

The Farmers' Movement

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Peasant movement, for the present purpose, may be seen as dating back to the Permanent Settlement Act and establishment of the *Zamindari* system in 1770s by the British. Since then the peasant across the country revolted against the new system again and again throughout the 19th Century and later. This movement later took the shape of 'Land to the Tiller', mainly a sharecroppers movement for the ownership of the land led mainly by the *Kisan Sabhas* of the Communist Party. *Zamindari* abolition in 1953 paved the way to satisfy the share-cropper's demand which happened slowly over the next decade. Telangana (Andhra Pradesh) and North Bengal (West Bengal) failed to implement this on ground, which resulted in the Naxalbari Movement and a decade later the Maoist Movement in Adilabad and Karim Nagar districts of Telangana.

The land distribution had been relatively accomplished in most other parts. Thus came into existence a new peasantry, now called 'farmers'. When the Congress Party failed to accommodate the interests of these farmers, their dissatisfaction gave rise to regional political formations, the result of which was reflected in Congress being dethroned in 1967 Assembly Elections in several Northern States. Charan Singh has been identified as the main leader of these new farmers who had taken to the new technologies through the mid 1960s and 1970s. However the party political process failed to represent the interests of these new farmers. In 1980 the whole situation erupted into a major farmers' movement in Maharashtra, in Karnataka and everywhere there after.

Actually this farmers' movement can be said to date back to 1958-59, when Narayan Swami Naidu in Tamil Nadu emerged as a new farmer leader launching a struggle for reduction in the rates of electricity. Later in 1973 this movement came to everybody's notice when they jammed the city of Koyambatoor with 10,000 bullock carts. Also in 1973 the procurement price for wheat was reduced from rupees 73 per quintal to rupees 69. Which created the occasion for Punjab farmers to launch struggle against it and form a farmers' union called Kheti-badi Union. Then there was a major change at the Centre and Janata Party came to power. Charan Singh, a very senior minister in the Union Cabinet, argued for much greater allocation for the rural areas in the Union Budget and a big Rural Development Program was initiated. However the party political process still failed to accommodate the interests of the farmers. The chief plank of development remained transfer of value from the rural areas for capital formation for industrialization. This is what is known as 'distorted terms of trade' (un-equal exchange) that agricultural/rural products suffered in the market. Then came the rise of farmers in Maharashtra and Karnataka in 1980.

On 15th December 1981 leaders of the farmers' movement from across the country met in a convention in Hyderabad and decided that Bharatiya Kisan Union shall be the name of farmers' organizations shaping this movement. The years that follow saw very large mobilizations in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab and Haryana and finally in 1987 in Uttar Pradesh. This is the Farmers' Movement of our times, often referred to as The New Farmers' Movement. The present movement (beginning 26 November 2020 on the borders of Delhi) demands a complete withdrawal of the newly enacted three laws : one, pertaining to promotion of contract farming, two, promotion of private interests in the purchase of agricultural produce and three, abolishing of ceiling on storage of essential goods including all agricultural produce and a legal framework for the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for agricultural produce declared by the Government. It is a continuation of the New Farmers' Movement, of course with new ideas and a new expression under the new conditions. Look at the issues of this New Farmers' Movement, the thought underlying it, the methods it has adopted and different dispositions that expressed its various moods and needs and you will realize that it is a historic movement which challenges the bases of imperialism.

It creates the occasion for the imagination of a new world order based on knowledge which is not separated from its location, governance which is distributed in society, exchange which is just for all the parties in exchange and which values friendship with Nature, *tyag* and *bhaichara*. It derives its sustenance from traditions of thought (*Nyay*) in which what is just is 'rational' and what is rational is 'just'. The knowledge in society today, that is knowledge with farmers, women, artisans, adivasis and small retailers, that is *lokavidya*, embodies those traditions of thought and practice, which are a great resource for imagining such a new world and the path to take steps towards it.

A bird's eye view of the movement

- **Issues** : Ownership of land (against displacement), prices for agricultural produce, electricity tariff and supply, cancellation of debts, prices and supply of water, seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, corruption of government officials, social forestry.
- **Spread** : Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar etc.
- **Methods** : Rail roko, raasta roko, stoppage of supply (eg. milk, wheat), crowding/jamming the cities, *gherao*, *dharana*, *satyagraha*, fast, stopping entry of political leaders in the villages, attacking corporate houses, very large gatherings/meetings, *panchayats/mahapanchayats*.
- **Dispositions** : Assertion, non-co-operation, protection, ideological expressions (Bharat-India, unequal exchange, self-governance, *kashtakaar-kalakaar-kamgaar* unity, exploitation of the peasants is from outside the village),

peasant versus corporations consciousness, government as the chief protector in the market.

- **Leaders :** Narayan Swami Naidu, Dr. Shivaswami, Nanjunda Swami, Sunderesha, Sharad Joshi, Vijay Jawandhia, Kishan Patanayak, Mahendra Singh Tikait, Rakesh Tikait, Mangeram Malik, Samar Singh 'Samar', Gurnam Singh Chadhuni , Balbir Singh Rajewaal, Bhupendra Singh Mann, Ajmer Singh Lakhawaal, Darshan Paal Singh, Jasprit Singh Ugraahan, Deewan Chand Chaudhari and many others at the district and division level.