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### Authoritarian populism, agrarian question and the challenge of formation of worker peasant alliance in India (Draft paper)

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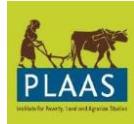


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# **Authoritarian Populism, Agrarian Question and the Challenge of Formation of Worker Peasant Alliance in India (Draft paper)**

*Dinesh Abrol*

## **Introduction**

In this article we examine the drivers, consequences and emerging dynamics of the ascent of politics of right wing authoritarian populism in India. It also assesses the emerging pattern of response of the peasantry and rural labour to the ascent of rightwing authoritarian populist of Modi and BJP in India. The assessment is that the resistance of peasants and rural labour is connected to the regressive agenda of promotion of external intervention for the benefit of primitive accumulation under perusal through the protection of cow on the cattle economy and agriculture and the implementation of demonetization and less cash economy, goods and services tax (GST) based formal economy, Aadhar based identity linkage (use of unique identity number for the delivery of essential services, transfer of available state support (subsidies for food and nutrition, agricultural input and banking services and social security) and many other such programmes.

There is also evidence that all these external interventions are also beginning to get resistance from the farmers, landless peasants and rural workers on the ground in some parts of the country. The assessment is that there is a growing mismatch between the material impact of the politics on the life and livelihoods and the discourse of government led by Modi in India. However, it is also true that the Central government and Modi, actively supported by the mobilization of cadres of rightwing ruling party (BJP) and Sangh Parivar affiliated organizations, have been able to contain the impact of the opposition of farmers, landless peasants and rural workers due to the lack of a robust political alternative on the ground.

Protests from the side of Dalits and Muslims have the potential to contribute to the opening up of the space for an alternative to neoliberalism and for the wider mobilization of peasants and rural labour on the front of agrarian situation in India. The assessment points out that while the left parties led class and mass movements are active and involved in the resistance to the agenda under implementation by the Central and State Governments but to open up the space for emancipatory politics the left and democratic forces will have to shed their dilemmas on what kind of strategy needs to be followed with regard to development of productive forces in the case of Indian economy and agriculture in particular.

The analysis is also made of the response of left politics in making with the aim to frame the position of this author to the ongoing debate in the Marxist scholarship on how to conceptualize the agrarian question. Finally the challenge facing the question of building of worker peasant alliance is addressed. Keeping in view the balance of forces on the ground and the current conjecture in India, it is argued that the left and democratic politics need to combine the mobilization of class politics on land and labour rights with the politics of democratic identity formation to mobilize the Adivasis, Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Muslims and poorer sections of Upper Castes.

## ***Drivers of populism in India***

With the weakening of congress party and the rise of Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) backed BJP affiliated organizations such Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Hindu Yuva Vahini and many other similar outfits, India is today witness to the politics of far right in full strength. With the Modi government at the Centre in India the RSS affiliated organizations have been emboldened to practice

unruly politics. There are far reaching consequences of this authoritarian populist politics for not only the economy but also the polity and society. The aim of authoritarian populist politics of far right is to organize the country around a non-secular Hindu Majoritarian political order. In 2014 the authoritarian populist politics of far right got a big boost from the decisive electoral victory of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) at the Centre in India. Consequently the rightwing populism has an effective leader in Narendra Modi, a RSS pracharak (organizer) promising the dream of good days (“Acche Din”) for the people of India. Talking of development, while also polarizing the people on Hindu-Muslim lines, the attempt of RSS backed Modi government at the Centre is to stabilize the rule of far right. The twenty hour politics of the RSS is trying to expand through Shakhas, Sarswati Mandirs and temples in almost all parts of India. It would not be an exaggeration, if it is suggested that the RSS is the new establishment not only at the level of the Central Government but also in all the important wings of the state apparatus.

The Indian society is on the way to becoming communal and less secular (John Harriss, Craig Jeffery and Stuart Corbridge, 2017). It is well apparent that Narendra Modi has been able to use the frustrations of the people with the Congress dominated political order and the social demand for jobs to come to power at the Centre and in more than twenty one states. And now the RSS ideologues are busy cementing the rule of Modi Government on the ground. Using modern communications and technology, the ideas of Hindutva- that places at the Centre of discourse the hegemony of the idea of glory of Hindu Culture are now well placed to deepen the roots of RSS in the Indian society, polity and culture. Furthermore today the BJP is the preferred party of India's capitalist classes. In the post-independence period, it is for the first time that the BJP Government has been able to get a brute majority of far right in the parliament (Madhu Prasad, 2014). While India is on the way to accept the anti-constitutional power of RSS, but for the sake of legitimacy the Modi Government would like to achieve “constitutionally” the objective of Hindu Rashtra, and it is quite possible that the Modi Government may even amend the constitution and has plans to establish the Presidential system of government if the people return Modi to power in 2019 at the Centre.

Until the nineties the politics of ruling class parties was conducted with the Congress party in the government at the Centre. Our understanding is that the post-reform period failure with regard to meeting the social demand for jobs and the frustration with corruption explain a large part of the rise of BJP. The political strategy of ruling classes has changed; the Congress party, which was so far the main national party for them, has been replaced with the BJP (Kalm Siddiqui, 2017). See the contributions of Atul Sood and Kalaiyaran A, 2014), Archana Prasad, 2014, Radhika Desai, 2014, Manali Desai and Indrajit Roy, 2016, Aijaz Ahmad, 2016 and Achin Vanaik, 2017 for much more on how the RSS backed BJP has secured the support of the provincial propertied classes and India's capitalist classes.

The legitimacy of Modi came from post 2008 crisis induced approach to policymaking in UPA 2 which had in leadership Dr. Manmohan Singh-an economist bureaucrat turned politician. In Modi the RSS successfully promised a depoliticized project of Gujarat Model of Development” of roads and electricity to the people of India across classes, though the appeal of this project is weakening but it continues to appeal to a number of people even today in India. With the help of corporate media, Modi has been able to sell the non-class discourse of “corruption free” Congress-mukt-Bharat. After the defeat of the Left front in a direct fight with the RSS backed BJP in Tripura the government of Modi is now promising a Communist free political system. Inability of the Left to mobilize the people for the implementation of an effective alternative to neoliberalism on the ground in the Left ruled states of West Bengal and Tripura has also made its own small contribution to the rise of rightwing authoritarian populist politics of BJP. Modi directly speaks all of this on a regular basis to people. Furthermore for the success of their populist project Modi is using public money and paying the PR firms which market him at home and abroad (LiveMint, 2014, NDTV, 2017). While being in government Modi, who was himself a pracharak of RSS for several years, is today openly mobilizing the RSS affiliates to polarize the people along the lines of Hindu and Muslim. Modi government has been quite skillfully pandering to the communal sentiment existing among Hindus. Even when he talks of support from everyone and development for all (sabka saath sabka vikas), it cannot be overlooked that the upper castes are in position to target Dalits and Muslims in the name of cow. This kind of politics in which market authoritarianism is going to coexist

with conservative political order is today feasible due to the external political interventions of RSS affiliated organizations on the ground.

It is also well apparent that the Modi government is successfully creating ground for the adherents of Hindu exclusivism in the new regions where comparatively the RSS influence was smaller until now. The RSS backed Modi government is trying its best to place the adherents of far right in the positions of leadership everywhere within the key institutions of governance. With the help of the RSS cadres the practice of establishment of a new social norm of majoritarian politics is now underway in the rural world. Muslims and Dalits are being targeted to submit themselves to the command of upper castes. Such experiments have been on with some level of success in the states of Northern and Western India for the period of last ten years. In these states the modus operandi of experiments of RSS includes the control of institutions of education and culture. The politics of cultural nationalism is conducted through Shakhas, Sarswati Mandirs, Deras and Temples.

The Hindu Majoritarian politics is under institutionalization in terms of everyday life politics through the social harmony committees. Some sections of socially backward classes are now on board in these committees because the caste based politics of parties of other backward classes (OBCs) excluded them from the benefits of power. Appeal to the “Hindu majority” under construction is that your enemy is Muslims and Secularists. Attempt is to establish a new political conservative order using which the upper castes seek to reestablish today once again their hegemony and domination in the rural world. The RSS practice of social engineering includes fracturing the coalition built around the unity of OBCs in these states. The OBCs are being consciously divided in its opposition to BJP. The RSS cadres are undertaking this task quite seriously across the country. At least this is very much the situation in the most populous states of Northern and Western India.

At the same time Adivasis and Dalits are being told not to exacerbate the conflict with upper castes and be in their place if they want peace. Do not challenge the upper castes. The RSS cadres are working for the domination of schools on the ground in a variety of ways. This political project is in the process of being fine-tuned and expanded to Eastern, Northeastern and Southern states. The new sources of state power in the form of police and courts that the BJP can use by the virtue of being in power at the Centre are clearly aiding much more the RSS cadres on the ground in almost all the states (Archana Prasad, 2016).

It is well evident that while the projects of Modi and RSS would definitely need a challenge on the terrain of cultural nationalism, and the people would need to be proactively mobilized for the reopening of the space of a secular and democratic project in the sphere of education and culture, the modus operandi of far right is no less problematic on the material and class front. Cow, land, wage, women of Hindus and their Ram Temple are also the new means of supremacy of ruling classes. Certainly the combined effect of these new issues is posing a new challenge of management of the class and material aspect of the political project under perusal by the RSS backed rightwing establishment on the ground. New antagonisms are beginning to unfold in the rural economy. Policies and programmes underway for the development of Indian economy would be creating serious difficulties for the BJP. The challenge of implementation of the new pathways of capitalist accumulation that the BJP is trying to bolster in India needs to be underlined and approached head on by the Left and its allies.

With the new sources of primitive accumulation and production are in making in the rural world the production dimension is facing challenge on the front of ecology as well as society. The project of cheap labour and cheap nature is creating new sources of antagonisms. Difficulties of this project are going to grow in both rural and urban India. The new conjecture in making at the level of the global economy is also full of uncertainties. Therefore, even the core element of the authoritarian populist politics is not above the aspect of class. The class aspect of the current version of rightwing politics is reflected in its support for the ideology of new conservative market economy wherein the Indian big business and the finance capital are going to gain (Adnan Naseemullah, 2017, Aijaz Ahmed, 2017, Prabhat Patnaik, 2015 and Utsa Patnaik, 2016).

We need to understand how the material and class aspect of the changes on the ground is actually evolving due to the regressive politics of rightwing authoritarian populist politics. Lack of understanding exists on where the current path of capital accumulation is getting its momentum from and how the class and material aspects should be targeted through the emancipatory politics of the progressive left in India. In the next section the consequences of external intervention of rightwing authoritarian populist politics are analytically described on the material front as “new sources of primitive capitalist accumulation”.

### ***New sources of primitive capitalist accumulation***

The significance of authoritarian right-wing populist politics for the rapidly evolving phase of primitive capital accumulation in the rural world requires in a way actually more exposition on the material front. The phenomenon of rightwing politics is under rapid evolution since 1991. The regressive politics of cultural nationalism, similar to “Make America Great”, aims to establish a new conservative political economic order in India. While a new moral economy backed by the idea of “Hindu Nation” is unfolding through the programmes of Holy Cow, Swatch Bharat, Skill India, Digital India and Start-up India and so on, these programmes provide momentum to the new path of capitalist accumulation. This path is giving rise to new sources of primitive accumulation.

Encroachment and dispossession are the new sources of capitalist accumulation. The new normal includes the expansion and legitimization of unsustainable policies and institutions favouring seed monopolies, geographical indications (IPRs), grabbing of land, water and biodiversity, crop insurance and private finance of traders and dealers. The challenge is growing on the material front for the petty producers and workers from the side of market authoritarianism. While it is obvious that these new sources of primitive accumulation cannot go unchecked, but emancipatory politics needs to take into account that the antagonisms that are likely to emerge on account of these very programmes involve fight with transnational capital and Indian big business.

When the BJP is pursuing the politics of establishment of a new growth path that favours the consolidation of hold of big capital which is also open to alignment with transnational capital, it is these programmes that also seek to provide legitimacy to the new path of capitalist development through a new set of political articulations which also benefit capitalist landlords and some sections of landed gentry practicing capitalist farming. Pathways establishing new sources of primitive accumulation are forming to accelerate capital accumulation under the conditions when the global economy has seen a slowdown and is unable to give the Indian capital its chance in the world market. The Indian state is on to the path of re-regulating the economy at home and needs to legitimize this shift through the perusal involving higher surveillance of citizens and business.

There are indications that the rightwing politics has also got some initial success with the regressive agenda under perusal by the Modi government on the ground for the protection of cow on the cattle economy and agriculture and the implementation of demonetization and less cash economy, goods and services tax (GST) based formal economy, Aadhar based identity linkage (use of unique identity number for the delivery of essential services, transfer of available state support (subsidies for food and nutrition, agricultural input and banking services and social security). It needs special mention that while the BJP has been in power in a majority of the states of Northern and Western regions of the Indian subcontinent for over the period of last ten to fifteen years, these projects are gaining momentum on the ground only now on account of their government at the Centre.

Four years of Modi rule have brought to the fore the potentials and limitations of the path of new economic conservatism. While the Gujarat, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, governments are leaders in corporate farming which required real time data for forecasting production and price estimates, but they also have agitations building up among the farmers against traders and government. There is an unusually high growth in landlessness, and these states are models for the ways in which farmers and agricultural workers have been displaced and exploited by companies. The BJP governments are known

to be the leaders in the sale of forestlands and their diversion to big companies in the name of projects (Archana Prasad, 2017).

Similarly it is important to recognize the way in which the GST system will change the commodity and labour markets. Given the structural inequities and power relations within these markets, the GST is unlikely to benefit small and micro enterprises at the lower end of the market. It is thus necessary to do transparent cost-benefit audits of GST through a transparent and participatory process, so that democratic mass organizations can raise the issues and concerns voiced by the working people within this pro-big business system (Archana Prasad, 2017).

So far, the courts and media have been willing to come along with the BJP to protect the political fallout of the campaigns being undertaken by the BJP and Sangh Parivar affiliated organizations. There is evidence that the BJP did gain some initial success and the RSS was able to successfully undertake the mobilization of traditional as well as new political constituents on the ground for the protection of cow, implementation of demonetization and use of unique identity number for subsidies for food and nutrition, agricultural input and banking services with the aim of formalizing the economy of petty producers, open defecation free (ODF) as a new moral economy and many other such acts under promotion from the central and state governments in India.

The consequences of the right-wing populist politics are visible now on the ground in the form of a new political and economic order under establishment. The consequences are reflected in the acceleration of a process of external intervention of the state apparatus in the process of capital accumulation. External intervention aimed at the perusal of forcible separation of petty producers from the means of production owned by them has been made possible through the perusal of legal means. Political governance of this process of primitive accumulation is being undertaken using judicial and extrajudicial enforcement of the laws in making. The new mode of regulation of social norms, economy, ecology and culture is in making. This external intervention has obviously political, economic, social, cultural and ecological ramifications. The core effect of external interventions of the state is reflected in the strengthening of primitive accumulation linked processes in the rural world. The petty producers are being forced to get out of the traditional livelihoods linked to crop and cattle economy, artisanal production, food processing and so on.

The petty producers are experiencing loss of livelihood, and there is the strengthening of a process of semi-proletarianization of the Indian economy. Although it will not allow the rural world to soon settle in the process of complete separation from the means of production and livelihood because of lack of opportunities for their absorption, but this is strengthening the process of enlargement of labour reserves in a big way in rural India who often migrate to towns for employment and go back when they are not able to make a living in urban India. Most of these petty producers come mainly from the strata of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Muslims. It is our understanding that the agrarian, merchant and industrial capital belonging to upper caste Hindus is the main beneficiary of the process of primitive capital accumulation. The politics of BJP and RSS is clearly accelerating the process of creation of a larger semi-proletariat and this will affect in a big way the social fabric of rural world in India. Actions of the political-bureaucratic apparatus are the recent most assault of the ruling classes in the series of attacks on the life and livelihoods of petty producers and workers that India has seen since the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms.

It is necessary to recognize that almost all the steps of the rightwing government have been implemented with the help of a large part of the corporate controlled media having backing from the Central Government (Caravan 2016). A reasonably well-planned pattern of coercive mobilization of cadres by the Hindu rightwing movements associated with the ruling party is visible on the ground. The cadres of rightwing party in power have not hesitated to us violence against the farmers, labour, women, Dalits and Muslims to implement their agenda of cow protection. Not only the governments (s) in power are defending the cadres but also the opposition to these steps faces the might of police and courts. The impact of rightwing politics can be seen on all the main pillars of the state.

The growth path has been backed by unruly politics of the cadres of RSS affiliated organizations. The populist politics has been framed by the rightwing government in terms of the need to fight against black money, clean, formalize and broaden the fiscal base, eliminate “jihadi islamic” and “maoist” terror from the Indian society. The right wing authoritarian populist politics is consolidating the market authoritarianism based political and social order in India. The challenge does not come from only administration, police and courts. Recently the BJP governments in Rajasthan and Haryana chose to amend even the Panchayati Raj laws to expand the list of disqualifications with regard to who can stand for panchayat elections. These laws lay down the basic minimum educational criteria, two child norm and several other bizarre conditions for a candidate to be eligible for standing for elections. The argument for ‘minimum qualifications’ is part of a larger rightwing project. Attempts to restrict the space and scope for democracy are so far getting wider support. The Supreme Court has upheld the amendments.

While collective reasoning by a growing number of ordinary people across the rural and urban world is gradually beginning to emerge in India, it is also true that that this dimension of authoritarian populist politics has many implications for the practice of left politics in India. First of all, it is our understanding that the politics of emancipation should deal head on not only with the challenges arising out of class politics but also with the challenges arising out of the social mediation of rightwing populism for the Left. Second, the politics of resistance to populism would therefore now weave into the class politics the politics of engagement with the new forms of social mediation in making.

The politics of democratization of primordial identities based on caste, ethnicity, religion and gender needs special attention from the left on the material front as well. Finally the politics of left with and without state governments in hand will have to equally focus on becoming a force of social transformation. Organizing the unorganized for cooperation in production is itself becoming a priority of the Left in rural and urban India. Before we come to this issue of how the politics of left should actually be facing this challenge in the next section the emerging forms of resistance to rightwing authoritarian populism.

### *Resistance to populism*

In this section, we describe the current state of emerging resistance of farmers and workers to the political project of the rightwing populists in India’s rural world. Evidence building on this front suggests that the opposition mounting from the side of farmers against the policies under implementation in the spheres of rural development and agriculture is gradually beginning to grow in central and western India. It is even making some impact on the political landscape. In fact the challenge of rural livelihoods is now back on the agenda of the ruling class parties in all the states. The leaders of farmers’ organizations of all types of ideological hues are trying to come together to mobilize the peasantry in a number of states going to elections. Issues of debt relief, minimum support price, government procurement, support of rice crop residues disposal to prevent burning of stubble which adds to pollution and climate change, drought management and relief are beginning to make headlines. The latest policy announcements and the Central Government budget of 2018 are being viewed by many observers of the Indian rural world as a response of the BJP to the mobilization taking place on the ground by the organizations of farmers and workers.

The question that needs an answer is why the rural economy is always on the precipice of crisis. The answer lies in a combination of factors. In the case of small and marginal farmers, there are significant problems related to getting the agricultural produce from the farm to its final point of sale. There is the need to support them in respect of investment in irrigation and water management. As far as the ruling class politics is concerned, their solution to monsoon dependence is crop insurance. But the state of crop insurance is dismal with over 80% of claims remaining unpaid. Desertification of farm land has increased in 90% of states with 30% of India being degraded or facing desertification. This affects productivity of agricultural land reducing returns from farming. Continuation of the MNREGA (rural employment guarantee scheme) helps but the Modi government has been less supportive resulting in

substantial delays in payments. In addition, there are structural issues related to land holding pattern (land concentration is growing), lack of clearly defined property rights and the lack of quick redressal of disputes which require fundamental institutional changes which are not on the agenda of BJP having the backing from capitalist landlords and traditional rural elites of North and Western India.

Since the early 1990s, when India began to pursue neo-liberal reforms and advancing progressively the path of economic liberalization (reregulation of capital), privatization and globalization of the Indian economy, evidence clearly suggests that India has got pushed into a new phase of agrarian crisis by the neoliberal policies under perusal. The ruling class parties have been reluctant to admit that the neo-liberal policies have made agriculture un-remunerative. Agriculture is being deliberately made unviable for the bulk of the peasantry. Only a small number of farmers are earning; the rest are in distress. Continuing suicides by thousands of peasants is a result of agrarian distress caused systematically by untenable policies. Spiraling input prices on the one hand and highly volatile output prices, influenced by international trends rather than domestic output, explain the problem of unviability of cultivation of a large number of crops in several regions. The problem is severe for those cash crops where public procurement operations as the intervention in market by the government are weak or non-existent. With the terms of trade also turning against agriculture during this period for a number of years peasants have been finding it difficult to continue in agriculture. The impact is also visible in its most sharp form in the growing size of rural landless population. They were 23 % of the rural population in 1981 and were down to 55 % in the census undertaken in 2011.

The shift in agrarian landscape is not a result of economic forces alone. It has been directly brought by the policies aimed at dispossessing small and marginal farmers by a number of means. Agriculture was left to itself from 1991-92 onward with the onset of neo-liberal economic reforms. Agriculture was starved of funds and public policy support leading to increased distress. In this period, to add injury to insult, most governments at the Centre and in the states tried reversing land ceiling laws, leading to dispossession of lands farmed by Adivasis and traditional forest dwellers. Land handed over for non-agricultural uses has increased from 3.3% to 8.3%. A significant shift is visible in the agrarian landscape. The core ideological belief of how small and marginal farmers are unviable is implicitly and explicitly guiding the policies. The belief of the dominant political and bureaucratic, scientific and technological elites is being actively nurtured by the agribusiness and its supporters in the World Bank and other multilateral agencies. The majority of small and marginal farmers have only access to marginal lands which are their only means to survive. With extreme hard labour by this class of semi-proletariat, working on the farms of others and on their own farms, these families are producing grains and reproducing themselves with the unpaid labour of women farmers at the home and in the fields. If India is self-reliant in food production, it is largely due to the hard labour of peasantry.

### ***Left and joint movements on agrarian front***

Being an agrarian economy, the interests of the peasantry would be protected only by comprehensively reversing the excessive neo liberal economic policies being implemented in the last quarter a century which is the root cause of widespread peasant suicides, indebtedness and large-scale migration. However, in the context of lack of political consciousness and organized strength among farmers to influence the political process, the challenge has come from the fact of how to gather support for the progressive left and democratic politics and how to prevent the authoritarian moves of the right-wing populist politics.

The Bhumi Adhikar Andolan (BAA) has emerged as an intervention of the left and democratic forces in the wake of the promulgation of the land acquisition ordinance on 31st December 2014 by the BJP led NDA Government. The political context in which the ordinance was declared was crucial in its emergence. The main opposition has party got only 44 seats. The presence of the Left Parties and the various Socialist parties also remain weak. The political scenario of the country, with the BJP acquiring absolute majority and forming the Government and the opposition parties having only a small presence

in the main house of Indian parliament the challenge, demands building of alliances for the conduct of emancipatory politics on the ground.

Certainly the Land Acquisition Ordinance brought by the Narendra Modi Government and the aggressive moves made by the BJP government on the ground paved way for the unity of various mass and class organizations of peasants, workers, Dalits, Adivasis, fishing community and all dependent on land for their livelihood. Some change became visible only when the Left and Democratic forces working among the peasantry and rural people took initiative to bring the progressive democratic movement all together for the defense of land and labour rights. The significant achievement is the emergence of unity of left and democratic peasant and social movements to unleash a widespread resistance movement. More than three hundred organizations and federations of farmers, workers, adivasis and individuals have been brought together to join a process of country wide mobilization.

The process of mobilization of farmers started in 2015; at that time parallel to the emerging united peasant movement there were many other streams of movement under the leadership of different farmer's organizations and also by political parties. The parliamentary party members in opposition together organized a march to Rashtrapati Bhawan. Various political parties organized protest rallies and Gajendra Singh, one farmer from Dhousa, in Rajasthan, hanged himself at Jathar Manthar which shocked the entire country. All these developments especially in the wake of the forthcoming crucial assembly election in Bihar compelled the PM to backtrack and give up move to call joint session of the Parliament to pass the bill and instead he announced to send the Bill to the Joint Parliamentary Committee.

The BAA on the basis of charter of demands of the peasantry and agriculture workers participated on 2nd September all India workers strike the call given by the united trade union platform in 2015. The workers extended their unreserved support to demand of the peasantry to withdraw the land acquisition ordinance. The strike was historic in which around 15 crore workers participated. This was a positive step towards consolidating worker-peasant alliance, a vital development to influence the political process at the all India level. In the background of mounting resistance all over the country against the NDA Government, the Prime Minister was compelled to declare that his government will not re-promulgate the Land Acquisition Ordinance. It was a resounding success as far as the peasantry and working class are concerned and BAA has given call to observe victory day all over the country. The Bihar election result in which the BJP got defeated was another emphatic blow against the NDA government and a resounding reply of the people against the Land Acquisition Ordinance. All these gains proved that through unity and issue-based struggles it is possible to challenge the anti-peasant policies of the Central Government.

In between a conclave of RSS backed affiliated organizations was held at New Delhi in which the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues also attended to take stock of the political development. After that event there was a sprout of violence based on communal hatred and religious intolerance starting from Dadri and frequent incidents such as Una, Jammu, Alwar, and lynching of Jharkhand, Assam, West Bengal etc. The lynching and unleashing violence on innocent people belongs to minorities, Dalits and other backward sections on the one side and the criminal silence of the administration under the Prime Minister over such heinous acts was a clear indication of the efforts of the communal forces to break the growing unity of the peasantry and the working class. This trend is continuing unchecked till the day, the latest being the murder of Junaid a Muslim boy in a running local train in Haryana.

The first all India Convention of BAA was held on 16-17 July, 2016 at Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad in which around five hundred activists from 15 States representing 65 organisations and various action committees attended. The convention resolved to organize a March to Parliament on 10th August 2016 and then meet Rashtrapati requesting him to ensure withdrawal of the infamous Land Acquisition Bill from the Parliament. The convention demanded that the Modi Government withdraw its decision to allow 100% FDI in agriculture and E Platform which facilitates corporate loot of peasantry by integrating agriculture market all over the country which were announced in the successive Union Budget 2015-6 and 2016-17. The resolution demanded the Parliament to review 25 years of

implementation of Neo liberal reforms that had intensified the acute agrarian crisis and peasant suicides in the country. The resolution also supported the all India strike of workers called by united platform of central Trade Unions on 2nd September, 2016 and call upon the peasantry to organise agrarian strike in solidarity to the same. This strike was a resounding success with the participation of more than 18 crore workers and the involvement of the peasantry and the rural people was very much apparent through the massive mobilizations in the countryside and the paralysis of the rural transportation system due to widespread road blockade.

The Union Budget 2017-18 carried forward the most dangerous policy of declaring the intention of the Central Government to bring Model Contract Farming Act to be adopted by all The State Governments. The intervention of BAA in the campaign struggle against the murder of Pehlu Khan, a dairy farmer, is worth mentioning. The issue was taken up jointly by all the BAA constituents and many delegations visited Jaisinghpura, in Mewar region of Haryana the native village of Pehlu Khan. A mass Dharna was organised by the BAA at Jantar Manthar on 19th April 2017 which was attended by the mother and children of Pehlu Khan. Currently the BAA platform is providing the opportunity for six national political parties including CPI, CPI ML, SUCI, CPI (M), JD(U) and NCP to come together against the communal violence being unleashed by the BJP-RSS combine. This campaign has helped to interpret the cattle slaughter issue successfully as an agrarian issue devastating the economy of peasant agriculture rather than a communal issue and raised the demand that the enactments made by various BJP ruled State Governments to ban cow slaughter must include provisions to obligate the State Governments to pay market price to the farmers for their cattle wealth. Also, in order to save the standing crop from the menace of stray cattle, the State Government must procure and maintain all stray cattle without burdening the public with any additional cattle cess.

The Central Government order of banning cattle trade for the purpose of slaughter has led to widespread alienation among the peasantry especially the small and the poor sections since 50% of the animal wealth belongs to this section and the income from Animal Husbandry has been 26% of the agrarian GDP and 7.65% of the GDP. The cattle trade and transportation have been badly affected and the price of the cattle has come down heavily distressing the peasant households all over the country. The impact on the tannery, meat processing and traditional meat retail market sectors are enormous that provides employment and income to lakhs of people especially those belongs to Dalits and minority sections.

Dalits in the country are under constant fear. Sufferings that need to be addressed by the BAA demand struggles on the right to land for social security, access to credit and life of dignity. The right to land and livelihood is the fundamental issue of Dalit sections to overcome the social oppression and that could be resolved only by undertaking the task of agrarian revolution. Keeping this angle as the Central point the BAA will have to undertake meaningful initiatives to rally the Dalits with the peasantry to forge larger unity of all marginalized sections. The Saharanpur incident of unleashing terror up on Dalit sections by killing people, burning down their houses and looting by the upper caste sections backed by the police and administration under the newly elected BJP Government of Uttar Pradesh brought together all the progressive sections. The Saharanpur incident was an example of how the RSS backed organisations have been trying to perpetuate terror among the public and to foment communal and caste polarization to serve political interests of the ruling classes.

The laws framed through the amendments of Chhota Nagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act 1908 and Santhal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act 1949 by the BJP-led State Governemnt of Jharkhand have paved the way for uncontrolled corporate loot and plunder of adivasi and Moolvasi land, livelihood and question their existence. These amendments empower the Govt. to grab land for “Non – agricultural purpose” to make commercial use of land which was prohibited till now. It will also adversely affect the pro-people provisions of the PESA Act 1996, FRA 2006. The large-scale consolidation of right wing political forces under the leadership of RSS-BJP combine using the communal and caste-based polarization backed by the corporate funded Media, together with the division of secular votes however helped the BJP to win the assembly elections of Uttar Pradesh and Uttharkhand. However, in Punjab the BJP- Akali Dal alliance got routed and lost power. In Goa and Manipur though the BJP has formed Governments it did not enjoy the majority support of the people.

In Uttar Pradesh the Government led by Yogi Adityanath was compelled to declare loan waiver scheme for farmers that denote the importance of the agrarian question which cannot be ignored by the ruling classes. The peasant movement is united on the demands of debt waiver and minimum support price formula announced by M S Swaminathan led farmers' commission to which the BJP had committed prior to the elections to Indian parliament in 2014. The agrarian question is going to remain as a major political issue all over the country influencing the all India political process and consistent and united struggles will only help the peasantry to safeguard its interests. The consistent campaigns and joint movements jointly and independently by the peasant organizations have started yielding wide ranging results in the form of sprouting massive and spontaneous peasant struggles and protest actions across the country. The success of Rajasthan peasant movement in forcing the Government to withdraw the hike in electricity bill was significant. The experience of the joint struggle in Maharashtra is a remarkable positive example, which filled confidence among the peasantry.

The constituent organizations of BAA have played the leadership role in the Maharashtra joint struggle. This struggle brought the importance of minimum support price and loan waiver as two major demands. Thus, the appropriation of surplus created by the peasantry by the market forces has been made the main issue of debate and exposed the pro corporate economic policy of the Governments. The impact of this struggle is widespread and the State Government was compelled to announce Rs 34000 crore scheme of loan waiver. Another achievement of this struggle is the agreement made on the milk price based on the formulae in the ratio of 70:30 for dairy farmers and milk processing societies respectively. The Maharashtra movement triggered peasant struggles in the neighboring states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The Mandsaur police firing on 6th June 2017 and murder of six farmers in Madhya Pradesh shook the consciences of the entire country. There were struggles and protest actions all over the country. The country has also another new platform of 180 peasant organisations. Under the leadership of this platform farmers' organisations called for major protests in 2017 in the states and at the national level.

The BAA has been able to join hands with other peasant platforms that have emerged in the background of the ongoing struggles. The BAA is demanding for the implementation of the MS Swaminathan Commission recommendation of fixing MSP as 50% above cost of production to all crops, guarantee purchase centres, a comprehensive loan waiver to the peasantry and withdrawal of the anti-farmer notification of the Central Government banning cattle trade in the cattle market. The BAA is also continuing its support for struggles being undertaken on the front of illegal mining. The unbridled mining and the model of economic development contributes to climate change and is destroying nature and earth. There is a need to stop mining in areas which are out-of-reach, dense forests and climate-sensitive forest areas. The environmental and social justice dimensions are beginning to come together. As there is much potential in this new politics of the Left the challenge on the front of the politics of development is therefore in terms of what is the current nature of agrarian question and with what kind of politics the question should be resolved for the benefit of the victims of the politics of external intervention of right wing in the process of capitalist accumulation.

### ***Emerging agrarian situation***

Our assessment of the agrarian situation is that the protest from peasantry is essentially against neo-liberal capitalism. The perspective of no peasantry is not really applicable to the agrarian situation in India. There is surplus land available for distribution to dalits and other landless sections for social security, life of dignity and access to credit. The land is available for redistribution with the government in some cases and with the landlords in other cases. Wasteland and disputed areas have been captured by the powerful landed interests. In some cases, the corporates and real estate interests are occupying these lands. The loss of commons is working to the detriment of perusal of sustainable agriculture. For the poor who come from mainly the populations of Dalits and Muslims and other socially backward classes the commons have played and can play a critical role in the security of their livelihoods.

Coming to our answer to the question of ongoing process of differentiation in peasantry which is critical to the shaping of the processes of strengthening alliances on the ground for the initiation of joint movements against neo-liberal policies, the assessment is that even if the impacts are not the same and of the equal level on all the different strata of peasantry in India the neo-liberal policies are today adversely affecting the peasantry as a whole. Further the opposition from peasantry to neoliberal policies is acquiring a wider dimension. Today the social demands of semi-proletariat section of petty producers (poor peasants, landless peasants, rural labour and artisans) include the demand of “Decommodification of Essential Public Services” and the support for “organization of women” around the demands that can help them to reduce their burden and unpaid component because of the rise in cost of social reproduction of labour. Although the income from farming has been on the decline, but the women are willing to form labour collective and undertake leasing of land for cultivation to secure livelihood. This suggests that the agrarian question is also acquiring the dimension of a larger question of land and labour for the semi-proletariat. The rural link of semi-proletariats is alive.

In the states of Northern and Western India where the BJP is a stronger force, because of the semi-proletariat status and the inability of the industry to absorb the surplus population in the rural world as proletariat, the movements of Dalits and Muslims are far more ready to get organized around the question of land and labour rights. It is now acknowledged far more universally that the Dalit leadership and the movements are viewing in all regions the right to land as a question of social security in India. While the break-up of land monopoly being undertaken through a larger programme of land redistribution is not feasible everywhere, but as the agrarian question is also a gender question as well as a social and ecological question the innovative experiments are generating new ideas for wider implementation in several states where the Left has some presence.

#### *Semi-proletarian formation, agrarian question and the challenge of ecological and social justice*

Experiments being undertaken by the Peoples' Science Movements (PSMs) for agro-ecology and rural industrialization are making much more sense to the larger Kisan and Labour Movement. As the primary productivity is dependent on soil, water and biodiversity health and the secondary productivity is dependent on costly agricultural inputs the search for alternatives is also taking them to take up the challenge of sustainable agriculture. The CPI (M) in Kerala is taking up this challenge as a party organization and is ready to multiply this effort on the ground. The BJP is calling this programme of CPI (M) in Kerala to be an example of the party turning into NGO. It seems that the CPI (M) is finally learning from the failures of the CPI (M) in West Bengal. Experience tells us that dispossession can continue even after the redistribution of land rights to tenants and landless. For example, this is the experience of West Bengal peasant movement which secured tenurial rights for bargardars on a large scale under the left rule. The Left lost in the state because of poor imagination and linear thinking on the front of agricultural and industrial development.

The path to structural transformation cannot be searched by linear thinking; this is an important lesson for the Left in India. Poverty exists but it cannot be resolved with a linear view of history. Our future thinking on industrialization needs to entertain the ideas of circular economy in an immediate sense. There are positive lessons which we can take from the ongoing niche experiments of rural industrialization that are being undertaken with the help of PSMs in the states of Uttarakhand, Himachal and Kerala. Insecure labour conditions are a necessary logical accompaniment of structural adjustment programme under implementation by the capital in India. While it is clear that today labour question is question of both, lack of employment as well as decent employment, but it is a question of what kind of strategy of rural and urban industrialization can be adopted when India cannot go and colonize territory and enslave the people of other countries.

Since the agribusiness offers only a path of agro-industrialization, which is more a path of rural and agrarian extractivism, it is clear that such a path cannot absorb the teeming millions of underemployed youth. Discourse on the classical formulation of the agrarian question has considered the question of worker-peasant alliance in the context of the following: 1) breaking land concentration, 2) establishment

of alternative path of peasant capitalism allowing a broad-based capitalist development and of a more democratic polity and 3) formation of collective property on the basis of egalitarian land ownership in the countryside that can enable the proletariat to advance beyond the bourgeois democratic revolution towards peoples' democracy and socialism.

Further discussions have occurred in the context of the new developments in imperialism. There is the emergence of corporate capital, a new player integrated into system of globalized finance, which is penetrating into agriculture in a big way. New areas of transitional demand must therefore include struggles in respect of new areas namely 1) struggles against the state withdrawal from the role of supporting the peasantry and petty producers on the front of input and output side to reduce the dependence of agriculture on market forces, 2) struggle against primitive accumulation of capital leading to the dispossession of peasantry and ensuring that land acquisition takes place in conformity with social rationality, 3) struggle against corporate and contract farming practices 4) preventing peasantry from making a shift to socially irrational technological and organizational changes and 5) promoting the implementation of employment guarantee scheme, formation of trade unions and uniting people against the privatization of education and health.

Today the struggles emerging for the realization of ecological justice within the Indian agrarian scene provide significantly a new opportunity for the organization of unorganized. Realization of the potential of semi-proletarian power needs the construction of a track of mobilization of peasantry, artisans and rural labour for the systemic transformation of productive forces. Spaces for the construction of all-in-peasant unity, unity of petty commodity producers from both farm and non-farm sectors and the leadership of working class including rural labour are today rapidly growing due to problems arising out of the environmental impacts of the mainstream pathways of agricultural development. Socio-ecological problems present these new opportunities more than ever before to the left and democratic movement to get the peasantry, petty producers and rural labour as a whole to move away from the grip of the capitalist landlords and big business over Indian agriculture in India.

Opportunities need to be recognized and can be pursued on a large scale. Peasantry and rural labour need to be mobilized to resist the ruling classes on the ground by supporting the diffusion of socio-technical changes that pass the test of social rationality of agro-ecological approaches to the development of agriculture and rural industries. Peasant rationality is ready for change if the impact of the consequences emerging for the state of health of soil and water, incidence of pest and disease and climate change is made to get recognition as a direct outcome of the neo-liberal capitalist path of agricultural development adopted by the Indian ruling classes.

Currently the peasantry and rural labour do not have support from the formal systems of research for the development of technologies for agriculture and allied sectors and rural industrialization. Innovation systems that the left and democratic movement need to help build must encompass the complexity of resource and capability use by addressing not only the biophysical but also social dimensions of agriculture, including equity of distribution of benefits. There is need to focus on broader processes emerging in respect of the influences on agri-food systems, including processes concerning the conservation and conversion of natural resources, efficiency of production, processing of food, marketing and consumption issues. There is a need to look at how the national and global food chains are interacting with and impinging on local food systems. The question of how to tap into the knowledge and skills of peasants and rural labour involves gaining an understanding of the changes taking place in environment and local agri-food systems. It needs to be kept in view that agro-ecosystems are also part of wider socio-ecological (climate change) and socio-technical (class and gender) relations, embody inequalities and differentials in terms of access to resources, capabilities and markets.

As the Kisan organizations need to go beyond the redistribution of land as private property, they also need to facilitate the pathway of promotion of cooperation between small and marginal farmers and rural labour. The organization of cooperative farming and its intimate links with non-farm activities is essential to building class alliances between agricultural workers and peasants. Access to water, forests grasslands and wetlands is essential to the survival of the agrarian system. Fifty percent of the Indian

population would be still living in the near future, if not forever, in areas dependent on rural world involving agriculture-based production economy. Agriculture and rural industries need simultaneous upgrading for the reasons of limitations of both infrastructure and employability of rural migrants in the metropolis and cities. In order to realize the true potential of agriculture as a driver for rural industrialization the strategy of development of agriculture itself must be changed. In the long run, the framework of rural industrialization needs to be realigned with the proposed strategy of agricultural development wherein the use of resource conserving technologies and integrated bio-farming systems involving multi-storied agriculture provide opportunity for rural industrialization.

### **Concluding remarks**

Reversal of the extreme agrarian distress can only be envisaged with an alternative paradigm that entails a total repudiation of the policies of neoliberal economic order promoting ecologically and economically unsustainable agriculture. It is obvious that for achieving this the Kisan organizations will have to strategize and organize their resistance to the current policy framework at two levels: First, resisting the devastating impact on neo-liberal policies on the farmers and agricultural workers and fighting for their social protection; second, building resistance through also the promotion and building of the alternatives to the current neo-liberal path of development on the ground.

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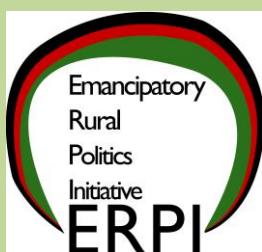
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative** (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless ‘growth’, climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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