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Land Reform First

PROBHAT ROY

“What appears to be a techno-economic quest for social and political change”

AFTER years of hibernation, Indian agriculture is on the threshold of an era of plenty. So dramatic is the rate of its progress and the volume of life-giving foodgrains - particularly wheat, and to a much lesser extent, rice - that the planners, agricultural scientists and the farmers-who-matter are exhilarated with the results, though no less baffled by the unexpected problems they face.

Wheat output has been phenomenal - from a meagre 11 million tons in 1960-61, it rose to 23 million in 1970-71 and is likely to touch 26 million tons this year. The key behind the success in productivity lies in the application of new technology.

This new technology, as is known, involved the use of high-yielding varieties of “miracle” seed, fertilizers, pesticides, tractors and other agricultural machines and above all plenty of water.

This phenomenon of buoyancy in production and the transformation of agricultural methods has been affectionately called Green Revolution. But what exactly has this Green Revolution achieved? What is its true nature? How has it affected the lives of millions of poor farmers and the people in general? Here we are on very complex and sensitive grounds. To say the least the Green Revolution has not been an unmixed blessing. Though scientific agriculture solves some pressing and immediate problems it creates a plethora of new ones. This is more so in a continental type country of mass poverty. Sophisticated methods of crop cultivation, alterations of farm techniques, new treatments of water resources are beneficial only to those who can take advantage of them. By its very nature, this clinical approach is restricted to those who are ready for it. But how many are ready? That is why vast masses of rural poor have remained outside the pale of the Green Revolution.

The success of agriculture depends on two primary factors: economically viable units of cultivable land and a proper mix of agricultural inputs, and, above all, water. For India's millions of impoverished farmers, however, this is but a mere dream. Why this is so can be easily understood if one takes a look at the components of its agricultural economy.

In 1960-61, of the total population of 434 million, 356 million lived in the villages, while 78 million lived

in the urban areas. A national sample survey showed that of the 72 million households, 11.7 per cent owned no land at all and another 32.5 per cent possessed less than one acre. The total of these households accounted for only 1.6 per cent of the total area. Thus, 44.2 per cent of household farmers virtually do not have any land.

On the basis of a few selected indices of holdings, 30 per cent of the rural population may be called marginal farmers. Another 20 per cent may be described as middle peasants. And only about seven per cent represents the rural rich. There are at least 27 million landless families and no one knows exactly how many people are jobless or homeless. All we know is that increasing numbers are swelling the ranks of unemployed or underemployed both in rural and urban areas. During the last decade, no fewer than 30 million have migrated from rural areas to towns and cities.

The difference in the configuration of the cultivable lands held by different segments of farmers has its inevitable effects - inequality of incomes and opportunity. The depth and magnitude of the cleavage can be assessed by the level of life of the rural poor. No less than 40 per cent subsist on an income as low as Rs.18.00 (US \$2.50) or less per month. It is difficult to delineate all the baneful effects of this agonizing development. But, undeniably the contradictions inherent in the agrarian economy have further deepened the social and economic disparities. The resulting hardships and tensions experienced by people in their daily lives, in the villages and shanty-towns, point to a new polarization. Inasmuch as modern technology serves the rich better than the poor, the Green Revolution has added a new dimension to the process of polarization. The greater the inequalities of income and wealth, the wider and deeper the gap between rich and poor.

The dynamics of change furrowing through the Indian agriculture landscape has different consequences for different sections of people. The landed gentry took advantage of their better quality land and cheap labour, and used the available resources to bring benefits to themselves. Through the mechanisms of easy

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credits, marketable surpluses, price manipulation and political pulls, the rural rich reinforced their social and economic power. The poor farmers and the landless workers, though no longer oppressed by classical feudalism, could not gain new advantages either because of their undeveloped or uneconomic holdings, or because of their starvation wages. For millions of poor farmers there are neither credit facilities nor water. They cannot even take full advantage of price subsidies offered by the Government. Indeed, they are so hard-pressed, that the bulk of their produce is either sold at below cost price or mortgaged even before it is harvested. The odds are too heavy against them. They have little or no surpluses to fall back upon. So, when lean months come or rain fails, they starve and die or are compelled to seek whatever work they can get for a mere pittance.

Forced to live in these deplorable conditions of utter misery and destitution, the poor and the weak have hardly any will or initiative left. And even if they are agile and active, they are constantly pushed down to rock bottom physical existence by the scourges of hunger, disease, illiteracy and the octopus of indebtedness. Moreover, traditional practices, sway of caste or community inhibitions or restrictions and age-old prejudices dull them to such an extent that new ideas can hardly penetrate their armour of resistance. Thus, in the end, they reduce themselves to be mere beasts of burden rather than socially productive human beings. Such are harsh realities surrounding the life of the poor farmers of India.

Collectively, the village life is still - even after decades of capitalist penetration - characterized by a diluted form of semi-feudalistic structure. Few rich families - because of their prized land, caste superiority, education and relative affluence - effectively control all the levers of power, both social and economic. They are the moneylenders, usurers, traders, bankers and government agents. They hold important positions in local institutions financed or controlled by governments. The rich farmer families constitute the kingpin around which the villagers' life and livelihood revolve.

They have recently added a new feather in their cap. They are the political functionaries of the new regime of the Green Revolution. It is against this background that a controversy is raging in the country at the moment, about how to deal with the problems of mass poverty. What kind of change in the farm structure is possible or desirable? How to bring about desirable change?

The discussion centres around the concept of "land reform." It is important in this connection to remember that the slogan of land reform has been raised here for more than twenty years now. Little or nothing has been done to make the slogans a reality. Even when a few State governments enacted legislation doing away with the obvious injustices of tenant farming or sharecropping, the laws have been honoured more in breaches than in their observance. The Tenancy Reforms Acts of Maharashtra and Bihar, for example, have not been able to protect tenant farmers from land eviction. Likewise, the Land Acquisition Act of West Bengal of the middle 1950s has yet to be fully implemented. Thus, the momentum of agricultural development and the simultaneous retardations of it have produced a disturbing fall-out, which in turn provoked a situation of social and economic tension. It is for this reason, more than anything else, that the issue of land reform has acquired a new importance and urgency.

But the restructuring of land ownership and the equitable distributions of land are no easy tasks. It is like striking a hornets' nest. Those who have once tasted prosperity are not amenable to reason or persuasion. So strong is their resistance to any measure for reform that the well-to-do farmers in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere have resorted to large-scale hurried transfer of their property to relatives, friends and even to household servants. To circumvent proposed legislation on land-ceilings, the rich families have even resorted to frequent "divorces" recently. No wonder the laws-to-be-enacted or those which are already on the statute books are so full of holes that it seems likely that very little "surplus" would be available for distribution among the landless.

The Government seems to be caught in the dilemma of compulsion to change and opposition to change - so powerfully mounted by the landlords' lobby. The root of the problem, of course, is the right to private property. Thus, it is a political question of momentous implications. What appears to be a techno-economic question is, essentially, a problem of profound social and political change.

The Green Revolution, besides benefiting a few, has indeed served a social and cultural purpose. It has made many poor people aware of the potentiality of change. They see material changes around them, even though they toil just as their fathers and grandfathers had done before. Real or abiding benefits of develop-

ment still elude them. They remain hewers of wood and drawers of water just as before. Yet they are conscious that this need not be their lot any more. In the



small world of their villages, they see the rural rich enjoying a good life. Only a few years ago, they remember, the rich farmers were not so better off. But the standards of life that separate them now are far too great.

Prosperity in a Punjab village is to be seen to be believed. Gone are the days of mudhuts and dusty roads. Prosperity now means brand new whitewashed houses of brick and cement; roads paved; children clothed and healthy looking. Inside the homes, *charpoy*s of yesteryears have been replaced by modern beds; sofas and furniture sparkle with glossy finish. Doors and windows show good grains of teak wood and are screened to keep flies and insects out. The style of living has changed too. Prosperous farmers no longer sit on the floor to eat - they have dining tables with colourful place-mats, all nice and clean. For comfort, they proudly own refrigerators, electric fans and even record players. Today's rich farmers greet visitors with coffee, cookies and other goodies of life. One is amazed to see a pretty wife acting as a gracious hostess just like her city-bred sister. Outdoors, prosperity is in the garage where they park their tractors, tillers and even harvester-combines. Cows are nowhere to be seen in the village - but far at a distance - in the grazing ground. At night, the whole village is electrified - so stark in contrast with the darkness that prevailed before. People gather together to enjoy themselves - with song and dance enhanced with imported liquor.

The change in the village climate is obvious. It is not as if the poor did not partake of any of the joys and pleasures of life bestowed by the Green Revolution. But his feeling of satisfaction is fleeting and ethereal. Socially and culturally, the poor and the weak remain isolated from the dominant village milieu. They do not and cannot feel to be part and parcel of prosperity. Conversely, in the midst of prosperity they feel aggrieved, cheated and deprived. And that is not difficult to understand. They live on the fringes of the villages - down by the riverside. They have little or no work for the greater part of the year. With what little they produce or earn, there is skimpy food to eat and no clean water to drink. They have no money to buy

bullocks, plough or fertilizers. The commodities and services they need so desperately are simply unavailable to them. The "first fruits" of the Green Revolution are still out of their reach.

It is this dichotomy between growing riches and dehumanizing poverty that calls for a drastic remedy. After years of stupor and resignation, the poor seem to be stirring up. They are demanding their first freedoms, from want and insecurity. "Land to the Poor," "Land to the Landless" are the rallying cry now. In fact, forcible occupation of land by the dispossessed and disinherited has occurred in some States like West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and even in relatively prosperous Punjab. In West Bengal, the land-grab movement reached such an intensity as to threaten the fabric of social and political stability. In the hilly and far-flung tribal areas, the people are demanding not only land but also the basic guarantees of food, jobs, clothing and shelter.

Lack of diversification of economic activity in the villages has also slowed down the process of agricultural regeneration. Hence, there are only islands or oases of prosperity in a sea of rural stagnation. A massive programme of rural works would have been a boon for the rural poor. Nothing of the kind has yet been seriously attempted. While a semblance of rudimentary infrastructure is there, in some parts of a few states, it has failed to provide the necessary spurt to sustain economic activities on any wide scale. Dairying, piggery or chicken farming are too few. Afforestation, reclamation of land, desalinization of water-logged areas, development of dry areas to improve the ecology of the country are still notional.

It is true that with the spread of education and skills, the younger folk in the villages are taking increasingly to semi-agricultural or non-agricultural vocations. Transportation, storage, distribution, maintenance of agricultural machines, and the like are becoming lucrative business. But all these activities do not add up to much yet, for the simple reason that the bulk of the rural population remains in a depressed state almost perpetually.

There has been, of course, no dearth of plans or schemes to relieve the acute sufferings of the rural poor. In the 1950s, Block Development Schemes were drawn up. In the 1960s, the Maharashtra government, for example, blueprinted the Small and Marginal Farmers' Schemes. There are also the Integrated Area Development Schemes. Most of these plans, regardless of their meagre success, have flopped. The reason why is also the answer to why extreme social and economic inequality cannot be eliminated merely by "plans" or "schemes." A mechanical or a technological approach *per se* are simply not conducive enough to rooting out the evils of centuries-old tyranny of man by man. To

attain a basic minimum standard of living for the vast majority of the rural population, what is needed is a dedicated endeavour of social engineering. This is not to deny the importance or the remarkable impact of science and technology on agriculture. But technology, to be effective and responsive to the social good, must consider the human condition first. An agricultural technology, though an important factor of change, is neither unlimited in scope nor in results. In fact, the agrarian structure, being what it is, impedes the uninterrupted and widespread adoption of technology. Human ingenuity and endeavour on a mass scale can open up a horizon of boundless creativity. It is capable of producing a world - not only of abundance but also of happiness and joy for all. After all, the Green Revolution - or any revolution - would be meaningless if it did not or could not change the human rela-

tionship from one of exploitation to that of honourable partnership and dignity for all mankind.

Thus, in the light of the experience gained so far, the Green Revolution - whatever its limited achievements - is running against a grave social malaise. In a sense, the Green Revolution both dramatizes and accentuates the inherent weakness of Indian society. A strategy of progress without distributive justice and equity is anachronistic and even absurd. A policy which, by its very nature, serves the affluent and damns the poor can very easily recoil on society. A growth-and-welfare psychology can neither alter the socio-economic structure nor can it harmonize and stabilize society. What is needed is a change in the productive relationship in the economy, not a mere change of methodology. The Green Revolution must give way to a thorough-going Agrarian Revolution.

Search for Human Rights

P. E. POOLE



THE CONTRAST between natural rights and the positive rights enacted by states in their role as law-makers is one which continues to warrant careful examination, and for two good reasons.

The first is the failure to define adequately the parameters of a natural right, such as "the right to property." The other fol-

lows the post-war attempt to obscure natural rights for political expediency.

We can take the second point first, because it is neatly dealt with by Maurice Cranston in his *What are Human Rights?** Natural rights are moral ones, and can be characterised by one single defining feature: their universal ascription to all human beings, whatever the time or place. But the international power blocs, in vying with each other in their attempts to formulate "universal" declarations which create the minimum embarrassment for governments, have in the past twenty-five years formulated a new class of rights - social and economic. But these, such as "everyone has the right to paid holidays," clearly lack universal application (not everyone on earth is an employee).

This new class of "rights" is happily embraced by Russia, for instance, which can now sit back and point to how citizens in the Communist bloc enjoy human rights. But any Jew in Russia will affirm that he is denied the natural right to freedom, which historically includes the right to free movement without hindrance at borders.

Cranston is far less satisfactory in the way he deals with his description of particular natural rights. In the

abstract, he is fine: "To assert, as do so many statements of the rights of man, that man has a right to property, is not to assert that everyone has the right in natural law to whatever possessions he is allowed to enjoy by the system of positive law under which he lives. The numerous cases of exiled criminals in South America having their ill-gotten fortunes recognised as legitimate possessions should make us aware of the ambiguity of the word 'property' - an ambiguity which corresponds to that of the word 'rights' with which it is logically connected. Possessions may be rightful in positive law, but not rightful in natural or moral law; although either form of rightfulness will justify the use of the word 'property' in speaking of such possession."

Cranston takes Locke as his main authority on the issue of property. Locke used the most effective plea for justifying a right, by maintaining that it had been earned. If I mixed my labour with the soil, then I'm entitled to claim the fruits of my effort as my own property, which includes my right to alienate that property in the way I see fit.

So far, so good. But how do we justify the claim to property in - rather than simple possession of - huge tracts of unworked land? Cranston states: "Locke does not fail to observe that property relationships become more complex with the introduction of money, and he goes on to suggest that the right to property extends to possessions which are not the fruits of a man's own labour, precisely because men give tacit consent to the introduction of money."

This transformation is clearly awkward to defend. The private appropriation of land before and after

* The Bodley Head, £2.00.