evidence for all parts, or at least the difficulty of access to this for reference purposes.

A) At the top of the agrarian class structure came the zamindars and landlords who owned and controlled most of the land. By the 1920's, landlordism had become the main feature in both the zamindari and ryotwari tenure areas. Moreover, through sub-infeudations, the number of intermediaries had increased. Large numbers of zamindars and landlords were new both in functions and personnel. High land revenue de-
mand, its rigidity, and the new legal and administrative system led to the expropriation of the older upper classes as well as the peasant proprietors. Merchants, moneylenders, speculators, officials, professionals, and other urban groups bought up zamindaris, or the peasant-owned lands, in order to become landlords. Most of the new zamindars and landlords were absentee and had little link with land. They, along with the older zamindars, were not interested even in organizing the machinery for rent collection, and therefore, readily took to subinfeudation, thus increasing the number of rent receivers and hence the rent-demand. The middlemen invariably had recourse to every conceivable legal or illegal mechanism to collect more from the actual tiller of the soil. In ryotwari areas too, land was gradually passing under the control of landlords and moneylenders. It is to be noted that the alienation of land by an owner-cultivator did not mean transfer of cultivation but interposition of a middleman between the previous owner, the new tenant and the state. By 1947, nearly 70 per cent of the total cultivated land was owned by zamindars and landlords. In ryotwari areas about 50 per cent of the land was in landlords' hands and the rest was heavily under debt.

The zamindars and landlords were not only recruited from moneylenders but many of them increasingly took to moneylending. The Uttar Pradesh Banking Enquiry Committee reported in 1931 that landlords were the largest source of rural loans in Uttar Pradesh, contributing nearly 40 per cent of all loans.

The stagnant colonial economy with its lack of economic opportunities in a period of increase in the number of proprietor-landlords produced sharp differentiation within the class of zamindars and landlords. Thus, in Uttar Pradesh in the 1930's 0.4/o or 804 zamindars owned 25°/o of the land while 1.5°/o held 58°/o of the land. In the Agra part of the province, 85.5°/o of the proprietors paid less than Rs. 25 per year as revenue, while another 13.2°/o paid between Rs. 25 and Rs. 250 per year. In Bengal, in 1893, 85.4°/o of the estates controlled 9.8°/o of the area, with an average per estate of 49 acres of land, net rental of Rs. 29, number of 4 shares, and net rental income of Rs. 7 per share. The next 13.8°/o of the estates controlling 39.3°/o of the area had an average per estate of 1228 acres of land, net rental of Rs. 1711, number of 6 shares, and net rental income of Rs. 235 per share. This extreme differentiation among the landlords was to have a very significant impact on the Indian national movement. The majority of rent receivers were, in their incomes and even life styles, not distinguishable from the rich or even middle peasants. They were impoverished and
were getting further impoverished. They were becoming quite hostile to colonialist areas, men born to education and status and used to political and administrative leadership, they could and did begin to play an active role in the anti-imperialist struggle and to provide the latter with elements of mass support, especially in elections under a restricted franchise after 1919. They played an important role in the 'massization' of the national movement. Yet, with all their impoverishment, they were rent receivers. This could not but leave an impresson on the social program of the National Congress and its pattern of national integration.

Similarly, they also began to play a certain role in the emerging peasant movement, especially in the 1920's. Apart from direct impact, the pull they exercised on the rich and middle peasants and through them on the peasant movement and its programs was significant.

The commercial bourgeoisie in India, first destroyed but later developed as the linkage of Indian economy with the world economy, gave a lift to internal trade. Growth of export of agricultural raw materials and foodstuffs and growth of internal trade in agricultural products as the result of the growing unification of Indian economy and the pressure on the peasant to compulsorily sell his products in order to meet his payments to the state, landlord, and moneylender provided ample opportunity for the commercial bourgeoisie to grow. The village market structure and the compulsive need of the peasant to sell immediately after the harvest and later to buy for consumption made the merchant a major appropriator of agricultural surplus. Commercialization of agriculture, which often led to crops being grown with merchant's advances and marketed through this monopolistic channel, further strengthened his position, as did the fact that he often combined the usurer's function with that of the trader's. He also increasingly began to control the land as an absentee landlord.

Colonialization of the economy, administrative and legal structure, the land revenue system, and increasing commercialization of rural life created a favorable economic and political climate for the village moneylender who began to occupy a dominating position in the rural economy and to expropriate both the peasant proprietors, the occupancy tenants and the zamindars. This led to major tensions in the countryside and produced two interesting consequences. In many parts of the country, the cultivators could be rallied by the small and even big landlords against the common enemy, the moneylender. Secondly, the rural tensions generated by the intrusion of the non-cultivating
usrer often threatened the social and political peace and led the colonial administrators to heap abuse on him. Yet the usurer was a crucial cog in the mechanism of colonial surplus extraction. He kept the revenue machinery working and other agricultural processes going. He enabled both the production of export crops and their eventual export. He was responsible for the maintenance of the minimum agricultural functions including the production of the peasant. He was the ultimate and the only safety valve in the countryside. In fact, he was as much an intermediary between the colonial state and the peasant as the zamindar or the earlier revenue farmer. So the colonial administrators abused and cursed him as an evil—but also declared him to be a necessary evil.

If moneylenders became landlords, many landlords and superior ryots—rich and middle peasants—became moneylenders. In particular, they lent to petty tenants, sharecroppers, and agricultural laborers who had no security to offer and therefore could not become clients of the regular moneylenders. The landlords and superior ryots could, however, use their social and caste position and kinship connections to collect. In 1951-52, nearly 25 per cent of all rural debt was held by agricultural moneylenders. Their competitive position as moneylenders was another point of friction between landlords and rich peasants and the traditional moneylenders. This enabled the former to generate a spurious radicalism that opposed usurers without opposing usury in any meaningful sense.

In conclusion to this sub-section, it may be said that the most important change in agrarian relations during the colonial period was the growth in the relative strength of the landlord, the trader, and the moneylender. Moreover, whatever increase of income occurred in agriculture due to certain commercialization of agriculture also went to them.

B) The actual cultivator increasingly became a rack-rented tenant-at-will or share cropper, whose terms of tenancy were constantly deteriorating. In 1951, 29 per cent of the rural population consisted of peasant proprietors, while tenants and laborers made up 71°/o or rest of the rural population. By the end of the colonial period, the rent and interest burden on the peasant amounted to 14,000 million rupees per year.

A major feature of the agrarian class structure in the recent colonial period was the high degree of internal differentiation and stratification within the peasantry.

At the top emerged a distinct stratum of rich peasants, both owners as well as protected tenants, who succeeded in benefitting from the com-
mmercialization of agriculture because of their control over land, the protection provided by tenancy legislation to occupancy ryots and legislation against transfer of land to non-agriculturists, the opportunity to buy the expropriated land of the peasants, and the scope of money-lending and trade. In some regions, many of these rich peasants—owners or occupancy ryots—became, because of the opportunity to obtain high rents, landlords in effect while retaining their status as peasants. In others, they strove towards capitalist or semi-capitalist farming.

An important aspect of the rural differentiation was the emergence of the rich peasant moneylenders. Not only was nearly 25% of the rural debt held by agricultural moneylenders in 1951-52 but in addition 14.4% of the debt was held by the relatives of the debtors.

The rich peasant as a rent and revenue payer was opposed to imperialism as well as to the zamindar. But, as an actual intermediary, whose legal position was still that of peasant-proprietor or occupancy ryot, or as a potential intermediary, his agrarian and political outlook was deeply conservative, and this apart from the fact that, even as a man of property and employer of labor, he was no radical on the socio-economic plane. This conservative character of the rich peasant was a major factor responsible for the conservative agrarian program of the National Congress and the failure of the radical and left nationalist to go, except in a few cases, beyond the programmatic stage in defense of the interests of the tenants-at-will, share croppers, and agricultural laborers.

Below the rich peasants came a stratum of middle peasants who were very close in social and economic position as also in political and agrarian outlook to the rich peasants, having survived the colonial process of disintegration and expropriation.

The vast mass of peasantry was gradually getting reduced to the statum of landless agricultural laborers and petty landholders, described by Surendra J. Patel as dwarf holding laborers, some of whom were petty proprietors and other tenants-at-will and share croppers, who had either no rights to land or were in the grip of indebtedness. Now the important point regarding these dwarf holders was that they were a transitional class; they were peasants who were on the way to becoming proletarians. They could be seen as small peasants, for their outlook and hopes and fears those of peasants; or as semi-proletarians whose social interests already converged towards those of the landless. But we will have more to say on this aspect in the section on the agrarian class structure in post-colonial India.
The ranks of landless agricultural laborers were swelled by dis­inherited peasants, ruined artisans, and the growth in population which was not absorbed by a modern industrial or service sector. It is to be noted that the agricultural laborers constituted a new social class of rural proletarians which was increasingly becoming distinct from the land-holding peasantry. The dwarf holder and the landless laborer constituted more than half of the rural population. They were not only the poorest and the most exploited, but objectively their problems could not be solved by any reform of the agrarian system. In fact, their problems could not be solved at all within the agrarian system.

The numerical distribution of the agricultural population into different rural classes is a difficult task and has not been fully attempted. Ultimately, with all the economic and sociological arguments against it, the pattern of land holdings or operational holdings is the only one statistically available and serviceable. But even here one has to impose rather arbitrary dividing lines. Surendra J. Patel believes that those holding or cultivating (as opposed to owning: the extremes of ownership may not be reflected in cultivation since landlords rented out their land to many tenants; consequently land holding, whether in ownership or tenancy, gives a better idea of rural class structure and stratification within the peasantry) less than 5 acres should be classified as dwarf holders and landless agricultural laborers. These, according to him, constituted 71.1\% of the total agricultural working population in 1931, with 37.8\% constituting the category of landless agricultural laborers. I believe that in general those holding less than 2.5 acres can certainly be classified as proletarians and semi-proletarians or dwarf holders. In any case this shows that differentiation within the peasantry had reached a very advanced stage in the late colonial period. According to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry of 1951 19\% of the rural families had no land. Of the land-holding families, 38.1\% had less than 2.5 acres of land, controlling in all 5.6\% of the land (16.8\% under 1 acre and 21.3\% between 1 and 2.5 acres). These may be seen as semi-proletarians or as dwarf holders. 21\% of the rural families held 2.5 to 5 acres of land, constituting 9.9\% of the area. These may be seen as the small peasants. 19.1\% of the families held 5 to 10 acres of land constituting 17.6 per cent of the area. These may be regarded as the small and middle peasants. 16.2\% of the families held 10 to 25 acres of land constituting 32.5 per cent of the area. These may be seen as middle and rich peasants. 4.2\% of the families held 25 to 50 acres of land constituting 19 per cent of the area. These were clearly the rich peasants.
1.4% of the families held 50 or more acres and controlled 15.4 per cent of the area. These were the big landowners who merged with the zamindars.

Differentiation within the peasantry was, moreover, occurring all over the country. For example in the Punjab, in 1939, 48.8% of the total holdings were in the category of up to 3 acres and constituted 6% of the entire agricultural area, while 6.3% of the holdings above 25 acres constituted 52.8 per cent of the area. In Uttar Pradesh, in 1946, 55.8% of the total holdings were in the category of under 2 acres and constituted 13.1% of the land, while 19% of the holdings in the category of over 25 acres controlled 12.9 per cent of the area. In the ryotwari area of Madras, 22.8% of the land owners owned less than 1 acre of land and 3.4% of the total land, while 0.8% of the land owners owned more than 18 acres and 13.1% of the total land.

II. Agrarian class structure in the post-colonial period

The nationalist leadership was committed at the moment of freedom to changes in the agrarian structure. At the same time it had to evolve a new institutional structure that would serve the needs of economic development in the long run. From the beginning it recognized a few constraints: (i:) Industrialization, however rapid, would not absorb the vast numbers of rural unemployed and underemployed who must therefore remain in the villages and live off the land. Capitalist farming could not absorb this labor force either; rather the opposite. (ii) Agricultural production must grow and agricultural surpluses must flow into the cities. The petty peasant producers could not perform this task. Only capitalist farmers could do so. (iii) In a relatively overpopulated country like India, capitalist farmers could not be permitted to dispossess peasant proprietors, since a large and undisguisedly unemployed proletariat would pose immense social and political problems. Hence the need for a new institutional structure which would be neither feudal, nor semi-feudal, nor wholly capitalist; and which would, on the one hand, produce marketable agricultural surpluses and on the other keep the vast rural population engaged in agriculture by preserving the small and dwarf holder till, after decades of industrialization, it began to be sucked into the non-agricultural sector. This structure had to have as its base small and dwarf peasant property and at its top rich peasant-cum-capitalist farming. This policy had in fact been laid down during the last quarter of the 19th century by Justice Ranade, much of whose thinking
percolated down to the Indian planners through the political as well as the intellectual traditions. Arguing against the zamindari system, which he described as semi-feudalism, Ranade pleaded for a policy of land to the tiller accompanied by the transformation of the old zamindars into capitalist-farmers. And, then, he wrote: “A complete divorce from land of those who cultivate it is a national evil, and no less an evil is it to find one dead level of small farmers all over the land. High and petty farming . . . . this mixed constitution of rural society is necessary to secure the stability and progress of the country.” This policy of replacing landlordism by rich and middle peasants while keeping the small, subsistence farmer-cum-commodity-producer intact so that there was no proletarianization and disintegration of the peasantry was accepted by the Congress Party and the Government of India after 1947. This policy has sometimes been attacked from the ‘right’ by those who want greater leeway for the capitalist farmer, and sometimes from the left by those who want more equitable distribution of land. The attack from the right has been easily met, since there has been scope for the growth of capitalism, and the dangers of untrammelled concentration of land are there for all to see. The technocratic critique that the vast mass of small holders are economically non-viable has been met with two types of answer. In the 1950’s the promotion of agricultural cooperatives was stressed. This policy foundered on the twin reality that no pooling of the resourceless and the landless would be viable and cooperativization of the rich and middle peasants’ land was beyond the limits set by the existing class and political structure of the country. The other answer has been to use state-supported credit and marketing structures and modern technology and inputs to make the small peasant viable.

The left criticism of the agrarian strategy was also ineffective, for it was based on illusory economic and political assumptions. Firstly, it accused the ruling classes of preserving semi-feudalism, while what they were doing was changing the agrarian structure, not be giving land to the tiller but by gradually transforming the landlords into rich peasants and capitalist farmers. Then the left argued for land ceilings which were easily evaded by the big landowners by dividing land among relatives and children. Land ceilings thus did not generate land for distribution but it did generate a large number of rich peasant holdings. The left now demanded lower land ceilings. But this step could produce a significant amount of distributable land only if the rich peasant was divested of land. This was politically not feasible for a regime which
depends upon the rich and middle peasants politically as well as economically. In fact, even the left dared not attack the rich peasant but either tilted at the windmills of feudalism or wanted to attack the rich peasant by calling him a semi-feudal landlord. The fact is that the agrarian class structure of India has been now so sharply stratified that the rich peasant confronts the proletarian and semi-proletarian elements, and he does so with the support of the middle and even small peasant.

What has been the impact of land reforms and other policies on the agrarian class structure? (i) The zamindars and the semi-feudal agrarian structure have disappeared or are disappearing. But the abolition of the major intermediaries released little land for distribution to the landless; in fact initially some of the landholding tenants were ejected by the landlords from the land which they were permitted to resume for self-cultivation as rich peasants and capitalist farmers. But many of the previous tenants now became owner-cultivators. (ii) The land reform was pro-landlord in the sense that the landlords were permitted to remain at the top of the agrarian class structure, though they were forced gradually to change their class status. (iii) With the growth of owner-cultivation the rural political and social domination passed to the rich peasant. Many of the agrarian policies, for example regarding ceilings which are described as reactionary by the left and are ascribed to feudalism and landlords are in fact the product of the deference paid to rich peasant interests or ideology. (iv) Land ceilings succeeded in reducing big landed property but released no land for distribution to the landless. Their main impact has been to discourage the purchase of land by the rich peasants who therefore now use their economic surplus to improve the land and not to buy it. Thus capitalism in agriculture has been strengthened without dispossession of the small cultivator and without further concentration of land. If anything, it is the rich, middle and small peasants who have gained at the cost of the very big landowners. Indeed, the deepening of capitalism has created wider employment opportunities. (v) The form that growth of capitalism takes is the promotion of rich peasant farming. (vi) Tenancy is very much reduced, though its extent is less known than before since it is driven underground. Tenancy is also for that reason more difficult to fight. Moreover, the areas of advancing agriculture, which so to speak hold up the mirror of the future to the backward areas, are virtually free of semi-feudal tenancy. (vii) At the same time, there has been a constant increase in the number and proportion of agricultural laborers so that they constitute the largest social group in the countryside today. But
this increase has not come from the dispossession of the small peasantry, as is sometimes believed. In fact, after the initial process of evictions in the 1950's, no dispossession of the small peasant seems to have been occurring.

Let us take a look at the agrarian class structure as it has evolved as a result of the land reforms and other agrarian changes. Table I gives the percentage of population in different sizes of operational holdings and the area commanded by each size of holdings. Table II is derived from

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<th>Table I</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Holding size</strong></td>
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<td>0 - 2.5</td>
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<td>2.5 - 5.0</td>
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<td><strong>Land operated in acres</strong></td>
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<td>30.00 - 50.00</td>
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<td>50.00 and above</td>
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the latest survey undertaken by the Reserve Bank of India. It provides, however, only the percentage of households in each size of holding and is given here only for comparative purposes.

Tables I and II are not strictly comparable since the population in a household goes with the size of operated holding. We have, therefore, based our discussion on Table I only.

Land control is thus highly unequal if the entire rural population is taken to constitute peasantry. However, if we take out the 48 per cent who really constitute not small peasants but, in Lenin's phraseology, proletarians and semi-proletarians (similarly, the rich peasants are best described as rural bourgeoisie and the middle peasant as the rural petty bourgeoisie), the differentiation on the basis of rich medium, and small still implies that they are part of the same class. We get, as Table III shows, a picture of viable landowning classes which resembles in almost all important aspects, except the extent of land owned, the European peasantry including that of France and Germany at the turn of the 19th century or even today in fact.

Among the landowners the inequality is not very weighted on one side; and this is particularly true if the landholders above 5 acres are taken into account. The ruling groups have been and are making every

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holding size</th>
<th>Percentage of landowning population (which is 51.77% of total rural population)</th>
<th>Percentage of area controlled by the landowning population (which controls 93.29% of total operated area)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5 to 5.0</td>
<td>33.67</td>
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</tr>
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<td>50.0 and over</td>
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attempt to keep these groups stable and viable both through legislation and economic policies. Moreover these groups play an important part in local and regional politics and have, therefore, the ability to protect their interests. Any policy of land ceilings, to be effective, must propose the extreme egalitarian step of family holding being limited to a single family size holding. Politically, this step would be no less radical than the proposal to collectivize land. This is especially so because of the relative equality and therefore solidarity between the 'effective' peasants.

The real problem for the ruling classes is posed by the 48 per cent who have no land or virtually none, who cannot be provided with adequate employment or living standard, and who can never again be reintegrated into the 'peasantry'. Yet, if they become conscious of their changed social position, their politics will turn against the capitalist system itself. To prevent this class awareness from emerging, to keep these people satisfied when the existing social structure is incapable of satisfying them, is the task of politics and ideology. Part of this burden is taken care of by the belief of their being a part of the peasantry, and to keep this illusion going, the El Dorado of land distribution is held up before them. The dwarf holders are given just enough land to keep their notions and hopes of being owner-peasants going. Moreover, this also prevents unity among all those who are really and historically permanently landless. The rest of the burden is assumed by the idea of social uplift and national integration, which does have a great deal of basis in real life. The question here is: are those 48°/o proletarians and semi-proletarians along with the 34°/o small and medium peasants or rural petty bourgeoisie to constitute the nation or are they, in the name of national integration, to wait for decades outside the pale of society till capitalism develops sufficiently to reintegrate them into the 'nation'?

III Peasantry and national integration before 1947

The leaders of the Indian national movement desired the peasantry's integration with the nation and the national movement in order to strengthen the striking capacity of the anti-imperialist struggle. Stung by the taunt that they represented merely the 'microcosmic minority' of the educated few—the babus—and more or less ignored by colonial authorities, it embarked on the course of wider social mobilization, including that of the peasantry, to be able to put greater pressure on the colonial rule to meet its constantly rising demands. This change in
nationalist policy coincided with the period when the full consequences of colonialism for the Indian peasant were coming to the surface, moving him into an era of spreading discontent and economic and political struggle.

A) To integrate the peasantry into the national movement, the nationalist leadership promoted two integrative principles: (i) The notion of the peasantry or kisan as a single cohesive social group or one happy family. One purpose was to overcome the peasantry’s division on caste, communal, or local bases. The notion of the kisan or peasantry had within it certain elements of class cohesion and even consciousness. These elements were later asserted and utilized by radical peasant leadership. But the notion was not promoted by the nationalist leadership with a view to promoting or accentuating the class struggle against the zamindars and landlords. Rather, it was seen as an instrument for overcoming the internally divisive tendencies which weakened the united national struggle against imperialism. Consequently, despite the large scale propagation of the ‘ideology’ of a single peasantry or of the kisan, peasant ‘class’ consciousness remained on the whole at a very low level and did not, in fact, exist at all in several parts of the country. Peasant consciousness spread very slowly and only when zamindars and landlords were gradually politically isolated.

The notion of the peasantry as a social group was also used to paper over the rapidly emerging differentiation within it. In fact it was even used to integrate the small and ruined landlords with the peasantry.

(ii) The second integrative principle was aimed at making the peasants feel part of the nation. This was achieved by stressing not only that peasant interests must predominate in the national movement, but that, further, the peasantry was the nation, or at least its basic constituent. It is on these grounds that the dominant National Congress leadership frowned upon the separate organization of kisans. As a resolution passed at the Haripura Session of the Congress in 1938 stated: “The Congress has already fully recognized the right of kisans to organize themselves in peasant unions. Nevertheless it must be remembered that the Congress itself is in the main a kisan organization.” (My italics).

B) The objective justification for the Indian nationalist leadership’s efforts to integrate the peasantry within itself and with the rest of the nation lay, firstly, in the fact, so well brought out in the works of R. Palme Dutt and A.R. Desai, that the peasantry’s primary contradiction during this period lay with imperialism. Hence, the anti-imperialism movement did not merely ‘exploit’ the peasants’ mass strength or place
its interests at the command of the bourgeoisie or 'middle classes'. It represented to a certain extent the anti-colonial interests of the peasantry. Starting with Dadabhai Naoroji and Justice Ranade and ending with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the national leadership’s effort to grasp and explain rural poverty with reference to colonialism and in the context of the anti-imperialist struggle was certainly more advanced than the efforts of the colonial authorities and imperialist writers to explain it outside the colonial framework or even than the understanding of the leaders of the spontaneous militant peasant movements of the 19th century.

Secondly, with the unification and integration of India, including its agriculture, economically and politically during the 19th and 20th centuries, it became essential that the peasants should learn to think and act to protect their interests on an all-India plane. For that they had to feel and know that they were part of larger national entities—the peasantry and the nation. Both these aspects came to be fully recognized by the peasant movement when it developed autonomously during the 1930's and 1940's. The peasant movement stressed the importance of the anti-imperialist struggle for the social development of the peasantry and its own role in it. In fact, it constantly fought after 1936 to acquire greater weight in the nationalist leadership and the national struggle.

Moreover it was not as if the peasantry or its movement were 'utilized' by the national leadership or were 'sacrificed' at the altar of nationalism—ironically this charge was to be made with a vengeance later by certain conservative 'peasantists' against the entire left, socialist and Communist leadership the world over. Nationalism helped arouse the peasant and awaken him to his own needs, demands and, above all, the possibility of an active role in social and political development. Nationalism helped the peasant movement to 'stand on its feet', to spread and take roots in the 1920's and 1930's. It gave cohesion to the peasants, created a sense of solidarity among them, and taught them elements of modern organization, overcoming the utterly disjointed and local character of the peasant movements of the 19th century, when the only widespread movements had been held together by religion or by the top zamindar leadership. Even later, in the 1930's and 1940's, the Kisan Sabha leadership, growing away from the national leadership through its sectarianism, failed to build a genuine all-India peasant movement or to organize large countrywide agitations. In fact, the peasant movement, like the national movement, was able to overcome and transcend the weakness of the nationalism leadership and its pattern of national
integration not by counterposing peasant interests and bourgeois nationalism, but by better integration of the peasantry with the national movement, by more vigorous anti-imperialism, and by trying to establish a different pattern of class leadership over the movement.

The link between the national and the peasant movements has been brought out with great clarity by two recent scholars, Majid Siddiqi and K.N. Panikkar. At the end of his study of the peasant movements in Uttar Pradesh from 1920 to 1922, Siddiqi concludes: “The association of the *kisans* with national politics helped both the peasant movements as well as the political movements for they drew sustenance from and gave strength to each other at different stages . . . . The movement from below was thus given an initial boost by the cohesion that politics lent it.” Similarly, K.N. Panikkar concludes his paper on the peasant revolts in Malabar during the 19th and 20th centuries by referring to the merger of the peasant and national movements in 1921: “This coalition created a sense of cohesion and solidarity among the peasantry. It also provided them with an effective organization.”

C) The negative aspects of the Indian nationalist pattern of the peasantry’s integration into the national movement lay in three of its important features;

(i) Ignoring the basic features of colonial agrarian structure, the national leadership on the whole curbed the anti-landlord struggle. Its dominant sections were opposed to anti-landlord ideologies, policies, and agitations. They opposed all anti-landlord actions of the peasantry in the name of non-violence and the unity of the anti-imperialist struggle. Separate class organizations of the peasantry, it was said, divided and weakened the national movement. Opposing the independent mobilization of the peasantry, they favored peasant mobilization only when it was a part of the broader national mobilization against imperialism. Thus Gandhi advised the agitating peasants of Uttar Pradesh in February 1921: “You should bear a little if the zamindar torments you. We do not want to fight with the zamindars . . . . Zamindars are also slaves and we do not want to trouble them.” In May 1921, he again wrote:

. . . . it is not contemplated that at any stage of non-cooperation we would seek to deprive the zamindars of their rent. The *kisan* movement must be confined to the improvements of the status of the *kisans* and the betterment of the relations between the zamindars and them. The *kisans* must be advised scrupulously to abide by the terms of their agreement with the zamindars, whether such is written or inferred from custom.
Similarly, in the Congress Working Committee resolution suspending the non-cooperation movement in 1922, three out of eleven clauses concentrated on the ‘legal’ rights of the zamindar: In the early 1930’s, the Congress Working Committee repeatedly assured the zamindars that it was not opposed to them and that it opposed ‘the confiscation of property’ and ‘class war’. Even the leaders of the Uttar Pradesh Congress, which was much more to the left on the agrarian question and was supporting and organizing peasant agitation against high rent, felt it necessary, in order to ensure the all-India leadership, to state publicly that it worked for “harmony between zamindars and tenants” and did not preach class war.

In the 1920’s and 1930-2, Congress leadership concentrated, (with the exception of Uttar Pradesh almost exclusively) on mobilizing the peasants around the anti-imperialist demand for the easing of the crushing burden of land revenue and other taxes such as salt tax. Gandhi’s peasant campaigns dealt almost exclusively with issues of opposition to the British administration or, in one case, British planters. The famous Eleven Points of Gandhi in 1930 included two peasant demands: a 50 per cent reduction of land tax and the abolition of salt tax; and at the height of the world depression, when the Indian peasantry was sinking under the burden of rent, usury, and land revenue, he sought to mobilize the peasants on the question of salt tax because this alone could unite the peasants from ryotwari as well as zamindari areas without simultaneously affecting the zaminadrs.

It may be suggested that the basic criticism here should not be that the national leadership did not promote the anti-feudal revolution with the slogan of land to the tiller. That would have thrown the landlords, big as well as small, into the ‘lap’ of imperialism. Not only was it not possible for an all-class nationalist front to do so, but in view of the strength of British imperialism before 1939 would perhaps have been bad short-term tactics and therefore politically short-sighted, for the aim of any effective anti-imperialist movement had to be the complete isolation of the enemy. The large number of small and medium landlords in the country need not have been handed over to imperialism as allies. The need to unite and mobilize varied interests and diverse classes and social strata into a wide national front and to neutralize those who could not be so united might indicate a policy of compromise between internally antagonistic classes, the underplaying of their mutual contradictions and the balancing of their conflicting interests.

But the balancing of conflicting interests precisely means both sides making sacrifices and making accommodation. If there was to be a class
compromise, on what terms was it to be? Whose interests would the compromise serve? Was the compromise genuine or did it mask a surrender on the part of some classes and groups? Granted that abolition of landlordism was not to be demanded, how far were the other demands of the peasants against rack-rent, evictions, forced labor, illegal exactions, and the debt burden and for security of tenure and fair wages for labor fought for and secured? Even the peasant organization showed enough political realism to distinguish between their long-term and short-term demands. If it was not possible to go as far as the Communists, why not at least go as far as Jawaharlal Nehru? Even in 1930-32, Nehru and other left Congressmen fought not for no-rent but for fair and just rent. Certainly, it should have been possible for any genuine social compromise to accommodate most of the immediate demands of the peasants.

Yet, this is precisely what was not done. In the name of national unity against imperialism, the peasants' interests were more or less completely sacrificed. National integration was promoted at the peasants' unilateral cost.

For years the National Congress failed to evolve a broad-based agrarian program. All the three major movements launched by Gandhi, namely, those of 1920, 1930 and 1942, started without any such program. Gandhi and the national leadership offered to the peasant at most a few "mildly ameliorative, 'self-help' measures" in the name of the constructive program. They placed almost their entire emphasis on Swaraj and the vague talk of agrarian change. The landlords were to be kept in the national movement by guaranteeing protection of their basic interests, the peasants were to be mobilized through the ideology of nationalism.

In the 1930's, some of the anti-landlord peasant demands were taken up and in one case, that of Uttar Pradesh, a genuine compromise between the landlords and tenants was put forward when the Uttar Pradesh Congress and Gandhi demanded in 1930 that occupancy tenants should be given a relief of 50 per cent and the non-occupancy ryots a relief of 60 per cent in their rent payments. Gandhi later in 1931 reduced the demand to a relief of 25 and 50 per cent respectively. But despite peasants' militancy these demands were not pressed by Gandhi and the all-India national leadership. As S. Gopal has noted, Gandhi in the end "roundly condemned pressure being brought on landlords, direct appeals not to pay, the proposal of a general 50 per cent reduction of rent and any refusal to pay less than what was within
the individual's capacity.” It is also to be noted that in Bihar, where Gandhians held stricter control over the Congress leadership, the nationalists did not take up any of the major peasant demands against the landlords. Not only were *kisans* to be restrained, the leadership was also to restrain itself.

Preparing for the elections of 1937 and trying to contain the challenge of the left within the Congress ranks, the dominant Congress leadership took up with varying degrees of clarity some of the immediate demands for reduction and land revenue, rent and debt burden, moratorium on debt payments, exemption of uneconomic holdings from revenue and rent, cancellation of rent arrears, ban on evictions, fixity of tenure, provision of cheap credit, abolition of beggar and illegal exactions, and recognition of peasant unions. But the Congress organized hardly any agitations, struggles, or even educational campaigns around these demands. The record of the Congress ministries from 1937 to 1939 was in this respect quite dismal. Their agrarian legislation was weak and meager, the only significant relief being given vis-a-vis moneylenders. Above all, their attitude towards the peasantry was not favorable. While the landlords were consulted and accommodated at every stage, the efforts of the peasant unions to exert pressure through mass mobilization were condemned and suppressed both at the party and administrative levels. In anger, Nehru wrote to G.B. Pant, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh: “... the Congress Ministries are tending to become counter-revolutionary. This is of course not a conscious development but when a choice has to be made, the inclination is in this direction. Apart from this, the general attitude is static.”

There are some indications that Gandhi's attitude towards the agrarian question was beginning to change in his last phase. In June 1942, he told Louis Fischer in answer to his question, “What is your program for the improvement of the lot of the peasantry?” that “the peasants would take the land, we would not have to tell them to take it. They would take it.” When Fischer asked, “Should the landlords be compensated?”, he replied: “No, that would be fiscally impossible”. In another interview two days later, Fischer asked, “Well, how do you actually see your impending Civil Disobedience Movement?” Gandhi replied: “In the villages, the peasants will stop paying taxes. They will make salt despite official prohibition ... . Their next step will be to seize land.” “With violence?” asked Fischer. Gandhi replied: “there may be violence, but then again the landlord may cooperate ... . They might cooperate by fleeing.” Similarly, he told Mirabehn in jail that after independence,
zamindars' land would be taken by the state either through their voluntary surrender or through legislation and then distributed to the cultivators. By 1946, he even acknowledged that there had always been class struggle in history and that it could be ended if the capitalists voluntarily renounced their social role and became workers. After all, he said, capital is really created by labor and not by the capitalists. But this intellectual and ideological development came too late to affect the national leadership and Indian bourgeoisie which were by now ready to 'ditch' him with all his idiosyncrasies. For Gandhi himself, the understanding was too hazy, too much outside the framework of his overall thought to lead to meaningful political activity. It was more an expression of his integrity and constant search to grasp the reality and, in the end, of the profound personal and political tragedy that was beginning to surround him in his last years. For what could be more tragic than that this great and moral man had created a framework of bourgeois politics and set a pattern of leadership which had no place for his own honest doubts.

Anyway, to resume our analysis, it is to be noted than in 1945-6, the Congress did accept the objective of abolition of all intermediaries, an objective which was actually accomplished in the post-war years but in an anti-peasant way so that semi-feudalism or landlordism was attacked and partially abolished but without benefitting the mass of lower peasantry. It is to be noted that neither the pre-independence nor the post-independence program of the National Congress contained even simple ameliorative measures for the ordinary tenant-at-will or share cropper or the agricultural laborer. Moreover in its various agitations, the demands and interests of these classes and strata were more or less completely bypassed.

Why was all this so? It may be suggested that this extremely weak and compromising policy towards the landlords was not adopted in the main because of deference to the interests and wishes of big landlords (i.e. jagirdars, talukdars, and big zamindars), against whom the post-independence land reforms were to be aimed. This policy was much more the result of deference to the interests and outlook of the following five strata:

a) The property-owning conservative instincts of the emerging stratum of rich peasants who were increasingly taking to landlordism and moneylending and who tended to dominate both the mass national movement in the countryside and the emerging peasant organizations and movements. In the zamindari areas their main interest lay in the security of tenure and transfer of land ownership to the occupancy ten-
ant, and in the ryotwari areas in lower land revenue and in curbing the all-pervading moneylender-merchant who was both their oppressor and their competitor.

b) The small and ruined landlords, whose deteriorating economic condition led them to participate on a large scale in the national movement and even the peasant movements in the 1920's and 1930's and whose established social position in the village and relatively higher standards of education enabled them to soon acquire leadership positions in these movements. It is interesting that when in 1935-6, the Bihar peasant leader Swami Sahajanand Saraswati did accept the program of zamindari abolition, he simultaneously declared that only big zamindars were zamindars while petty zamindars were peasants. Earlier he had resigned in protest against a socialist majority resolution of the Bihar Kisan Sabha executive demanding zamindari abolition on the grounds that this would alienate those Kisan Sabha supporters who were small zamindars and large tenants.

c) The professional and other members of the middle classes and intelligentsia, who lived and worked in small towns around the villages, who often took to petty landlordism and had moneymaking connections, and who also formed the backbone of the national movement in these semi-rural areas.

d) Merchants and moneylenders with their direct links with the commercial, usurious and rental exploitation of the peasantry.

e) The class instincts of the bourgeoisie as a propertied group. These instincts are never even radical, far less revolutionary.

The fact that the Indian national movement relied so heavily on electoral politics, specifically on the narrow electoral base of the top 10 to 15 per cent of the population, made it heavily dependent on these classes and strata. In the rural areas, in particular, the rich peasants and small landlords constituted the bulk of voters. On the other hand, the mass of poor peasants and agricultural laborers had no votes.

(ii) A second major weakness of the national movement lay in the fact that even at the level of purely anti-government demands the peasant movement was not permitted to acquire a wide scope. Efforts were made to limit the agitations to the specific demands of very specific groups, and were often designed to secure immediate relief. No wide mobilization of the peasantry occurred even around Congress-led peasant movements outside Uttar Pradesh, where the movement was also designed to get relief to sections of peasantry really hard hit by the depression. The Champaran and Kaira movements were rather narrow in scope and Gandhi made it clear that they were not a part of the po-
political national movement. The Guntur no-tax campaign of 1921 was quickly curbed. The Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928 was declared by its leader, Sardar Patel, to be non-political. After 1937, the Congress ministries frowned upon any effort to organize peasant demonstration even in support of the Congress agrarian program. It is, moreover, not accidental that Gandhi and the Congress did not organize a single general no-tax campaign.

(iii) Thirdly, the politics and the political and class consciousness of the agricultural laborers and poor peasants were completely dominated by the politics and the political and class consciousness of the rich peasants and small landlords. Thus, from the point of view of the rural poor, both aspects of national integration were flawed. The concept of the nation subordinated their interests and politics to those of the urban bourgeoisie and the concept of the peasantry to those of the landlords and the emerging rural bourgeoisie.

D) The Indian nationalist pattern of national integration showed major weakness even at the level of nationalism or the anti-imperialist struggle:

(i) Because the class demands of the mass of peasants were not taken up, and reliance was placed almost entirely on the anti-imperialist appeal, the level of peasant participation in the struggle remained rather low, except in a few areas for a short time and in a few Communist-led movements. The propertied peasants had too much to lose to be willing or able to sustain a movement for long in the face of severe governmental repression. The result was that the largely urban based nationalist movement could not be sustained beyond a short period of one to two years.

Consequently, without large scale, effective mass peasant participation, the nationalist movement could at no stage go beyond the strategy of Pressure-Compromise-Pressure or P-C-P and often found it difficult to implement even this strategy by bringing enough pressure to bear upon the Government.

(ii) In several areas, the peasant-landlord and the peasant-merchant-moneylender contradictions coincided with religious or caste divisions. This enabled the communal and casteist forces to augment their appeal with class and economic appeal, just as the class appeal tended to take on religious or casteist coloring. Thus in the Punjab, the landlords, rich peasants and the colonial authorities first used casteist politics around the concept of agriculturist castes for years and later, after 1973, turned to Muslim Communalism. The merchant-moneylenders too tried to
protect their interests by appealing to Hindu communalism. In Bengal, the Muslim peasantry struggled hard to generate a secular peasant movement against primarily Hindu landlords and moneylenders, but succumbed in the end to Muslim communalism when faced with the pro-landlord or very weak anti-landlord nationalism of the Bengal Congress and the Hindu tinge of much of the national leadership. In Kerala, the militant tenant movement of 1920-1921 had ended up with elements of communal passion. In Maharashtra, Andhra, and Tamilnadu the cultivators and landlords had ranged on the opposite scales of the caste hierarchy.

In all such situations, the nationalist pattern of peasant and national integration could not succeed without incorporating some elements of class struggle. The refusal of the dominant national leadership to do so resulted in the failure of national integration in the Punjab and Bengal where the communal forces ultimately prevailed. The reverse was the case in Kerala, Andhra, North Western Frontier Province and to a certain extent in Uttar Pradesh where nationalism based on agrarian radicalism overcame communal and caste identities. The failure in the Punjab and Bengal was a major factor in the eventual partition of the country.

In all these cases, it becomes clear that national integration could have come only through class consciousness and that, contrary to the dominant nationalist view, not only did the peasant ‘class’ consciousness not divide Indian society in the face of imperialism, it was in fact the only effective means of opposing the disintegrative communal and caste ideologies and movements which objectively aided imperialism. National unity and integration had to be based on a conscious political program of uniting different social classes and not of ignoring class differences or of subordinating the interests of the rural poor to the interests of the rural rich. In India, a program of amorphous, non-class integration failed to check the growth of social integration based on varieties of modern false consciousness using elements of traditional culture, values, and institutions.

E) It is of course to be noted that the peasantry and the peasant movement also failed to produce better principles of integration for itself or for the nation. The peasantry did not produce its own ideologies or organic intellectuals or its own thought or even its own organizers. It is interesting that a peasant party did not emerge in any part of the country. The politics of the politically aroused peasants tended to be guided by the left nationalists who used the glamour surrounding the notion of peasantry to integrate the radical urban youth and small town
intelligentsia into the national movement and around a vague pro-peasant program that did not go beyond ameliorative measures or a purely anti-imperialist program.

F) The Communist and other left groups showed a better awareness of the anti-feudal demands of the peasantry but they too failed in the two directions in which the nationalist leadership had failed.

To a certain extent the left did not place sufficient emphasis on political work among the peasants. They failed to raise the anti-feudal consciousness and the awareness of their own class position among the peasants. Though they showed a certain awareness of the emerging class differentiation and divisions within the peasantry, they failed to make a serious study of the phenomenon or to create its awareness among the peasants, especially among the dwarf holders and agricultural laborers. Though they succeeded in creating a certain peasant ‘class’ cohesion against the landlord wherever the peasant movement was under their guidance they failed to guard the peasant movements against the rich peasant or even small landlord domination. As Swami Sahajanand Saraswati recognized in 1944 in his most radical phase, it was “really the middle and big cultivators (who were) . . . for the most part with the Kisan Sabha” and that “they are using the Kisan Sabha for their benefit and gain . . .” The Swami now pleaded for basing the Kisan Sabha exclusively on the agricultural laborers and poor peasants.

Moreover, with some exceptions as in Bengal during the Tebhaga agitation, even when the class position of the tenants-at-will, share-croppers and agricultural laborers was recognized in theory and in the programs, in practice few agitations and little struggle was organized around their demands and interests. Quite often, just as the Congress leadership sacrificed the interests of the peasants to those of the landlords in the name of national unity, the left tended to sacrifice the interests of the rural proletarians and semi-proletarians to those of the rural bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie in the name of peasant unity.

A very important failure of the left lay in the fact that, while emphasizing the independent class mobilization of the peasants as peasants outside the framework of the national movement, it failed to establish a strong link between the anti-feudal and ‘economic’ consciousness of the peasant and anti-imperialism. Its tendency to place much greater emphasis on purely economic demands resulted in the lesser political role of the peasantry as well as in a lower development level of the peasant movement in extent and depth. The historical task was to simultaneously take up the peasants’ class demands and to make them more militant
anti-imperialists. Merely to make the criticism, which is made by many contemporary and later left-wing writers, that the national movement subordinated peasant demands to nationalism is inadequate and does not explain why the left, which followed the advice of being more thoroughly and militantly anti-feudal, made little headway among the peasants, except in Kerala and to a certain extent in Andhra where it combined both. Any effort to keep the peasant movement away from the anti-imperialist stream weakened the peasant movement itself. For example, in U.P. in 1921, the liberal dominated U.P. Kisan Sabha’s efforts to keep peasant agitation separate from the nationalist non-cooperation movement failed and resulted in its own disintegration even though its demands were more militant than the pro-Congress Kisan Sabha’s. Similarly, when the Bihar Kisan Sabha and its popular leader Swami Sa‘raj anand Sarawati took a stand opposed to the national movement in 1942, their influence declined sharply among the Bihar peasants. The Communists also went into a virtual retreat during 1930-1934 because of the failure to establish a correct relationship with the contemporary national movement. The fact was that while the nationalist leadership failed to mobilize peasantry because of their neglect of the peasants’ class demands, the left, too, failed because of the failure to establish a correct linkage with the peasantry’s anti-imperialist feelings. Here, obviously, the correct policy would have been to ‘walk on two legs’.

IV. Peasantry and national integration after 1947

The post-1947 period marked a major change insofar as the country won political independence and state power was no longer exercised by alien rulers interested in accentuating forces of national disintegration. But the process of the peasantry’s integration into the nation had not been completed, and therefore continued. The forces of national disintegration have made repeated appearance, sometimes involving sections of the peasantry. Objectively too, agriculture has been becoming more and more national. The dominant political leadership has been making efforts to mobilize the peasantry for national capitalist development which now performs the unifying role played earlier by anti-imperialism. The all-India parties, the electoral process, the spread of education, the modern mass media, and to a lesser extent the all-India peasant organizations have been major instruments of national integration.

A) The task of national integration still had a few positive and un-
finished aspects and has been, therefore, supported by most of the political parties and politically conscious Indians:

(i) India had to struggle constantly for economic independence and against the constant threat of neo-colonialism. National unity is a basic aspect of the defense and growth of political and economic independence.

(ii) National and economic reconstruction could occur only on a national plane. The notion of the development of society still exercised a great pull over the minds of the people.

(iii) In view of the political, economic, administrative, and constitutional unification of India, political power could be used, as well as captured, in the end, only on a national plane.

(iv) More specifically, the interests of the rural masses in land reforms, higher wages, agricultural prices vis-a-vis industrial prices, allocation of state funds, and even social and cultural development — inheritance laws, social position of women, education, radio, films, etc. could only be best and successfully fought for on a national scale.

(v) Socially divisive forces such as caste, communalism and linguism, which affected national integration, also impinged upon and disrupted the economic and political struggles, that is, the class struggles, of the different sections of the rural masses. These forces have retained a strong hold over the Indian people, including the rural masses. These still had to be overcome. For example, caste was and still is used by the dominant rural strata, earlier headed by the landlords and now mostly by the rich peasants, to keep the lower class down and to unite around themselves the middle and small peasants of the same caste. These divisive forces have remained quite strong, partially because of the fact that little was done before 1947 or after to spread modern ideas among the peasantry and to actively uproot the old obscurantist ideas.

B) While the goal of national unity and national development was certainly positive in the historical situation, it could not be achieved in the old way. Gradually, after 1947, the negative aspects of the traditional pattern of peasantry’s integration into the nation acquired greater weight. The further unification of the nation could be carried out not under the slogans of a nation and a peasantry without classes, for there no longer existed a common, alien enemy, but only by identifying the new national but internal enemy or enemies within both the nation and the village. National integration had now to proceed through democracy, class struggle, far-reaching socio-economic transformation, and socialism.
(i) It is now widely recognized that the benefits of agricultural development since 1951 have in the main gone to the rich and middle peasants. Apart from the class configuration, a major factor in this has been the notion of the peasantry forming a homogenous class, "an integrated rural society", and a single village or rural community. Thus the Indian planning process was initiated under the slogan of "community development" for the "rural sector". Rural cooperatives and the Panchayati Raj have also been built on the same assumption of "class fusion." Moreover, the concept of village community was consciously put forward and advanced as an alternative to the notions of class cleavage in the countryside. The Community Development Programme, Panchayati Raj, and rural cooperatives were to become instruments of aggrandizement in the hands of the rich peasant and landlord-turned-farmer who emerged politically very powerful, partly as a result of the adult franchise.

(ii) Above all the ideology of a single peasantry or kisans has prevented the fuller emergence of class struggle in the countryside.

This ideology increasingly became after 1947—as even before 1947—an instrument of the rich peasant-small landlord domination of the by now distinctly emerging social strata or even classes of the small, impoverished peasant—the dwarf holder—and the landless agricultural laborer. The notion of the peasantry has hidden the fact, brought out in section II above, that the emerging and even dominating tendency in the Indian countryside is the division of the peasantry into the rural bourgeoisie, rural petty bourgeoisie, rural semi-proletarians, and rural proletarians. Of course, sometimes the rural upper strata use the divisive ideologies of caste and communalism in the same manner.

An important point of difference with the pre-independence period needs to be noted in this respect. During that period, the entire peasantry was objectively anti-imperialist, even though different peasant strata had different interests; after 1947 the different agrarian classes and strata have hardly anything in common.

The powerful position of the rich peasant in the countryside, in the state legislatures and governments and even in the Centre, aided by the notion of peasantry, explains both the slow pace of agrarian reform and the failure of the left-wing parties to organize the agricultural laborers and dwarf holders except in Kerala and a few other small pockets.

This ideology of being a peasantry—even if formally divided into rich, middle, and poor peasantry—formed the basis of much of left-wing peasant activity, including that of the CPI, CPM, and CP(ML)
groups. This was the basis of their view held in common, whatever their other differences, that the chief political task in rural India (or even in India as a whole) was the making and completion of the anti-feudal revolution. Consequently, in an effort to organize peasants on an all-class basis (barring the semi-mythical feudal lord) the organization of the rural proletarians and semi-proletarians was neglected if not completely ignored.

One political and social consequence was the continuing hold of conservative political forces on the agricultural laborer.

In contrast to the left, the peasant radicals have instinctively responded to the changes in rural class structure and advanced the slogan of equality in place of class struggle, change of social system, etc. The ruling political leadership has also increasingly adopted this objective of equality, thus confining agrarian radicalism within the ambit of peasant outlook. This slogan of course makes a powerful appeal to the small and middle peasant, the low caste agricultural laborer, and even the rich peasant who sees it in the context of the marked difference between his style of life and that of the urban bourgeoisie or even middle classes.

(iii) The notion of the peasantry as a class has also led the left to ignore the historically specific problems of the lower caste rural poor, whose caste has been and is being used to keep them down. Today this aspect cannot be seen as a ‘feudal’ survival. This is a specific historical form through which the rich peasants and small landlords keep down the agricultural workers and the dwarf-holding share croppers and tenants-at-will. This neglect has enabled the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeois elements belonging to these castes to mobilize the rural poor behind their own politics and interests. Of course, as pointed out earlier, the higher castes also use caste to keep the small and middle peasants behind them. Struggle against the caste system is needed to break up both these artificial unities.

(iv) The notions of the peasantry as part of a single nation and as a single class have also prevented the unity of the exploited rural poor with the exploited of the urban areas and the radical intelligentsia. Consequently, as before 1947, certain parties such as the Bhartiya Lok Dal (or BLD) and the Akalis have been trying to raise the false urban-rural dichotomy.
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