

## Peasants and Farmers

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Peasants and peasant societies have been studied in great detail by social anthropologists and sociologists. Though peasants have often been distinguished from farmers by social scientists, in popular perception no clear distinction is made or understood. It should therefore be not surprising that no words or terms are present in Indian languages to indicate this distinction.

Peasant societies are said to be characterised by subsistence/ self-sufficient economy, with very little by way of surplus being available for exchange. Absence of any 'industrial' activity other than those that are allied to agriculture is said to be another feature of peasant societies. Social scientists also define peasant societies in terms of values and institutions. For instance, peasant societies are supposed to be 'moral economies', that is peasants would not mind paying more by way of tax or rent during times of prosperity but expect the rulers to be lenient during times of distress. Some anthropologists like Oscar Lewis speak of a 'culture of poverty' as a characteristic of peasant societies. Peasant societies are also said to have very strong ties of kinship and family. In the Indian context one may include caste/ jati as an important feature of peasant communities. Peasant life is said to be simple, based on ascriptive roles and statuses, less accumulative and hence less exploitative. Social scientists generally agree that peasant societies dissolve with the rise of industrial economy and inevitably transform themselves into capitalist farming. Commercial and capitalist farmers are governed / controlled by markets. Production is for the market and hence price of agricultural products and the cost of inputs become the key elements of the farmers economy. There are no peasant societies that can resist the transformation to commercial/ capitalist farming unless they

are in total isolation..Though we can hardly speak of peasant societies in the twenty first century and in a globalised world, one may still find elements of culture, values, institutions and beliefs of peasant societies present even today. Whether one can have a complete break with peasant life/ culture is a theoretical exercise with which we are not concerned now.

Peasant society in India was very unlike peasant societies especially in the West or Europe.A prominent difference between the peasantry in India and Europe was perhaps the near absence of ‘ feudalism’ in India. It appears therefore the Indian peasants were less ‘ molested’ than their European counterparts. Indian peasants it seems never paid more than one sixth of their produce to the state or political authority. In contrast, ever since the Norman conquest, British peasants were made to part with more than seventy percent of their produce to the lords and overlords. The Indian practice of not paying more than one sixth of the produce as tax/ rent seems to be a widely prevalent practice in the whole of South Asia. Thus one may safely conclude that in contrast to peasantry elsewhere, especially in Europe, Indian peasants enjoyed more freedom, had more autonomy and were less exploited. Perhaps the institution of caste / jati played no small role in preventing atomisation of peasant society in India and ensured their autonomy.

The coming of the British changed all this irrevocably in the late eighteenth century. The very first act of the British after they took control of India was the enactment of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 which created a class of zamindars who were given powers to confiscate land of peasants who fail to pay land revenue fixed by the Boards of Revenue. These BoRs fixed rent at rates unprecedented in Indian history. The British governors were annoyed to find that a lot of cultivated land across India paid no rent at all or were ‘rent free’. Such lands that existed in most parts of India

constituted about 30 to 40 percent of the total land under cultivation. These lands were called Manyam or Mafee or Inam lands and were assigned to a number individuals , institutions, functions /functionaries . The British sought to abolish most of these over a period of time by various arguments. For instance, one way the British resumed such assignments was to argue that the present occupants of such lands have not been discharging functions for which the lands were given as Manyam/ Inam. Thus over a period of 50 years or so much of the Manyam, Inams were cancelled or reduced to a great extent.

Peasant society in India was very unlike peasant society in Europe not only because of the absence of feudalism . Apart from paying much less rent or tax on cultivated land , data suggest that the Indian peasantry enjoyed a high degree of autonomy to decide irrigation and other crucial infrastructures required for cultivation of lands like the commons , forests etc. A more important feature of peasant society in India was the extent to which the peasant communities in villages were able to set apart a sizeable part of their produce to run and manage several services. It is estimated that between 15 to 40 percent of the total produce of each village was thus allocated to run/ manage services like washerman, barber, blacksmith , carpenter, etc. Dharampal was able to unearth detailed records of such arrangements in over 2000 villages in a district of Tamilnadu of the period 1760. That very similar arrangements must have prevailed in most parts of India means there was relative freedom/ autonomy in peasant communities of India before the British rule.

Independence did bring about significant changes in Indian peasantry. The almost immediate legislative measures adopted by the centre and several states to abolish absentee land lords and give land back to the tiller, even though poorly implemented, did bring in large changes in villages

impoverished and ravaged by the British policies Unlike peasants in Europe who were pushed out of land to migrate to cities in search of jobs in the emerging industries as wage slaves there was no large scale migration of peasants in India. This was perhaps due to the absence of industries to attract rural poor and also due to wider distribution of land as very very small holdings in most of India.

In addition to this caste/ jati may have played a role in holding back the poor from moving to cities in search of jobs. It is quite possible that even when poor migrated to cities for employment in the emerging industries as unskilled labour, they left behind their families with small pieces of land in villages. Thus , unlike Europe , the Indian peasants who were forced to migrate to cities in search of jobs or attracted by the glamour of big cities like Bombay or Calcutta did not snap their connection with the villages. For instance, even now those who have migrated to Bangalore from the districts of Hindupur or Krishnagiri or Dharmapuri and get employed as casual labour or street vendors or cobblers etc , keep going back to their villages to help their families during harvesting or transplanting activities.

More importantly , unlike the violent transition from feudalism to capitalism that Europe experienced, the transition from peasant cultivation to commercial farming in India appears to have come about rather quietly. Along with land reforms , however tardily implemented , the push towards commercial crops, mechanisation, introduction of chemical fertilisers, very rapid increase of irrigation in most parts of India and the active involvement of governments in promotion of modernisation of agriculture , the establishment of Universities of Agriculture Sciences in several states helped in the peasants becoming farmers. By late sixties , with the Green Revolution, one no longer found ‘ land reforms ‘ as prominently in the manifestos of political parties. Remunerative prices for produce and state

procurement of food grains were heard more than land to the tiller or the abolition of bonded labour. It is not as though 'feudal' order that was supposed to have existed in India dissolved peacefully after independence. But it may not be incorrect to say that the transition from subsistence cultivation to commercial farming in India was rather smooth. There was no great resistance to the introduction of various measures aimed at linking the cultivators to the wider market, thus transforming them to capitalist farmers. Even the introduction of technology, mechanisation, HYV seeds or chemical fertilisers on large scale did not meet with any opposition. The war cry in those days was modernise agriculture. Those who adopted modern methods of cultivation were called progressive farmers and rewarded with cash prizes or taken on a tour of cities. Thus by late seventies when farmers associations began to emerge across many Indian states, their demands were all related to the market, prices, subsidies for electricity, fertilisers etc. By the beginnings of eighties it was clear that a predominantly peasant economy of fifties had been transformed into commercial, capitalist farming. Again unlike the forced collectivisation of agriculture that Russia and some others had to go through before modernisation of agriculture / commercialisation, in India we seemed to have achieved it without as much pain or suffering that other societies have gone through. This may be because of our late arrival on the scene. But even those who were similarly placed as we were did not have the transition as 'peacefully' as we had them.

There is a question that is often posed about the future of farmers / farmers movement in Indian context, especially after the recent unprecedented year long movement of farmers. To be more specific, the question is whether farmers can 'rule' India. Can their movement usher in fundamental changes in our socio-political set up. In other words, can the farmers bring

about a ' revolution' as it were. My take on this is there are no indications that farmers of India want to really transform our society. I am not going into questions such as whether farmers of India can be mobilised for socio-political transformation or the class character of farmers or their consciousness etc. It appears to me that the farmers as represented by SKM are rather shy to plunge into politics. The repeated assertions that they are not political can indicate only one of the following. They are as yet not prepared to take political position. Or they do not see themselves shaping the politics of the country. I really do not have an explanation for this lack of ' political will' .

Perhaps, economism , as Lenin would have called it is what characterises the farmers movement in India.