
UNIT 1 AGRARIAN MOVEMENTS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- identify the agrarian classes in India and their main features;
- enumerate the features of agrarian movements;
- identify the conditions in the social system which give rise to or are associated with agrarian movements;
- critically analyze the forms that agrarian movements take, and their implications for change; and
- describe their features.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Agrarian movements are an integral part of an agrarian system and reflect the changes which are developing internally in the structure of the agrarian system or in relation to it. In this unit, concepts pertaining to the agrarian system, the agrarian class and social movements are discussed. A reasonable understanding of these is necessary for appreciating the context which gives rise to agrarian movements. The unit will also identify the main agrarian movements, trace their development and describe their features

Considering the size of the country, the diversity, the long history of agrarian struggles and their inadequate documentation, it is very difficult to present and explain details about all the agrarian movements in India. It is still possible, however, to capture some of the major movements, examine their significance with reference to the context within which they developed, and the consequences they had for the agrarian condition in particular and for the Indian society in general.

This unit will give you a brief account of the key concepts regarding the *Agrarian system*, relationships between movements and change, the framework for the analysis of movements and some of the basic concepts of agrarianism. Further, we will describe the phenomenon of the agrarian movements that came up in our country, both before and after Independence.

1.2 THE INDIAN AGRARIAN SYSTEM AND AGRARIAN CLASSES

Agrarian movements do not take place in industrial or urban settings, although they may draw support from sections of population in these sectors, or may even have alliances with them for achieving a larger political goal. Basically, these movements arise within agrarian systems. The dictionary meaning of the word ‘*agrarian*’, stated briefly, is *that pertaining to cultivated or agricultural land (and its tenure); related to cultivated land or its management or distribution*. The term ‘*agrarianism*’ refers to *movements for the division of land and changes which would improve the economic status of the farmers, methods, more or less controlled, to bring about changes in the existing pattern of land ownership and operations that involve not only the diffusion of wealth, income and productive capacity in the economy, but also the creation of new incentives and opportunities for increased productivity, income and employment*. Finally, ‘*agrarian outrage*’ is an act of violence originating in discords between classes with antagonistic relationships.

1.2.1 Agrarian Class

The manner in which the members of an agrarian population are related to each other in the social organisation of agricultural production describes a given agrarian system, and also determines the agrarian classes. These relations include *attributes* such as:

- Crop share (rent) given by a tenant to his landlord;
- Unpaid labour of the tenant agricultural labourer;
- Non-market wages;
- Bondedness of labour;
- Customary exactions;
- Rights over the women of inferior tenants and labourers for sexual gratification of the landlord;
- Various expressions of deference used for the landlord symbolizing subordinate and lower caste/class status of the tenant.

The agrarian class structure is, thus, a reflection of the relations of production in agriculture. The variation in the forms and content of agrarian class structure depends upon the level of technological development and the nature of the ownership of the means of production such as land, machinery, cattle, etc.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answers.

b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of this unit.

1) Explain the terms *agrarian*, *agrarianism* and *agrarian outrage*.

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1.2.2 Agrarian Classes in India

The agrarian class composition varies depending upon social, economic, geographic, political and administrative conditions of the region. Nature of land control and land use varies, from place to place and even at one and the same place, depending upon the productivity of the region, largely because of the type of soil, availability of water, adoption of improved agricultural practices, development of communication, integration of market forces, political and administrative set up, etc. These factors affect agrarian relationships everywhere in the country. Today *penetration of market forces and adoption of technology are considered very important factors for shaping agrarian composition*. For a large country like India, which has numerous complex combinations of agrarian systems, it is difficult to describe the various agrarian class combinations. Here, we study this system as it obtained under the feudalistic system that existed during the pre-British era and then during the British period when the colonial power had a vested interest in perpetuating it.

With the influence of capitalists, changes began to take place in the agrarian field. These changes were stimulated by anti-feudal movements leading to the ratification of abolishing landlordism and the introduction of land reform measures after independence.

1.2.3 Agrarian Classes: Feudalistic Agrarian System

Feudalists are the families generally owning or controlling substantially large areas of land, but they do not engage in cultivation directly. They lease out their lands to tenants who cultivate those lands. Their principal source of income from land comprises the rents paid by the tenants. The rents they receive are either in kind (*produce rent*) or in cash (*money rent*). Produce rent, again can either be a fixed amount or a specified share of the crop grown by the tenant. Money rent is generally a fixed amount. Such rent collecting landowners constitute the *rentier classes* of landlords who often are *absentee landlords*, depending upon where they normally reside. In addition to income through rent, the landlord class is often associated with earning through usury (interest on lending). The *peasant class* is generally identified with self-cultivating through family labour, subsistence and small farm cultivator households. The distinguishing feature of this class is the contribution of the peasant householder's family labour to its own activity of cultivation. The feudalistic character of the agrarian system reside in the nature of interrelationships among the various class categories.

1.2.4 Agrarian Classes: Capitalistic Agrarian System

Farmers, owning or controlling substantial landholdings, who get their land cultivated with the help of wage labour under their own direction and/or delegated supervision, can be described as *capitalist farmers*. They themselves do not engage directly in cultivation.

The rich and family farmers can be distinguished by the contribution of their family labour to cultivation under self supervision. They operate on land holdings which can be cultivated almost entirely through their family labour. They do not hire themselves out as labourers.

1.3 MOVEMENT: MEANING AND FEATURES

Since movements and change are closely related, it is important that you understand the meaning of the term '*movements*'. Almost any collective mobilisation tends to get described as a movement of one kind or the other—of peasants, labourers, students, women, backward classes or tribal communities. Movements have recognisable structures and can best be understood in terms of their features. Here, we will outline their features as we discuss the contributions made by some of them:

- A *movement* attempts to bring about **change**, even in the sense of an entirely new social and economic order. It generally involves some goal oriented sustained mobilisation of a collectivity, in a relationship of conflict with some other group(s), and is directed towards the achievement of its objectives.
- A *movement*, particularly the one which has far reaching implications for change, must develop, sooner or later, **a comprehensive ideology** which will present a rationale for bringing about (or resisting) change(s) for which a struggle is considered necessary.
- *Movements* usually have **a strategy** for achieving their aims and also employ tactics as a part of the overall strategy. Sometimes, movements tend to achieve their legitimate rights through persuasion. When the state shows no concern, these may lead to organised demands for changes pertaining to some specific aspects of their lives or for total transformation.

A distinction is often made between *peasant movements and farmers' movements*. Herberle (1972) observes that "*Farmers' movements, as a rule, do not develop elaborate ideologies but raise concrete demands; in this respect they come closer to being mere protest movements.*"

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answers.
b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of this unit.

1) What is a *movement*? Enumerate any three features of a movement?

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1.4 MOVEMENT AND CHANGE: THE FRAMEWORK

1.4.1 Classification of Social Movements

Social movements have been classified in a number of ways using one criterion or the other—*ideology, strategy, nature and extent of change/reform in the structure*. The main categories of people involved in such movements are peasants, workers, students, caste group, women, etc.

Mukherjee (1983) has classified movements on the basis of the kind of change they seek to bring about:

- Those that seek to bring about (or resist) quasi-structural changes within the system (i.e, they may have some of the appearance of a structural change but in fact are not so). These are *quasi movements*.
- Those that seek to bring about (or resist) alternative structural changes by addition or deletion of some structures. These are *social movements*.
- Those that seek replacement of existing structure(s) by alternative structure(s). These are *social transformatory movements*.

It is obvious that most social mobilisations are quasi-movements seeking redressal of grievances or staking claims for a better bargain in the transactions that take place within and between structures that constitute the system. These are mobilisations not for changing the system, but for changes within the system. Such mobilisations are often viewed as *system correctives*.

1.4.2 Framework for the Analysis of Movements and Change

We can broadly identify two orders of means adopted by movements to bring about or resist change(s). These are *institutionalized and non-institutionalised means and pertain to a system defined by the 'established power' governing that system*. If it declares a given means adopted by a movement as illegal and subject to severe penal action, it has to be considered as non-institutionalised. There are three aspects of the use of means: (a) that related to the use of *violence*, (b) that related to its *social legitimacy* and (c) that related to the question whether they are *institutionalised or non-institutionalised*. Means are employed by the state (or the establishment) for overall social control, and also by movements emerging out of contradiction within the societal system.

It may be noted that a given set of means is considered institutionalised or otherwise in relation to the nature of the structure of established power. The state also has the authority to define it as legal or illegal. Thus an identical mass protest may be accepted as part of the political culture and structure of India or U.S.A. but not so in China or South Africa.

We can now arrive at a framework for analysis by which we can assess more precisely the following:

- 1) the nature and quality of a movement;
- 2) the change it aims to bring about; and
- 3) the means (strategies and tactics) it may use.

In this context six kinds of situation can be identified as presented and explained below:

Means	Change promoting/resisting goals	
	Intra-systemic	Systemic
Institutional	Quasi-movement Example: Strikes, lockouts, protest marches, meetings etc. for legitimate demands and redressal of grievances. <i>Stable State (A)</i>	Quasi-movement tending towards social movement Example: Trade union claims for decision making powers. <i>Unstable state (B)</i>
Non-institutional	Quasi-movement tending towards social movement Example: Tebahga movement in Bengal involving peasant revolt for one third crop share by tenants. <i>Unstable State (B1)</i>	Social movement tending towards revolutionary movement Example: Naxalite movement, Charu Mazumdar phase—totally underground. <i>FLUX (C1)</i>
Institutional Non-institutional	Quasi-movement tending towards social movement Example: Riots, rebellions, peasant revolts against exploitation. <i>Unstable (B2)</i>	Social and revolutionary movements Example: Structural changes associated with rebellions, satyagrahas, etc. <i>FLUX (C2)</i>

Situation (A): This refers to movements using institutional means to achieve ends, which do not involve any structural changes of the system. For example, farmers'

associations pressing for various subsidies, procurement prices for crops, loan waivers, etc. are not intended to bring about changes in the agrarian system. Such movements are quasi-movements.

Situation (B): This refers to collective mobilisation which seeks systemic changes through institutionalised means. Peasant associations demanding abolition of the institution of tenancy and grant of land to the tiller through legitimate modes of demand articulation, would be the examples. The *All India Kisan Sabha's* large scale mobilisation of the peasantry for the abolition of intermediaries (zamindars) is also a good example of this case. This is indicative of an unstable state of the social system with a possibility that non-institutionalised means could surface at a later stage.

Situation (B1): This is characterised by a collective mobilisation which adopts non-institutionalised means for the attainment of intra-systemic goals. The *tebhaga peasant movement* in pre-partition Bengal demanding two-thirds share for the tenant cultivator in place of one half of the crop share can be cited as an example of this case. This is an unstable situation as it necessitates non-institutional means to fulfil demands, which apparently do not seek to alter or transform the system. Instead they work for a more equitable sharing of the produce.

Situation (C1): In this, systemic changes are sought solely through the use of non-institutional means, and it points to anomic conditions of total flux. This is a condition in which changes take place with such rapidity that it is difficult to make out the existence of any system(s) or the outlines of any emergent system in between. When the Naxalites decided to annihilate class enemies through conspiratorial means, the situation was a real chaos.

Situations (B2) and (C2): In this combination, institutional and non-institutional means are employed for the realisation of intra-systemic and systemic goals respectively, thus indicating a large participation rate and a greater degree of instability of the social system. The last situation is exemplified by the earlier phase of the *gramdan sarvodaya* movement seeking to replace private ownership of village lands by communal ownership of its members, and also by the Maoist *movement* seeking to replace the landed rich in power by the numerically larger deprived categories of landless and poor peasants. The movements for national liberation also illustrate this situation.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answers.

b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of this unit.

1) How would you distinguish between a *quasi-movement* and a *social movement*?

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1.5 MOVEMENTS ARISING OUT OF FEUDALISTIC AND CAPITALISTIC CONTRADICTIONS

In a real-life situation, elements of both feudalistic and capitalistic systems can be traced and any given concrete agrarian situation may be predominantly of one type or other or even somewhere mid-way between the two.

Following this conceptual understanding of the process of changes in agrarian systems, we can say that most agrarian mobilisations arise out of :

- a) contradictions embedded in the feudalistic structures of agrarian society; and
- b) contradictions emerging from capitalistic penetrations in agriculture.

In the former situation, the major contradictions are to be found within the feudalistic agrarian system—the exploitation of and discrimination between agrarian classes and communities. This results from the institutionalised customary practices of surplus appropriation mainly in the form of rent, usury, unpaid labour and other forms of economic oppression pursued by the land owners.

In the capitalistic agrarian system, the major contradictions are between the rural and the urban-industrial, between the farming (community) and the urban industrial capitalist classes, and the conflicting classes within the rural community guided by purely economic factors.

First, we shall briefly discuss the *Champaran* (Bihar) 1917 and *Kheda* (1918) movements, which were greatly influenced by Gandhi. Thereafter, we shall discuss the two large scale Marxist peasant mobilisations—the *Tebhaga* and the *Telengana*. Later, we shall have a look at the post-independence agrarian movements—the *Gramdan-Sarvodaya*, and the Naxalite movements. All these would qualify as products of colonial-feudalistic agrarian structures. Thereafter, we shall discuss the farmers' agitations as typical of areas in which capitalistic market influences have become pronounced, including the *green revolution belts* and lastly the movements triggered by the opening of domestic markets under WTO agreements.

1.6 MOVEMENTS ARISING OUT OF FEUDALISTIC CONTRADICTIONS (BEFORE 1950)

Between 1860 and 1950, with the exception of half a decade between 1930 and 1935 when prices of agricultural produce did indeed fall, the prices rose continually over this entire period. The single greatest impact, which such a rise in prices produced was manifest in a developing struggle between landlords and peasants for control over the increased value of agricultural surplus. The landlords raised rents. The tenants protested. The landlords asserted their proprietary rights by emphasising their power to evict tenants, while the latter claimed, and were occasionally and with increasing frequency granted, occupancy rights. Over the century, the peasants' ability to resist landlords' control over rent rates and the produce increased and the structure of landlordism stood considerably weakened by the end of the British rule.

The agrarian struggles, which emerged during the British period, are usually classified into two major phases:

- i) Revolts upto and including 1857 were launched largely by the tribals and the peasants in a less organised manner. We are not discussing them here.
- ii) Revolts after 1857 up to the first half of the twentieth century, intensified in the face of the British economic and political policies, recurring famines, a new land revenue system that proved to be a burden on the peasantry, a new administrative machinery, and new civil laws.

The early twentieth century struggles had two parallel currents in the history of the peasant movement. One was the spontaneous economic struggle against more immediate oppressors like money-lenders, traders, zamindars, British administrators, etc. The other was the more conscious and organised agitation led by the Indian National Congress, mainly by Gandhi, and other movements under the leadership of the Communist Party, both of which were operating on an All India basis.

1.7 MOVEMENTS ARISING OUT OF FEUDALISTIC CONTRADICTIONS (AFTER 1950)

Some movements arose out of the feudalistic contradictions, mainly because the implementation of land reforms was tardy and their progress was hampered by feudalistic forces with covert support from the bureaucracy and the power elite, though the said reforms had been accepted as a matter of state policy.

i) Gramdan 1952

With the coming of Independence, and after the death of Gandhi, on the anvil of Tebhaga and Telengana movements, emerged the **bhoodan** and later the **gramdan** movements as alternatives to the **Tebhaga** and **Telegana** movements. **Gramdan and bhoodan** were extensions of Gandhi's concept for the replacement of private ownership of property by trusteeship, particularly in the case of *land*. Trusteeship implied that owners of the means of production (i.e. land, machinery, etc.) should become trustees of their wealth and enterprises (i.e. land, machinery, etc.), which should belong to the community which labours on it. ***Bhoodan and gramdan*** are based on this concept.

Vinoba Bhave's bhoodan movement began in Nalgonda, the hot-bed of the Telengana movement. Vinoba asked the landed families to consider the landless as their one additional unborn children and to gift their shares to them. In the next stage, land owners in the villages were requested to gift their entire land(s) in the villages. The lands would then belong to the village and not to the individuals. This was no doubt a revolutionary step amounting to demanding an end to private property.

The response to the programme naturally came from tribal communities and the landless and poor peasants of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The tribal district of Koraput in Orissa, however, responded almost as one body. The means adopted to mobilise for such changes were based on volition, persuasion and non-violence.

In the initial stages, some remarkable results were obtained. For example, in 1958 about 88 households embraced gramdan with only 18 acres of land in village Berain (Bihar), which was inhabited only by SCs and STs. All villagers were agricultural labourers except one middle class peasant family.

The village then set about creating new institutions—the ***Sarvodaya Sahyog Samiti*** (cooperative society) and the ***gramsabha*** (village assembly). Decisions involved collective farming on 18 acres of ***gramdan land***. Sharecropping contract with landowners had now to be routed through the cooperative society. A community centre, cattle shed and community garden were established through ***sharamdan*** (Voluntary gift of labour). The village children slept at the same place in the community centre complex irrespective of caste differences. A package of village industries was started—the oil press, bee-keeping, production of toddy molasses and, of course, the ***Charkha*** (spinning wheel) for spinning and the ***kargha*** (loom) for weaving. An egalitarian social system evolved rapidly.

The better off farmers started demanding certain concessions for their conditional entry into gramdan which was acknowledged. This led to a chain reaction with other poor peasants demanding similar conditions, which had to be granted. In due course the smooth egalitarian functioning of gramdan was impaired.

The ***gramdan sarvodaya*** movement did not directly engage in struggles against feudal forces of exploitation. It attempted a structural option for the exploited sections of the peasantry and agricultural labourers to build an alternative egalitarian system of production and distribution, which would replace the feudalistic agrarian system.

ii) Naxalbari and Naxalite Movement, 1967 onwards

The Naxalbari movement in the Siliguri subdivision of Darjeeling district, which matured in 1967, derived its name from Naxabari, a village in North Bengal. It was a continuation of prolonged struggles by the peasant association against feudal exploitation and subversion of land reforms. From the mid fifties, the *Krishak Samiti* (peasant committee of the Communist Party) engaged in relentless struggles against the landlord class. They would not allow them to evict tenants, or to levy non-legal exactions. They advised tenants not to give the landlords any crop share unless they furnished documentary evidence of the land under tenant cultivation.

Leftists emerged victorious in the 1967 elections in West Bengal. On 2 March 1967, a non-Congress United Front Government was established jointly by the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communists Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] and a breakaway group from the Congress (the Bangla Congress).

The crux of the problem in West Bengal, like in any other state, in the struggles within the feudal order, was concentration of the ownership of land in hands of landlords. The United Front Government was pledged to bring about long due land reforms—a small plot of land for each poor and landless peasant and their release from the burden of usury.

Soon after swearing-in, the minister in charge of land revenue, a veteran CPI(M) peasant leader, announced a policy of speedy distribution of surplus land among the landless and the stopping of eviction of sharecroppers. The parties had promised land redistribution but were not in complete control of the state, and thus not yet sure how to recover the land transferred malafide by the landlords.

On the *malafide (benami)* transfer the minister said, “the government had not yet been able to take any decision. The hurdles put by the Constitution and the court papers and documents are stupendous.” (Sumanta Bannerji 1986). The government also realised the strength of the landlords, their control over economic and social affairs and their ability to delay the process of land distribution. This they could do by resorting to the courts, which had no provisions meant to support any progressive laws or easy implementation of those specially pertaining to land.

The Kisan Sabhas had political influence, but organisationally they were not in total control of the villages of Bengal. Thus, the base of the organisation was not strong enough to face the onslaught of the landlords who could draw support of the judiciary and the police in many ways. The landlords took all the possible measures to delay the identification and distribution of surplus land (land above ceiling).

A section of the Kisan Sabha (the North Bengal District Committee owing allegiance to the CPI (M)) could not come to terms with the situation. They attacked the minister in charge for his having submitted to the bureaucrats.

This section of the Kisan Sabha was already active among the peasantry in North Bengal. On 18 March, 1967, after the formation of the United Front Government, in a peasants’ conference held by the Siliguri Subdivision Committee of the CPI (M), the leadership gave a call to carry out the following directives:

- a) end the monopoly of ownership of land by the landlords;
- b) redistribute land through peasants’ committees and organisations; and
- c) destroy the resistance of the landlords.

Thus, this committee decided to go ahead with a tactic which was quite different from the one envisaged by the CPI (M) party as a whole. As the two differed, *the Siliguri Committee* expected opposition from the state government; to counter which they prepared the peasants to fight both the Central and the State opposition.

From March-April 1967, all the villages in that subdivision were organised and 15,000-20,000 peasants were enrolled as whole time activists. Peasants' committees were formed in almost all the villages and they were transformed into armed guards. They soon occupied land in the name of the peasant committees, burnt all land records which had been used to cheat them of their dues, cancelled all mortgage debts, passed death sentences on oppressive landlords, formed armed bands by looting guns from the landlords, armed themselves with conventional weapons like bows, arrows and spears and set up a parallel administration.

The movement was crushed. Contradictions surfaced at various levels. The tactics adopted by the Siliguri Committee differed from those of the Party as a whole. The Party, as we mentioned earlier, was bound by certain legalities. This resulted in a split in the Party and the consequent formation of CPI (ML) in 1969. The Party, however, pointed to the legitimacy of the demands made by the North Bengal District Committee during the clashes that ensued between the peasants of the subdivision and the police. The other partner of the government (the Bangla Congress) and the Central Government, however, discussed the events in terms of a law and order problem. Finally, the circumstances were used by the Central Government to crush the United Front Ministry, and an all out attack was launched against the Communist Parties irrespective of their differences.

Today, the Naxalite movement is not carried out by any single party. Countless groups espouse Naxalite politics and operate autonomously in their chosen areas maintaining, at best, tenuous links with some other groups.

iii) **Operation Barga**

When the Communist Parties and other leftist forces were voted to power and to form government in 1977, many measures were adopted to relieve the rural population from land related problems, hunger, lack of credit facilities, unemployment and insecurity of tenure. Of the various land reforms in West Bengal, here we are going to concentrate only on Operation Barga, a programme for the registration of sharecroppers, which was both a culmination of prolonged struggles and a movement in its own right.

Bargadars exist in large numbers in West Bengal and they, along with the agricultural labourers, are the backbone of agriculture there. Operation Barga has been a major campaign in West Bengal since 1978, after the Left Front government came to power in 1977.

The Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill introduced at the end of Tebhaga movements, for example, was an expression of the problems faced by bargadars. Operation Barga was an operation for materialising the provisions of the then existing laws. One of the major aspects of this operation was the registration of bargadars. This was a stupendous task before the peasant organisations headed by the left forces. West Bengal had a long history of Zamindar settlement. Forms of tenancy had been inbuilt in the system in which there were no records. Oral contracts were the order of the day and any papers worth maintaining were with the landlords and the more well to do landowners. Thus, identification of barga land was a major task before the peasant organisations.

The bargadars were bound to the landowners economically, politically and even socially. The temporariness and *tenant at will* status forced them to live with the fear of eviction and, therefore, made them subservient to the power of the landowner. The peasant organisations had to first breakthrough this relationship and later after the registration, to give protection to the bargadars from any attack mounted by the old power groups, like the bargadar landlords. Of course, these efforts received a boost from the political and administrative support that these organisations received from the state government.

'Operation Barga' appeared to be the culmination of all the anti-feudal struggles of the past; the programme itself was a struggle, a movement which received support from the state, a state which had the political will to implement the laws. As a result, by 30th June, 1985, 1.31 million barga recordings were completed out of an estimated total of 2 million bargadars. The registration of bargadars provided the sharecropper with legal security of tenure, but they continue getting affected by poor living conditions and are compelled to sell their certificate (patta) sometimes. Of course, institutional finance and other poverty alleviation programmes have been introduced to stop this trend. By 1983, nearly 300,000 sharecroppers were provided with such credit.

The cropshare norm seems to be settling for 75:25 with the bargadar providing the bulk of the inputs into farming. **The structure of tenancy has been 'secured'** through security of tenure provided to the bargadar, and this has created such conditions for the bargadar as 'free' him from the many economic and non-economic obligations that 'tied' him to the landowner earlier.

Check Your Progress IV

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answers.

b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of this unit.

1) Bring out the main features of Bhoodan and Gramdan movements.

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2) List the main features of Operation Barga.

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1.8 MOVEMENTS ARISING OUT OF CAPITALISTIC CONTRADICTIONS

Agrarian mobilisations upto the sixties took place largely in response to contradictions within the old agrarian systems dominated by feudal relations. Thereafter, the agrarian situation seems to be changing in certain areas where **market forces and prices have** tended to play an ever increasing role in the lives of the farmers. Over a period of time, areas growing cash crops in **Tamil Nadu**; areas under onion, sugarcane, cotton, beedi and tobacco cultivation in **Maharashtra**; areas under cotton, sugarcane, hybrid jowar, etc. in **Karnataka**; and wheat growing states of **Punjab** and **Haryana** which were the earliest to reap the benefits from the green revolution, began witnessing a new consolidation of rural power. Strong farmers' organisations have emerged in these areas.

By August 1980, the *Ryota Sangahas* active in *Shimoga, Belgaum, Bijapur and Bellary* districts in Karnataka consolidated themselves on a non-party basis. The outcome was the establishment of the new *Karnataka Rajaya Ryota Sangha (KRRS)*, the same name as that of CPI led KRRS, with the leadership in the hands of Rudrappa, Sundaresh and Nanjundaswamy (a professor of law and a Lohia inspired socialist). This crystallisation was facilitated by Narayana Swamy Naidu who earlier toured the State under the sponsorship of Shimoga leaders. Thenceforth, an ideology of *ruralism* would guide the future expansion of the movement. Specific issues and area-specific problems submitted from time to time, were being replaced by a new framework, which “*made clear that agriculture had to be treated as a commercial unit as in industry. The same treatment was demanded for agriculture in respect of price policy and supply of electricity and other inputs as was given to industry*”.

The KRRS inspired movement is described as a ‘village movement’ rather than a farmers’ movement. There is emphasis on the ‘identity and self-respect’ of the villagers, which the KRRS has brought to them.

i) Recent Peasant Movements in Orissa

The peasants of Orissa have been agitating over the issue of low prices for paddy or rice since 2000.

The question of ‘under-rates’ has been there for long, but the origin of this protest is quite difficult to trace. According to Surendra Sahu of the *Jharsuguda Anchalika Krushaka Sangathana* (Regional Peasant Organisation), the protest started in November 2000 in Jharsuguda. Initially, the peasants organised themselves to press for their demand for famine relief. (This district was affected by famine during the year 2000-2001.) The next season, that is during the monsoon of 2001, the district was inundated by floods caused by local rivers. Since then, i.e. July-August of 2001, the demand of the peasants shifted to flood relief. Later, towards October–November 2001, the issue in front of the peasants was the proper sale of whatever little paddy they had produced despite the vagaries of nature. And now their organisation seems to be growing in strength.

But the people in the district of Bargarh, which is irrigated by the Hirakud Dam, had been fighting for the proper sale of their paddy. In fact, they clearly remember the protest they had registered during the year 2000. On 2nd November, 2000, at Godbhaga and on 10th November, 2000, at Debahal, there was a *Rasta Roko* (Road Blockade) on National Highway No. 6, to have paddy sold in the premises of the Regulatory Market Committee (RMC) for the stipulated minimum support price. This led to some relief for some days as the paddy was purchased at the minimum support price in the RMC premises. But again after some time this practice fell into disuse. In Barpali on 3rd February, 2001, as the paddy was not purchased from the farmers in the RMC premises, the peasants stuffed the Block and *Tahsil* Offices with their paddy in protest. This became a method of protest and was tried again on 8th May, 2001, at Attabira Block. On 10th May, 2001, after a *Rasta Roko* protest (involving National Highway No. 6), which was preceded by a massive rally of peasants from the various parts of the district and numbering around 10,000, they assembled at Bargarh and the district administration was brought to its knees. An agreement was reached between the protesting peasants and the district administration. The important points in the agreement were as follows:

- 1) *The sale and purchase of paddy was to be effected in the RMC arena.* This was to put a check on the mill owners. Earlier, the practice by the mill owners was to buy paddy from outside the RMC, at a price much below the stipulated minimum support price and sell it to the Food Corporation of India at a much greater profit.
- 2) *The second important point in the agreement was regarding payments.* In case the sale is as little as 15 bags of paddy, the buyer is to make payments immediately. If it is higher than that, then 30 per cent of the price is to be paid at the

RMC and the rest within the next week. Besides, the Fair Average Quality standard or FAQ analysis is to be done at the RMC premises and not at the rice mills.

Apart from these, there are various other local problems. The Bargarh district administration/collector had the grand idea of introducing photo-identity cards for peasants who would sell paddy at the RMCs. The objective was to identify and put a check on the '*beparis*' who collect paddy from peasants at a cheaper price and sell it at higher rates at the RMC.

Then there was the question of the poor-peasants, marginal peasants, or landless and dalit peasants. This was addressed squarely by the socialist leadership of the *Orissa Rajya Krushak Sangathan* (Orissa State Peasant Organisation) at Bargarh. According to Lingaraj, a popular peasant leader of the *Orissa Rajya Krushak Sangathan* of the region, this section of the peasantry has very little surplus to sell in the market. Very often, the necessities of cash make them part with some of their own food (so it can hardly be called surplus). Usually, they have between 5 to 15 bags of rice to sell.

When they were under the pressure of the movement, the mill owners preferred to buy in bulk from peasants who could bring between 100 to 500 paddy bags to sell. In this situation most marginal peasants preferred to sell their paddy to their village '*beparis*' or agents of the mill owners. In fact in the far flung villages, these *beparis* and agents provide the required cash to peasants, and in return receive from them paddy during the harvest-season. In places like Talsigagd, Gaisima, *and* Khuapali, in the district of Bargarh, the socialist activists set an example by forcing the mill owners to purchase from the small-sellers/marginal peasants first, and then from the rest of the sellers. This sacrifice led to some activists being rebuked by their own family members for not helping their own sales.

ii) Recent peasant movement in Karnataka

It was about 15 years ago, i.e. in 1991, that the Congress Government, then ruling at the Centre, had initiated the "*new economic policy*" of *privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation*.

Gulbarga district was in the news those days because of *kisan* struggles for remunerative prices for *tur dal* and other agricultural products. These activities acquired significance in the wake of *suicides committed by some of the peasants* as this class of people was not getting remunerative prices and its members were unable to repay the loans they had contracted.

As a part of the statewide agitation called by various *kisan* organizations to protest against the Union Government's import policy and to show their wrath against the anti-people policies of the S M Krishna government in the state, a *Rasta Roko* agitation was successfully held throughout Gulbarga district.

At Bangalore, the state's capital, hundreds of activists belonging to *kisan*, women's and working class organisations held a *dharna* in front of the Chief Minister's official residence. The response was reminiscent of the tumultuous days of the peasant agitation two decades ago, popularly known as the *Navalgunda-Nargunda peasant struggle*, which in its wake brought to power the first non-Congress government in the state.

In view of the agitations by *tur dal* growers in the northern parts and by coconut and areca nut growers in the western parts of Karnataka asking for the state government's intervention to stop the collapse of prices in the case of these crops, the milk producers' struggle and the agitation against the steep hike in electricity tariff announced by the state government, the *Karnataka Prantha Raitha Sangha (AIKS)*, *Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha*, *Karnataka Prantha Krushi Kooli Kaarara Sangha (AIAWU)* and the state unit of AIKS (Ajay Bhavan) called for a *Rasta Roko* agitation on February 5-6, 2001 and *Jail Bharo* agitation on February 7, 2001. They thus endorsed the call

given by seven Left-led peasant and agricultural workers' organisations which had organised an all-India convention and March to Delhi earlier.

The sad plight of the growers of *tur dal*, areca nut and coconut and also that of the milk producers was a direct outcome of the import policy dictated by the WTO and more than willingly followed by the Central Government. The agitating organisations demanded intervention from the state government to arrange support for the growers of *tur dal*, areca nut, coconut, paddy and maize. They also demanded withdrawal of the steep hike in electricity rates announced by the state government as per the IMF-World Bank dictates. Another demand was that the state should halt dismantling its public distribution system, elimination of which too had worsened the plight of the *kisans* and other poorer sections.

iii) Other recent Agrarian Crisis and Agrarian Struggles

In recent time a serious crisis has emerged in the field of Indian agriculture. The crisis is most glaringly manifested in the growing incidence of starvation deaths and farmers' suicides. While the largest number of starvation deaths are still routinely reported from the backward regions of the country, especially *Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and now increasingly from Rajasthan*, the *trend of suicides* generally prompted by heavy indebtedness, crop failures, or inability to find a market for the produce, is noticed even among the well-to-do farmers in the agriculturally developed areas of *Punjab, Maharashtra and Karnataka*.

The crisis has also led to a new phase of agrarian unrest. Peasants and farmers have strongly opposed the WTO, growing penetration of giant agribusiness firms and attempts to corporatise agriculture. Once again powerful farmers' movements are being witnessed in the areas of green revolution, Punjab and Haryana in particular.

While the WTO agreements, especially the removal of quantitative restrictions (QRs) on imports, and as a result, the thoroughly unequal competition with heavily subsidised big corporate farmers from the Western countries has aggravated the present crisis, at the root of it lies the accumulated anomalies of the underlying landlord path of capitalist development in Indian agriculture.

Sections of big farmers have started dreaming about exporting to the world market and securing super-remunerative prices. And then the corporate sector has started demanding 'level-playing field' even as it began forging closer ties of collaboration with the MNCs, but the big farmers have come up with the demand for insulation from the WTO.

The AIKSS organised a peasant conference at Faizabad in UP against the new agricultural policy in March 2001. This was followed by a '*lutera bhagao, krishi bachao*' (stop this plunder, save agriculture) campaign in the course of which mass signatures were collected on a 'freedom charter' against the WTO. In September 2001, an impressive 'freedom from debt' conference was held at Mansa in Punjab and finally on November 9, 2001 a massive anti-WTO rally was held in Delhi to protest the launch of a new trade round at the Doha summit of WTO.

iv) Conclusions

The most recent manifestation of farmers' mobilisation has seen the emergence of Mahinder Singh Tikait, himself a small/medium farmer, projecting the aspirations of the farmers of West Uttar Pradesh. One after another, newer areas of capitalistic market penetration is throwing up leadership which speaks more or less the same language, makes more or less similar demands, applies more or less similar strategies and tactics and always involves large rural masses.

What kinds of change are involved with such large scale farmers' mobilisations? Firstly, the "*peasants*" are becoming '*farmers*' with their entry into cash economy. This entry implies use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, hybrid varieties of seeds, irrigation, electricity,

diesel tractors, power tiller and so on, which are all monetized. So there arises the question of a '*remunerative*' market price for the produce.

The second point to note is that in these areas of cash economy, farmers get their credit from formal institutions like banks, cooperative credit societies, etc. So, the role of the money-lender (usurer) is more or less eliminated or considerably reduced. When debts accumulate, the farmer does not face 'bondage' threats. He has an association which gets him a debt relief or a waiver or a deferral of repayment.

Thirdly, the landowning farmers are not characteristically related to each other through a hierarchy of rights and obligations. They increasingly tend to get related to each other as members of the common interest groups, viz. the 'farmers' associations'. Such membership, based as it is primarily on economic interests, tends to reduce or alter the distinction of caste. In this sense the association plays a secularising role and comes out clearly in terms of class interest.

Fourthly, the farmers' mobilisations have been by and large open and non-violent, in contrast with unrest and conflicts in feudalistic agrarian systems. The movements of the feudalistic agrarian system had attacked the foundations on which the system rested, whereas in the movements just discussed, the quest has been for gaining a larger share of the existing system without upsetting the power balance drastically.

Fifthly, almost invariably in these areas, peasant associations, which had earlier fared well fighting against feudalistic oppression and exploitation within the agrarian systems, have been overtaken by farmers' associations that have located the major contradiction between the rural and the urban. This is especially so in the areas where the impact of market forces is being experienced.

The principal participants in this contradiction are the agricultural labourers and poor peasants on the one side and the rich peasant and landlords on the other. It is the agricultural wage labourer who seem to be emerging as the class whose interests are least accommodated within the framework of the '*ruralist ideology*' so far. Freed from attachment and bondage which were associated with the security of some patronage, the agricultural wage labourer is still distant from the security of patronage, which the formal industrial sector provides to his counterpart, or in keeping pace with the benefits for which farmers are struggling.

The ideologues and champions of the ruralist ideology prefer to conveniently overlook the fact that consistent with their *logic the agricultural labourer also should get the same security of wages as his urban/industrial counterpart*. Instead, whenever there is a movement asking for a rise in agricultural wages, it is met with violence from the rich peasants and the landlords. Many a time these attacks on the agricultural labourers are treated as caste wars overlooking the class contradiction. On the whole, the changes taking place in these areas range from quasi-structural to structural depending upon the stage of transition an agrarian system is in between the feudalistic and the capitalistic orders.

Check Your Progress V

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answers.

b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of this unit.

1) List the main features of the farmers' mobilisations of the seventies and the eighties.

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2) List any four changes caused by large scale farmers' mobilisations in recent times.

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1.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have identified, very broadly, two kinds of agrarian contexts which are associated with correspondingly different kinds of agrarian movements.

The first is where mobilisations are taking place in response to *feudalistic oppression*. In the feudalistic agrarian system, status discrimination and the system of exploitation are fused within a system of patronage. It is this system, which the agrarian mobilisations are attacking. Whether it be the share of tenants produce, unpaid labour, minimum agricultural wages, customary exactions, bondage of agricultural labourers, right over their women for sexual gratification and other symbolic behaviours of deference expected of inferior peasants, these are the attributes which characterise the feudalistic structures against which agrarian movements are directed.

The second kind of agrarian movements are taking place in areas where the *market forces* have introduced cash economy. This has forced the farmers to calculate their costs, and has made them sensitive to the prices which their agricultural produce must fetch if they have to survive or prosper (*capitalistic agrarian system*). It contends that the exploitation of the rural community by the urban industrial elite is the root cause of the plight of the farming communities. Consistent with this logic, it does not accept that the farmers/peasants are differentiated among themselves as small, medium and big farmers. The talk of such differentiations they contend is a cleverer use of the urbanites to divide and rule over the farmers. *The farmers demand that the state should extend to them the same kind of benefit structures, facilities, concessions, infrastructures, etc. as they extend to the urban-industrial system.* Interestingly, when it comes to agricultural labourers, the farmers have so far shied away from fighting for their wage and other employment securities.

These two types of agrarian systems may be considered as 'pure' or 'ideal' types. This means that in concrete empirical situations they are likely to co-exist with varying degrees of predominance of one over the other. This is so because our agrarian scene is undergoing changes with the release of market forces and rural development programmes. In an important sense, *conflict is endemic to development.*

To sum up, we have discussed a number of agrarian movements arising from both feudalistic and capitalistic contradictions to demonstrate their nature and variety in terms of the contexts which gave rise to them, the means (strategies and tactics) adopted by them, and the quality of change with which they are associated.

1.10 KEY WORDS

- Bargadar** : is a person to whom land is allotted through registration under certain conditions.
- Barga land** : Land allotted to Bargadar is called Barga Land.
- Corporatise** : To run agriculture as an industry
- Agriculture** : An unit of measurement for measuring land. Generally, 20 *kathas* make a *bigha*. This measure, however, varies from place to place and so does the number of *bighas* that make an acre.
- Katha** : *kathas* make a *bigha*. This measure, however, varies from place to place and so does the number of *bighas* that make an acre.
- Landlord Path** : In line with traditional fuedal structures.
- Level-playing field:** On equal terms
- Sangams** : Village level organisations of members participating in the ongoing struggle. The activities and membership is organised and not loosely knit.
- Tebhaga** : was a movement of the sharecroppers demanding the right to retain two-thirds of the produce for themselves, thus, advocating a reduction in the share they had to pay to the owners of the land known as *jotedars* (landlords and rich peasants). The tenants, better known as *bargadars* (meaning sharecroppers) were entitled to 50 per cent of the gross crop output, but in reality the net crop share which they were able to take back home from the *jotedar's khamar* (threshing floor) was much less. This was because the crop and other loans and also the customary non-legal exactions were adjusted before the *bargadars* could take their share. Sharecroppers had no security of tenure.

1.11 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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1.12 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) The term 'agrarian' generally refers to cultivated or agricultural land including its management or distribution. On the other hand, the term 'agrarianism' refers to the movements for the division of land and changes which are supposed to improve the economic status of the farmers. While as the term *agrarian outrage* is simply an act of violence emerging as a result of discords between classes having antagonistic relationships.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) A movement is a collective mobilisation of people for a particular cause. It brings about changes, which are directed towards the achievement of its objectives. The main features of a movement are:
 - i) A movement has a comprehensive ideology;
 - ii) Movements have strategies for achieving their aims.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) Quasi movements are those, which bring about (or resist) quasi-structural changes within the system. Social movements are those that seek to bring about (or resist) alternative structural changes by making additions or causing deletions to some structures.

Check Your Progress IV

- 1) *Bhoodan* and *gramdan* were attempts to bring about total redistribution of land, leading to the termination of the system of private property, to be substituted by trusteeship arrangements. A kind of collective ownership was envisaged. The *gramdan sarvodaya* movement attempted a structural option for the exploited sections of the peasantry and agricultural labourers in order to build an alternative egalitarian system of production and distribution, which would replace the feudalistic agrarian system. In this sense, it was a social-transformatory movement. It sought to bring about this change through non-violent means. Unfortunately, the instrument of satyagraha was not used convincingly whenever these *gramdan* villages had to face a hostile environment. The *gramdan sarvodaya* movement shied away from both militant as well as non-violent struggles, when the feudal interest overtly and covertly attacked the new system. By default, the leadership played into the hands of the established *status quo* with ruinous consequence for the movement.
- 2) Registration of the bargadars; Security of tenure; Record of rights; and Distribution of certificates (pattas).

Check Your Progress V

- 1) The farmers' mobilisations of the seventies and eighties arose out of the contradictions which developed following the strategy adopted for the green revolution in the sixties. Today, the main features of these mobilisations are as follows:

They are under the leadership of rich and middle level farmers who are the actors in these movements and also the principal beneficiaries or losers;

- They are interested in promoting their sectional interest and not in raising questions pertaining to the agrarian system as a whole.
- They do not incorporate the interest of the landless agricultural labourers and poor peasants.

- Their issues relate to the operations of market forces and are guided by the development of productive forces, e.g., technology, etc.
 - By and large, these mobilisations have been non-violent.
 - They have not formalized as political parties.
- 2)
- formation of interest groups, e.g. as farmers, cutting across caste affiliations;
 - promotion of class interest;
 - priority to economic factors of production over non-economic factors;
 - transformation of peasants into farmers due to the process of penetration of market forces in agriculture.