

**M. V. Nadkarni.** *Farmer's Movements in India.* New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987. 237 pp., Price: (hardbound edition) Rupees (Indian) 100.00.

This book is a comprehensive analysis of farmers' movements in India with a focus on the movements in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Punjab and Karnataka. It examines the economic, social and political aspects of the farmers' struggle for a better deal within regional and national perspectives and evaluates the potential impact of these struggles on economic development in general, and on rural development, in particular.

In a most competent way the author has presented the current state of the debate on the subject. He deals exhaustively with the subject of agricultural price policy and argues against the proposition that favourable price-setting for farm products is adequate to alleviate rural poverty. A better way to tackle this problem is to improve the per capita output in the rural sector, since the root cause of the problem is not unfavourable terms of trade but the increasing proportion of land holdings, which are economically not viable. Agricultural price policy is analyzed within the context of class relations, which enables to establish a link between the economic and political demands of the farmers. This analysis leads the author to conclude, that in contrast with the peasants' movements in India, which helped to break up the feudal agrarian set-up, the recent farmers' movements, with a few exceptions, have little revolutionary content. Their leadership has been appropriated by the rich landowners, who have transformed the movements into a lobby for advancing their own interests, within the existing power structure, to the neglect of the poorer peasantry.

The book has seven chapters. The first chapter traces the rise in the importance of the farmers in national politics and gives an interesting discussion of the nature of the farmers' movements and of their interaction with the other interest groups. The second chapter analyses the agrarian structure and the position of the agricultural sector in the national economy. The course of the farmers' movements is traced in detail in the third and fourth chapters, with the latter focusing on the farmers' movements in Karnataka, where the movements have gathered most momentum. The fifth chapter discusses the class character of the farmers' movements within a political economy perspective, which provides an interesting insight into the class nature of the movements. In the sixth chapter, the author surveys the controversy about the efficiency of agricultural price policy and presents a strong case for using non-price factors for combating poverty.

Peasant movements have a long and impressive history in India. They led eventually to land reforms and to the dismantling of the old feudal system of exploitation. The institutional changes replaced a dominantly feudal order with a dominantly capitalist order, while sharp inequalities and class distinctions continued to dominate the rural scene. The introduction of capitalist relations in agriculture

followed the path of Junker-style landlord capitalism, which was actively promoted by the state in the three decades of the agrarian reform. Effective land monopoly and the servile pre-capitalist employer-labourer relations were preserved, while the excesses of absentee landlordism were curbed. As a result, land ownership is likely to have worsened.

The changes within the agrarian structure were accompanied by increased representation of the farmers in the institutions of economic and political control. And, given a dominant rural population and adult franchise, the rich farmers, who wield considerable economic power in the rural areas, have now become the dominant group in the Lok Sabha. The rural elite in alignment with the urban bourgeoisie have been promoting their interests jointly, benefiting in the process themselves, foreign companies and their subsidiaries, at the expense of the working class and small business.

Two factors contributed to the decline of the agricultural sector and to protest movements of the farmers: One, the long-term decline in the relative income per worker, which was the reflection of deeper structural problems. And two, the adverse relative prices for agricultural products. The second chapter on the Agrarian Structure and Agriculture in National Economy, shows that the structural problems in the agricultural sector have been caused by the deepening of capitalist relations of production and by the slow growth of employment opportunities in the non-agricultural sector. The super-imposition of the modern relations of production in Indian agriculture upon traditional exploitative social relations led to the strengthening of these relations rather than to greater freedom for the worker.

The concentration of productive assets in Indian agriculture is evident from the small proportion of the farm holdings (21.4 percent) producing the bulk of the total marketed surplus. One implication of this concentration is that rising prices of agricultural products and the improvement in the terms of trade effect only those farm holdings which produce for the market. Moreover, the proportion of the surplus producing land holdings has been declining over time. Even worse, the process of the concentration of land and productive assets in the hands of the capitalist farmers has not been accompanied by the full absorption of the expropriated peasants in non-agricultural employment. The distribution of the work force has remained more or less the same, so that the expropriated rural labour has remained tied down in the agriculture sector causing per capita productivity to stagnate.

Accompanying these processes has been the relatively poor performance of the agricultural sector. The growth of this sector has been much less, both in relative and absolute terms, as compared with the growth of the non-agricultural sectors, as a result of which, the share of the agricultural sector in the total income has been declining over time. The Green Revolution failed to make a significant impact on the relative prosperity of the agricultural sector, even though in absolute terms it performed fairly well as compared with its performance before Independence. These

processes contributed to discontent among the farmers, which was manifested in the form of farmers' movements, whose intensity and character varied across regions.

In chapters three and four, the author provides detailed information about the farmers' movements in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Punjab and Karnatka, dwelling at length on the origin and development of the movements, on the issues raised and on the response of the government. The subsequent chapter analyzes the class character of the various movements, and shows convincingly that the farmers' movements, which were in response to the genuine difficulties faced by the farmers, had only a limited aim. They were not rural movements for improving the position of the rural poor, but a struggle to get a better deal for the rich farmers within the existing socio-economic and political milieu. The movements resulted in increasing the power of the rich farmers, particularly with regard to the agricultural proletariat.

Given this class nature of the farmers' movements, it is not difficult to understand why the 'left' perception of forging a peasant-working class alliance against monopoly capital did not work. The rich farmers were not interested in such an alliance. Their aim was to use political influence to get a better deal within the coalition of dominant interest groups, in which the rich farmers were already playing a significant role. Nevertheless, farmers' movements played an important role in preventing the marginalization of a large section of the peasantry and in improving rural infrastructure and local administration. The income and asset distribution in the economy would have been more skewed in the absence of the movements and monopoly capital would have been more powerful. The state of the agricultural worker, however, has become increasingly desperate because of agricultural stagnation, overpopulation in the countryside and an uneven and slow development of the capitalist relations of production.

This is an interesting and well-researched book, which gives rich information on the various farmers' movements in India and provides useful insights into the class nature of the movements. Even if the farmers' movements have followed, mainly, a course, which has not helped to alleviate the state of the rural poor in India, this book makes a useful contribution by showing why.

Pakistan Institute  
of Development Economics,  
Islamabad

Khwaja Sarmad