

... interests of the workers have been marginalised.

4 Agrarian Interests / Role of Peasant class.

Though 70 per cent of India's population live in villages, earning their living from agriculture, they have not been able to organise themselves in a way as to make their presence adequately felt in national politics and get their due. They have failed to organise themselves like the industrial labour and blue and white collar workers in the urban areas.

The peasantry in India is divided into a hierarchy of rich and poor belonging to different castes and sub-castes (*jatis*), cutting across regions and sub-regions each with its own specific pattern of agriculture and land tenure system. Naturally, the peasantry of this size, with its internal divisions and regional variations, scattered over a land of continental dimension, cannot be organised on an all-India basis. Unlike the industrial workers, the peasantry seldom unites, and even if it does so, it could be for specific, limited or *ad hoc* purpose. As Marx noted, the peasantry is too dispersed a class, too dominated by traditions, customs and proprietary interest could hardly develop class consciousness, and unite in an organisation for united action. This is however not to deny the existence of several peasants organisations and to overlook the history of agrarian revolts, though sporadic and spontaneous, and peasant mobilisation

for specific purposes.

During the British regime attempts were made to form independent class organisations of the peasants by some Congress leaders and the Communists. For the first time in Indian people's history, an all-India organisation of the peasantry came into existence with a common programme of common demands and expressing the aspirations of the Indian peasantry as a whole. This was the All-India Kisan Sabha established in 1936 under the presidency of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel having as its constituents several Kisan Sabhas already existing in Bihar, UP, Punjab, Bengal and Andhra. But soon, due to a conflict of interests between the big and rich farmers on the one hand and the middle and small peasants on the other, the organisation split. Later the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) fell into the hands of the Communists as non-Communist Kisan leaders withdrew from 1942.

Since Independence the AIKS continues to be a loose federation of State-level bodies, each fluctuating in membership and activity according to the energy made available by the regional communist leaders of some 2.5 million peasants organised in the AIKS; over three-quarters are in the one State of West Bengal. While there are local agricultural workers' unions, and in West Bengal, field labour has been long organised within the kisan movement—about 40 per cent of membership—generally the mobilisation of agricultural workers has been very poor, partly because their situation is so desperate, partly because there are conflicts of interests even within the communist movement between peasants and their labourers, and partly because the leadership has been insufficiently committed. In 1980 the CPI(M) set up an apex body, the All-India Agricultural Workers' Union and only about 1 million of India's estimated 56 million agricultural workers have been enrolled. Forty-five per cent of this membership is in Kerala and thirty per cent in Andhra.⁹

In addition to the AIKS, there were the Hind Kisan Panchayat controlled by the Socialists, the United Kisan Sabha controlled by the communists (Marxist) and the All-India Agriculturists Federation, aided by the Swatantra Party in the early sixties. But these organisations could not be instrumental in implementing the land reforms. Only the AIKS had been instrumental in the implementation of modest reform measures in West Bengal and Kerala.

In 1978, Chowdhury Charan Singh and Raj Narain took the initiative in founding the all-India Kisan Kamgar Sammelan. But it was too omnibus an organisation covering all categories of peasants including other ancillary rural professions, to become an effective

union.

Agriculture being a State subject, peasant associations organised on regional and local basis could be effective interest groups. Thus most State Governments are subject to the constant pressure of peasant interests; sugar lobbies, rice lobbies, wheat lobbies and tobacco lobbies are active in the corridors of power at the State level. Regional political parties like Akali Dal, the BLD, the BKD have had their political strength through powerful upper and middle peasant castes support-structure and vote banks. The power of the upper and middle peasantry is manifest in the unwillingness of the State Governments to impose tax on agricultural income, although agricultural production accounts for about 30 per cent of gross domestic product.

In the 1980s, "farmers' movements" appeared in various parts of the country. These took the form of protests and agitations staged by the farmers of the Green Revolution, the capitalist farmers. Of these, the largest and apparently most cohesive and best organised were the Shetkari Sang Latana (farmers' union) of Maharashtra led by Shard Joshi and the Bharatiya Kisan Union of western Uttar Pradesh led by Mahendra Singh Tikait. The movements got some basic concessions from the State Governments in regard to the demands for higher agricultural support prices and input costs. They manifest the power of the more affluent farmers in their states.