

# The interaction of agrarian movements and political changes in India

by *Theodor Bergmann*

## 1. Introduction

Political activity, attitude and consciousness of the agricultural population form a core problem of agricultural and internal politics. This is particularly valid for developing countries, where the overwhelming majority lives in and from farming and where the development processes largely depend upon the functioning and contribution of the farming sector. – Some historians and sociologists dealing with farming perceive of peasants as people, who live without history;<sup>1</sup> others see them as conservative, not innovative in politics and technology, skeptical and reluctant against everything new. Mitrany (1961) ascribes this perception of the peasantry to Marx, too; as evidence he quotes the famous words by Marx about that amorphous mass of small cultivators of their plots, whose interest have to be represented by outsiders. Mitrany ignores, that Marx refers to peasants saturated after an agrarian reform.<sup>2</sup> Wolf (1969), Barrington Moore jr. (1969), Shanin (1971), Alavi (1968/1972) and other rural sociologists, on the other hand, have analyzed the revolutionary forces, that originate from agrarian movements and are able to change history and society.

Historically, peasants, or better: the lower rural strata have played an important, often revolutionary role in political and social changes and in economic development. Beginning from the peasant wars in Sweden and Germany to the revolutions in Mexico, Russia, Yugoslavia and China and to the independence movements in India and other colonies, this sector has substantially influenced the path of history. Ignorance and blindness in face of these immense social forces and their real direction probably contributed to

1 Cf. Franz (no year).

2 In the »Class struggles in France« (1852/1946) Marx writes: »The smallholders on their plots form a huge mass, whose members live in the same situation, but without entering into multiple relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them each from the other . . . Each single peasant family almost caters for itself, produces directly the largest part of its consumption and thus wins its livelihood more in exchange with nature than in communication with society . . . Thus, the large mass of the french nation is formed by simple aggregation of similar magnitudes, as e. g. a bag with potatoes forms a bag of potatoes. Inasfar as millions of families live under economic conditions that distinguish their way of life, their interests and their education from those of other classes and pit them into a hostile position they form a class. Inasfor the connection among the smallholders is local only, the similarity a of interests does not produce a community, a national connection and a political organization, they form no class . . . They cannot represent themselves, but must be represented (by others).« (pp. 104–105). Engels in the German peasants' war (1850/1920) describes the revolutionary role of the peasantry at the end of the middle-age in fully different terms.

misjudgment of strong movements and to the surprise of governments in Western Europe and the United States about the revolution in China and the war in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> This paper deals with the various relations and connections between the political activities of the agrarian population and social and economic development and exemplifies these interactions with the developments in India.

## 2. Selected theoretical aspects

### 2.1 Delimitations

It is difficult to find generally acceptable definitions for the issue dealt with here. Sociological terms and their definitions are bound to culture, system and time; their content changes with their socio-cultural context and the needs of the analysts. Some research workers prefer a narrow formulation of the terms of the concerned strata and movements, other prefer a very comprehensive definition. The delimitation is so difficult, since the agrarian sector and those living and working in it have floating borderlines, and continuously people are changing between the sectors.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned earlier, the farming population in the early phases comprises the vast majority of a society. To allow for a comparison of different cultures, the notion of agrarian population is defined here very broadly: We are subsuming in it all social categories, dealing with primary food production – the ultimate producers or cultivators, independently of their social status, their legal title to the land they cultivate, the degree of their socio-economic dependence or self-determination.

The same is true for the notion of movement. It comprises very distinct activities and actions from collective non-action and passive resistance to agrarian revolution, actions also of varying intensity and duration. For the rural population in particular the demarcation between organization and movement is very unprecise and depends of several factors. Landsberger (1974) gives a simple, very comprehensive definition:

»In the context of low-status groups, such as peasants, we mean by a movement any collective reaction to such low status«. (p. 18)<sup>5</sup>

Historians speak of peasantization, the transition of agricultural producers from natural subsistence economy to market production and a monetary economy. That is the economic change to becoming a peasant. The transition from social dependence (serfdom, bondage, sharecropping, tenancy etc.) to selfcultivation of (mostly) owned land transforms the cultivator to a socio-economically independent subject in the sense of a (Western European) peasant or farmer.

3 On the other hand, certain agrarian strata under specific circumstances have played a counter-revolutionary role and supported or even borne fascist movements (Germany, Finland). Cf. Hofstee (1968), Nooij (1969), Loomis and Beagle (1946) and Bergmann (1976).

4 Structural change, outmigration, combination of income sources, combination of agriculture and crafts in the Asian mode of production and other factors obscure a clear-cut delimitation between the sectors.

5 For further definitions see Bergmann (1976).

Movements try to fulfil demands and desires of their social stratum, to change existing orders, power relations, political balances. Sometimes, they create organizations for that purpose, that offer political leadership to these movements and give them a longer duration and lasting effects. The forms of social struggle and social change are multivarious; the forms of social change can be arranged on a continuum, reaching from gradualist social reform to permanent revolution and enclosing several intermediary steps and combinations, e. g. reforms, reforms that change the system, long march through the institutions, long march, unique, repeated, permanent revolution.

Contrary to movements, institutions express existing power relations in organizational form. Mostly they do not serve to implement reforms and changes; rather they try to counteract them according to their task, to bar or at least to delay them. – This produces a natural contradiction between social movements and social institutions, but at certain instances also a specific form of interaction.

## 2.2 Movements as expression of felt needs

The notion of agrarian politico-social movement implies an understanding that rural society is socially stratified, that the strata are clearly segregated and have and represent distinct, sometimes contradictory interests. Social differentials and distinctions lead to socio-economic contradictions, tensions and struggles. This perception refutes the idea of an harmonious, peaceful, idyllic village community with a set of common interests. It rather tries to unveil the internal power-structures in the agrarian population. There are – no doubt – certain common features for all people living in the village, who have to struggle against the natural conditions; in so far they all sit in the same boat. But ownership of means of production, particularly land and water, the power, to distribute the fruits of all efforts, the share in political power clearly distinguish between the upper and the lower strata, the haves and havenots.

The sociological demarcation of the social strata (or classes) is not at all as simple and unambiguous for the agrarian as for the industrial population. Also the relationships might cut across the boundaries of the strata.<sup>6</sup> Theoretically, as it were, the strata can be defined and named. But to fix the borderline is an issue of political judgment of great relevance and explosiveness.

Social tensions and struggles, social change are, thus, perceived as »natural« expression of societal life and development. When social differentiation increases and leads to polarization, which is part and parcel of a private, profit-oriented economy, tension can become more intensive and acute. Social movements (e. g. for agrarian reform) and socio-technical institutions (e. g. cooperatives) may be interpreted as activities to counteract growing social inequality and to re-enact a certain degree of social equality after a phase of strong social polarization.

6 Spittler (1977) speaks about clientele-relationships. In this notion, socio-economic dependency is interpreted in a broader sense; it becomes the mutual dependence of rich and poor agrarian producers.

Joint action of agrarian producers unfolds, if their needs become more urgent, if they become aware of them as a common task, and if an organizing force appears. – The basic need of the cultivator is the hunger for land; without land he lacks livelihood for himself and his family, he has no employment, no status in the »village community«. The land-title also implies legal power to decide about the produce from the land. To ownership and use of land belongs the disposition about the water, too, in the tropics and subtropics. The enemy of the cultivator in the first line is the big landlord, who receives, collects, demands or enforces delivery of a large share of the harvest. Distribution of land serves to decrease or level off the social disparities, that are expressed in several ways (decision about education, conspicuous consumption, distinct lifestyle, positions of power).

After the removal of the feudal system, the discussion acquires a new dimension: the government asks for a share of the produce or of the agricultural surplus, because it wants to compensate the expropriated landlord or to fulfil his former tasks of care-taking of his tenants or to build and finance the infrastructure and industries of a modern society. The same peasants, who were beneficiaries of agrarian reform and who actively enforced and supported its implementation, now change their position and under certain circumstances take a hostile attitude against the government, they supported before, if it demands their factor contribution and they feel, it is too large.

The struggle for land, however, can also be fought among equals, among small cultivators. Then it leads to split, not to political unity and to economic cooperation. Furthermore, this struggle can be fought between tribes, if one tribe aspires to another tribe's lands or extends his cultivation into its domain; or it can lead to tensions between sedentary cultivators and pastoralists-nomads. Such struggles cannot be called social movements in the sense of Heberle (1951).<sup>7</sup> The basic issue of ownership and use of land can become a national (and social) one, e. g. when foreigners have occupied the best soils and the most favourable regions (Eastern Africa) or where foreign domination has established its own system of land tenure and revenue levy (India, Pakistan). In such cases, the struggle to recuperate the land or for land reform becomes a social issue and a social movement, which allies itself with the comprehensive national movement for independence and might become its strongest supporter. The social content, then, largely determines the methods and the forces promoting the struggle.

After land is distributed, the cultivators are saturated and their goals largely achieved; their political activity fades away. The organization is dissolving or changes its personal composition. They can even become supporters of the ruling system (Japan).

The structural change, which continues even after an agrarian reform, can be accepted under favorable conditions, while otherwise it might cause irritation, commotion and social movement. If e. g. change is strongly accelerated and compressed into a short time-

7 Heberle (1951) defines »movement« in the following words: »The main criterion of a social movement, then, is that it aims at bringing about fundamental changes in the social order, especially in the basic institutions of property and labour relationship . . . a commotion, a stirring among the people, an unrest, a collective attempt to reach a visualized goal, especially a change in certain social institutions.«

span, this can provoke violent resistance (Soviet Union, GDR). If no breathing spell is left for sociopsychological adaptation to the new status, opposition might take several forms – from »individual«, but massive rejection of deliveries and passivity to migration or emigration or to active violence against officials and administrators.

Besides the movements and organizations of the lower strata those of the upper strata have to be mentioned, though they are analyzed more rarely.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, these are counter-movements against attempts to change social relations and rural power structures. They strongly influence agrarian development in Latin America, where agrarian reform is called for. For a long period they determined the development in Japan. Generally, they have an essential influence on administration and are very efficient.

### 2.3 From needs to social formulation

Ecological, demographic and socio-economic conditions are parts of the complex of factors, that cause social movements and co-determine their forms and methods. Thereafter, a complicated process of social interaction and social control starts from the needs to awareness and formulation and finally to organized and formulated expression of the social forces. The conditions of this process and the organizational forms are specific for the agrarian population, essentially different from those usual for urban factory-workers. Important specific features are:

1. Physical weakness and dependence on the village for food provision.
2. Individualization of the job, dispersal over a wide area, lack of communications.
3. Lack of a comprehensive, nation-wide political organization.
4. Difficulties in the formation of an endogenous leadership.
5. Illiterary, social control in the village.
6. Caste-system or similar systems of social stratification,<sup>9</sup> that are strengthened by religious organizations and institutions and produce an inferiority-feeling among the masses.
7. Competition of the ultimate producers for land and share in the market diminishes the awareness of a common fate and equal interests.
8. Lack of common social longterm objectives, shortlivedness, weakness of organization.<sup>10</sup>

8 For Latin America they are discussed by Feder (1969), for Germany by Flemming (1978).

9 Caste-like systems are frequent in Asia (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Japan, China), through nowhere they are consolidated as strongly by religion as in India. However, Gough (1974) feels, that the caste-system offers advantages in the organization of struggles, too, and that generally cultivators in South India are enabled to fast mobilization and action by their spatial community in castes and their »political« organization of interests.

10 About the specific features and problems of organization cf. inter alia Feder (1969) and Bergmann (1976). Landsberger (1974) summarizes them in these words:  
»Both kinds of movement are based on large, but disadvantaged classes; hence, considerable similarity might be expected. Nevertheless, the worker's urban location, his association with an economic sector, which is generally expanding, and his rather different relationship to the means of production . . . are likely to produce differences in the movements, in which he participates, as compared with those of the peasants.« (p. 28).

There are many intermediate forms and steps in the transition from informal movement to solid organization as between the forms of peasant activity, starting from inactivity and »banditry« and ending with sophisticated organizations, employing most modern techniques.

The actual forms of articulation of needs and demands and the forms of struggle for them depend upon the following factors:

- social and political organization of the villages,
- educational standard,
- existence of leadership,
- degree of social and political control and potential of regression,
- political organization of the ruling class or group,
- conditions of government machinery,
- political allies and alliances.

Several favorable factors are vital for the formulation, organization and fulfillment of demands, if a real social change shall be achieved.

#### **2.4 Categorization of cultivators and of agrarian movements**

Several attempts have been made to categorize the agrarian population; but often difficulties arise to locate the clear borderlines of theoretical analysis in the reality. There is no doubt for me, that the marxist view of social contradictions in the village is right in principle and realistic. But the precise limits of social strata are not easily found, e. g. according to criteria of mass statistics, and social relations often cut across these limits. Besides allegiance to the own social group there are other allegiances and commitments, social control etc. There is also upward and downward mobility, the hope for upward mobility and the idea of open strata.

Alavi (1968/1972) tried a socio-economic categorization of India's rural population. Following Mao Zedong's (1954) schema of the five clearly delimited strata of classes in Honan, China, he isolated there sub-sectors in the landowning classes, that are clearly demarcated against each other:

1. Landlords, not cultivating land,
2. independent small and medium peasants, who own the land they cultivate and do not exploit landless labourers,
3. capitalist farmers or wealthy peasants, who »cultivate« their land or manage their holding and employ wage labour.

Gough (1974) in an analysis of movements in South India found a different picture. She felt, that the stratification of agrarian population is too complicated to fit into a simple pattern; there are transitions and relations between the sub-sectors. Therefore, she subdivided according to the criterion, whether the landowner takes an active interest in the management of his land and contributes at least a certain amount of own labour to its cultivation. She distinguished five strata: landlord, rich farmer, medium peasant, poor peasant, farmworker.

It is equally difficult to develop a uniform typology for the complicated social relationship in the village. Stinchcombe (1961/62) in his attempt to categorize social relationships set out from the farm-types that dominate a given agrarian structure. In scheme 1 we try to systematize and find a typology of agrarian movements according to the dominant agrarian system. This proves, that the agrarian system largely determines political direction, economic objectives and allies.

From an analysis of several movements in Kerala, southern India, Oommen (1976) derived a pattern for the historical process and the phases of agrarian movements with the main criterion of relationship between movement and legislation. In that pattern he distinguished four possible relations:

1. Both – movement and legislation – act in the same direction of change.
2. Both oppose social change.
3. Legislation promotes change, while the movements oppose it.
4. The protest movement initiates the change.

### **3. Selected agrarian movements in India**

#### **3.1 The socio-economic framework**

As mentioned above, agrarian movements are replies to needs and in their forms and objectives partly determined by the agrarian system, because needs and demands are specific for each system. – India's socio-economic conditions can hardly be described generally and comprehensively, because regional variations in this nation of 700 million people and 22 federal states are too vast.

In regions of old settlement and of irrigated farming often large landholdings prevail in dimensions, that are mostly smaller than in N and S America, but substantially larger than in Japan and China. The operational holdings are very small or small. Usually land is leased to tenants and sharecroppers in small plots – for one season (thus often for half a year). Also the »owner-cultivated« land of landlords is in reality often tilled by tenants, sharecroppers and farmworkers. Rapid population growth with no alternative employment promotes further land fragmentation and decrease of a growing number of operational units. This harms the bargaining position of the ultimate producers against the landlord or his representative. Since the man-land-ratio narrows, competition among the tenants is aggravated. Land rent and tenancy rates rise, until outmigration into other sectors can be offered.

Zagoria (1971/1974) in his research about peasant communism in southern Asia set out from Stinchcombe's scheme (1961) and has related socioeconomic and ecological conditions and the ability to organize of the lower classes in an agrarian system of family tenancy. He included settlement structure and density, literacy, crop rotation on the one side and communist votes on the other side. High agrarian density, heavy inequality in landownership, a large class of landless villagers are factors of politicization, that again

are closely connected with the ecological conditions of irrigated farming and paddy-cultivation in South Asia. The potential for political organization is high for 7 reasons:

1. The contradictions between landlord and tenant are evident.
2. The landlord transfers the natural risk of the yield largely on the tenant, whose income is thus unstable.
3. Contrary to the owner-cultivation or the plantation system, the tenant grasps his economic position and is well able to produce and market without landlord.
4. Possession and tenancy titles are not assured and lasting.
5. Population growth and land fragmentation aggravate the tenants' position. Thus, downward mobility of large parts of the poor agrarian population characterizes the system.
6. Spatial concentration of the rural poor favours political organization.
7. Spatial distance from the landlord confers more independence on the cultivator.

The landlord class is perceived as enemy, superfluous, greedy, exploiting, while the lower classes deploy a large measure of independence, political awareness and organization.

South Asia is distinguished from other developing regions by several geographic, climatic and ecological factors: high soil fertility, heavy population pressure, concentration of a large landless proletariat or semi-proletariat of tenants, sharecroppers, farmworkers, wide-spread parasitic landlordism. Dense population and relatively high literacy (in Kerala, South India) promote the readiness for social change, while isolation weakens or impairs that readiness.

Main features of the Indian situation after independence are: high agrarian density, growth of the agrarian population without employment alternatives, »feudal« forms of dependence and exploitation,<sup>11</sup> consolidated by colonial rule and caste-system, consumptive drain of agricultural surplus, relatively slow growth of farm production.

The objective factors are viewed by Zagoria as generally favourable for the emergence of agrarian movements. The are partly counterbalanced by unfavorable factors: hunger and physical weakness of the farming population, distance between the centers of movement, poor rural infrastructure, therefore isolation and local or regional limitation of movements, multitude of languages. The impact of the caste-system is controversial. I am inclined to see it more as harmful, since it creates barriers between groups of equal social position, because it created an inferiority feeling in the low castes, who therefore hardly produce their own leaders, because the system promises to remunerate social subordination in later lives. Gough (1968/69) on the other hand opines, that the close togetherness by caste and the caste meetings might have favored the organization of agrarian struggles.

In this paper hereafter only a small selection of particularly important agrarian movements can be analyzed. Tribal revolts and movements are excluded, though Desai (1979)

11 Desai (1979) expresses the view, that agrarian relationships are no longer feudal, but have essentially become capitalist.



is justified, when including them among the important agrarian movements with social motive forces and political objectives. Some of these tribal struggles, however, have led to separatist objectives due to their localization.

### 3.2 Independence movement and agrarian population

There is no doubt about the close relationship with and the large share of the rural masses in the independence movement. The latter, however, as national unity party, has been and is socially quite heterogeneous in itself; and in its leading circles different, sometimes contradictory concepts and strategies fought for dominance. Besides many others we see as the most important the moderate socialist current, inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru, and the rural-conservative current, led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. They finally united for the goal of independence; but the methods and forms of struggle and the concepts of social content of independent India distinguished these main currents basically, in spite of continuous compromise between them.<sup>12</sup>

The colonial power tried to pacify seditious tribes by intensive christianization or to marginalize them by criminalization. Several tribes were declared criminal.<sup>13</sup>

The collaboration of the rural exploiters and their dependence upon the British colonial power determined the double objective of agrarian unrest since the 1870's: against Indian landlords and zamindars and against colonial rule. Thus, the cultivators, at first unorganized, later in their unions (kisan sabhas) became an important part and the mainstay of the Indian National Congress (INC) and played an essential role in many of its actions and campaigns. Certain forms of agitation and struggles were specifically »designed« for these strata and their ways and conditions of life. The Congress, on the other hand, particularly the faction around J. Nehru, remunerated the peasant contribution by the promise of a radical re-distribution of land. These promises crystallized already in the resolutions of the annual Congress conferences before independence, and became more frequent after 1947 in similar resolutions and several initiatives taken by the central government in New Delhi. Large movements, e. g. of the indigo-cultivators (1860), the Deccan riots (1875), against the salt-tax, the Tebhaga-movement (1946),<sup>14</sup> the Moplah-rebellion (1921) in Kerala, were specifically agrarian or village-based.

The success of the Russian revolution in 1917 and the weakening of British imperialism by the first world war together with economic troubles improved the setting for the agrarian movements in the twenties and thirties. The struggles aggravated during and after world war II and increased the difficulties of the colonial government.

12 The distinct social concepts are very clearly formulated in Nehru's correspondence with Gandhi (Nehru, 1961).

13 The same is largely true for present-day dacoits in central India, social rebels, who were or are marginalized by society. This is a parallel to social banditry, see Hobsbawm (1972).

14 The Tebhaga-movement in Bengal was pointed at the landlords of old and particularly of new type and called for a reduction of tenancy rates to a third of gross harvest.

### 3.3 Gandhi's ambivalent approach to mass movements

There is no doubt, that Gandhi was one of the great leaders of the independence movement and well grasped the impact of the rural masses. He was aware also of the horrible and growing distress of the villagers. Some of the basic issues and demands of these classes he championed and fought for their material improvement (»uplifting the rural poor«). He accompanied the political struggle with the example he lived: to live in the village of tension itself, to intervene as mediator, to spin with the spinning wheel (the *ambar charka*), hunger-strike. He called for the integration of the *harijans*, the untouchables, in Hindu society and practiced it. On the other hand, he opposed radical social demands and change, to be realized by the oppressed on the village level. E. g., when the movement in the United Provinces (today Uttar Pradesh) grew »violent« and attacked private property of the wealthy in the villages, the Congress leadership opposed it and warned the peasantry

»... that they must not use sticks and knives ... must not plunder the estates, the peasants must win the stone-hard hearts of their enemies by their kindness and love. The attempt to achieve their aims by refusing to pay the lawful rent of the landlord or refuse to fulfil their conscription duty to him may be looked upon as an immoral act.«<sup>15</sup>

Again and again, Gandhi withdrew from the struggles and publicly took his distance from the combatants. Thus, he wrote to the Viceroy on March 2, 1920:

»The party of violence is gaining ground and making itself felt ... It is my purpose to set in motion that force (non-violence) as well against the organized violent force of the British rule as the unorganized violent force of the growing party in violence. To sit still would be to give rein to both the forces above mentioned.«<sup>16</sup>

His call for civil disobedience, non-violent resistance (*satyagraha*) can be interpreted in several ways, **either** as efficient form of resistance for the unarmed, underfed, physically weak vast majority of the oppressed against the well-armed, well-fed, strong, small minority of oppressors, as expression of Hindu world perception, **or** as a method to maintain control over the cruelly exploited masses of agrarian population, difficult to organize and to control, to block the unfolding of social contradictions in the independence movement, to assure its unity, to open a valve for the heavy pressure. The call for non-violence presupposed, that the ruling class, the British colonial power and their aides, would agree to the same »rule of the games« in social conflicts. There is no doubt: Gandhi wanted to undermine and topple British rule by the non-violent and powerless force of the many millions of oppressed.

Historical judgment about Gandhi's strategy can and must be controversial, though his leading role in the struggle for independence is not questioned. Desai (1979) analyses and criticizes Gandhi from a Marxist viewpoint:

»Mahatma Gandhi emerged as the astute and most farsighted leader of the Indian bourgeoisie. He experimented with various approaches to both politicize and also to regulate the mass and class movements. He unleashed various movements, withdrew (from) them, when he got frighte-

15 Quoted after Choudhary (1971) in Desai (1979).

16 Quoted after Desai (1966), p. 363.

ned by the possibilities of these unleashed forces getting out of control and leaping into mighty revolutionary class struggles affecting both the imperialist masters and the local exploiters. Mahatma Gandhi also elaborated during this period astute organizational devices to prepare a chain of leaders to organize workers and peasants in a manner which would harness their energy and direct these energies into particular types of movements that would be reformist, economic, non-violent and based on the principle of class-collaboration, which was founded upon a theory of the exploiting classes functioning as 'trustees' of the people.« (pp. 213–214)

During the period of independence struggle, J. Nehru was more inclined to support the poor rural strata in social controversies, to side with them and to enhance their activities.

### **3.4 The battle for land after 1947**

After independence, national unity against colonial rule was pushed into the background; internal social and economic issues took the forefront. The struggle for the distribution of land, fulfillment of the promises of the Congress-party about radical agrarian reform became a central issue in Indian politics. – Three forms of land-reform can be distinguished:

1. by legislation and administration
2. by self-activity and self-help of the landless and small cultivators
3. by voluntary land-donation of large proprietors.

#### **3.4.1 Legal agrarian reform**

Indian reality is too multivarious for a general description; a generalization is necessary, though.<sup>17</sup> – Essentially, all government attempts at agrarian reform in the first three decades were abortive. The central government can only formulate general directive lines on this issue and can push the state governments by declarations of intent. The more Indian parliamentary democracy approaches village reality, the more it is dominated by the large landlords, their friends and representatives. With few exceptions, most of the 22 state governments have done little or nothing for an efficient distribution of land. In Kerala it has been successful (see below). In Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal new attempts have been made in recent years, of which the one in West Bengal seems to be the only one crowned with a certain success.

Of the 142.2 million hectares net area sown (1975/76) 1.8 mill. ha = 1.2 % only have been touched by legal agrarian reform, being calculated as surplus land above the ceiling (see table 1). Thereof, 0.8 mill ha = 46.6 % only were declared land-reform land, 0.4 mill. were taken possession of by the states and finally 0.28 mill. ha distributed – indeed, a meagre result without any impact on land tenure.

17 For more details about agrarian reform in India see Joshi (1975) and Bergmann and Eitel (1976).

## Korrektur aus VRÜ 1983, S. 98:

Erratum zu: The interaction of agrarian movements and political changes in India, by Theodor Bergmann, VRÜ Vol. 15, 4/1982, pp. 435–454

Due to difficulties in setting and correcting of the tables, table 1, p. 446 was confused. It must be replaced by the following table.

**Table 1:**

The results of agrarian reform by states – 1976

Federal state	Cases solved pending (1 000)		assessed as above ceiling	Acreage declared as land reform land (1 000 ha)	taken over by state	Distribution 1 000 ha benefi- ciaries	
Andhra Pradesh	212.0	227.0	405	85	8	1.6	?
Assam	1.1	8.2	162	59	?	48	101.376
Bihar	23.0	14.2	81	26	?	9	7.878
Gujarat	–	–	20	–	–	–	–
Haryana	0.6	33.6	23	–	–	–	–
Himachal Pradesh	2.7	0.04	57	31	23	1.5	4.582
Jammu and Kashmir	–	–	18	–	–	–	–
Karnataka	29.1	110.7	162	20	11	–	–
Kerala	23.2	14.6	61	25	12	5.5	19.857
Madhya Pradesh	204.7	14.5	20	72 <sup>1</sup>	4	0.1	52
Manipur	–	–	2	–	–	–	–
Maharashtra	84	5.4	150	120	83 <sup>2</sup>	84	53.855
Orissa	2.6	36.1	40	26	23	14	22.165
Punjab	26.1	10.4	35	2	0.4	0.4	379
Rajasthan	84.3	2.2	321	236	172	68	26.217
Tamil Nadu	41.7	3.3	37	18	16	13	19.475
Tripura	–	2.6	1	–	–	–	–
Uttar Pradesh	29.8	27.6	101	70	43	25	65.947
West Bengal	18.2	23.7	81	26	17	10	32.154
Union territories	2.7	10.3	3	2	0.2	–	29
India	786.4	544.4	1 780	818	413	280	353.966
			= 100	46.6	23.3	15.7	

1 probably printing error

2 data incomplete

Source: Commerce, Vol. 133, 14. 8. 1976, p. 324/325

The sixth five-year plan (1978) reports somewhat better, but in fact similar results, proving the gaps between pretention and reality. – As per July 31, 1977, there were

	ha	%
above the ceiling	2,153,000	= 100
declared as surplus	1,635,000	= 75.9
taken possession of by governments	850,000	= 39.5
distributed	522.000	= 24.2.

The official commentary says:

»Up to the 60's the land reform measures had no visible impact on the distribution of rural property.« (p. 11–12)

### 3.4.2 The peasant soviets in Telengana

The movement of the agrarian and tribal population of erstwhile Telengana, today part of the federal state of Andhra Pradesh, was one of the most enduring and geographically wide-spread agrarian movements in India. Peasant soviets were formed and a territorially coherent area of state power of these new bodies was established. This provoked the intervention of the central government, the demise of the feudal ruler (the Nizam of Hyderabad), the integration of the state in the Indian Union and the bloody oppression of the peasant soviets; finally it catalyzed the emergence of the land-gift movement.

The princely state of the Nizam of Hyderabad was unique in India; it was one of the largest feudal states comprising several ethnic and linguistic groups. The masses of both the rural and the total population were of Hindu religion and tribal, while administration, aristocracy and feudal lords were muslims. Feudal landlordism was strong; but cultivation was done in small operational units at high tenancy rates and feudal servitudes. The Nizam, himself the largest landowner, wanted to follow the British option and merge his state with the far distant two parts of Pakistan. This ought to preserve the feudal power of the muslim upper class and the islamic-theocratic character of the state in the long run.

If the central government in New Delhi had acceded to that desire, the subcontinent had become a dynastic patch-work like Germany around 1850. However, in November 1947 a truce was signed between the Nizam and New Delhi. The communists, meanwhile, won the trust and leadership of the peasant masses and the tribal groups and could establish a parallel government until 1948. Sundarayya (1972) summarizes the material achievements:

»During the course of the struggle, the peasantry in about 3,000 villages, covering roughly a population of 3 millions in an area of about 16,000 square miles, mostly in the three districts of Nalgonda, Warangal and Khammam, had succeeded in setting up gram raj (village self-governments), on the basis of fighting (official) village panchayats. In these villages, the hated landlords – the pillars of Nizam's autocracy in the rural areas – were driven away from their fortress-like houses and their lands were seized by the peasantry under the guidance of the people's committees. All evictions were stopped and the forced labour service was abolished. The plunderous and exorbitant rates of usury were either drastically cut down or altogether forbidden. The

daily wages of agricultural labourers were increased and a minimum wage was enforced. The oppressive forest officialdom was forced to abandon the entire forest belt and the tribals and the people living in the adjoining areas of the forests were able to enjoy the fruits of their labour. For a period of 12 to 18 months the entire administration in these areas was conducted by the village peasant committees. During the course of this struggle against the Nizam's autocracy, the people could organise and build a powerful militia comprising 10 000 village squad members and about 2 000 regular guerilla squads, in defence of the peasantry against the armed attacks of the Razakars<sup>18</sup> and Nizam's police.« (p. 2–3)

The feudal regime proved too weak to liquidate the agrarian revolution, that fought for social and national goals at the same time: liquidation of feudalism in the farming sector, liquidation of the state of Hyderabad with its islamic rule and integration with surrounding India, hindu and lay at the same time. The central government under the premiership of J. Nehru decided for massive military intervention, to quell the incipient agrarian revolution, before it could extend its competing political administration and by the same stroke to bar the secession of the princely state and its geographically absurd merger with Pakistan. A period of brutal oppression followed the military intervention: according to Sundarayya (1972) 4000 communists and agrarian sympathizers were killed, more than 10 000 were brought to camps and jails for 3–4 years and 50 000 beaten up and tortured in police and military camps. – Agrarian reform was postponed by the new administration and remains an unsolved problem even today.<sup>19</sup>

In its leadership of the peasant movement and its confrontation with the powers that be the CPI was wavering. Desai (1979) and Sundarayya (1972) see this in connection with the attitude of the Soviet Union and the CP, which changed around 1948 and now thought, that armed, revolutionary struggle against the new Indian government would be undesirable.<sup>20</sup> Before the first parliamentary elections of 1952, the CP switched over to a new line: it recognized the new legality and the rules of parliamentary democracy.

Despite its defeat, the Telengana movement had far-reaching and lasting consequences.

1. The CPI became the strongest opposition party and created a fund of political trust among the poor rural population. 2. It strengthened its leading hold in the kisan sabhas. 3. It »inspired« Vinova Bhave's land-gift movement (see below 3.4.3!). 4. It initiated the administrative re-organization of the whole country by main languages in 1956.

### 3.4.3 Vinova Bhave's land-gift movement

The bhoodan- and gramdan-movement cannot be analyzed here at length. We refer for that purpose particularly to Bergmann (1974), Oommen (1972) and Ostergaard and Currell (1971). For four reasons it must, however, be mentioned briefly.

18 Razakars: ill-famed special troops of the Nizam of Hyderabad.

19 This was taken up again in the late seventies, and with a new law on agrarian reform a solution was sought.

20 Desai (1979) as independent marxist and Sundarayya (1972) as follower of the CPI (M) criticize the policies of the CPI, which was still united at that time, from different angles.

1. The land-gift movement is typical for the Gandhian approach to social conflict, undertaken by his dearest disciple Vinoba Bhave: neither administrative or government action nor self-help and class-struggle of the oppressed, rather moral admonition and voluntary forsaking of the oppressors as path to social harmony and resolution of conflicts.
2. The bhoodan-movement was apparently catalyzed by the Telengana-movement and was started just in this troubled region and during this troubled phase. It was conceived as alternative to a socially dangerous self-activity of the oppressed.
3. In a summarizing evaluation it must be said, that it was a material failure; nowhere it has changed the pattern of land tenure. After a noisy start it soon faded away and slowly fell into total oblivion.
4. It was no real movement of the people, who were aroused by its objectives in the sense of Heberle's definition.<sup>7</sup> Since it followed M. K. Gandhi's strategy and rejected to mobilize those interested in land distribution, slowly the motivation of big landlords to donate land voluntarily vanished. Public administration was not called to action and was generally not activated. Its own specific approach and methods were the germ and the main reason of its failure.

### 3.4.4 Land grabbing movements and similar phenomena

After the liquidation of the Telengana-movement and the failure of the Bhoodan movement, the scene of rural politics was not »pacified«. Continuously, Indian press reports violent clashes in the villages with a background mostly in social tensions, the Tanjore-incident (1968, with 42 wives and children of farmworkers burnt to death), arson in landlords mansions, non-payment of tenancy-rates, no delivery of the landlords' share in the harvest, murder of landlords, bloody terror by landlords and their hirelings in Bihar during the premiership of Morarji Desai. Sometimes, the political climate in the countryside was so tense, that secret government reports warned against revolutionary eruptions and the prime minister feared the transformation of the green revolution into a red one.<sup>21</sup> The land-grabbing movement of the early seventies was wide-spread. In large regions in Western India (Gujarat, Maharashtra) landless people occupied uncultivated land from landlords and started cultivation without payment or levy to the owners. The movement was so comprehensive and massive, that many members of the central parliament and of the state assemblies ostentatiously participated in it.

Rural unrest and social demands were substantial factors in the crisis of the Congress at the end of the sixties and in the early seventies, leading to a deep schisma in the party and to Indira Gandhi's first huge victory in the elections. Her demands and slogans largely corresponded with the desires of the rural poor, though she lacked the power to fulfil the promises and expectations. Furthermore, it is not by chance that during the premiership of M. Desai (1977–79) the violence of landlords and their armed gangs increased heavily,

21 About the political aspects of the partial »successes« of the green revolution, that benefitted certain strata and raised social tensions, see Ladejinsky (1977) and Pearse (1980).

**Table 2:**  
Land donations by states up to July 1970

Federal state	Donations		Distrib
	acres	donors	acres
Andhra Pradesh	241,952	16,627	103,351
Assam	11,935	7,344	265
Bihar	2,117,467	290,200	391,400
Gujarat	103,530	18,327	50,924
Himachal Pradesh	5,240	-	2,531
Jammu and Kashmir	211	-	5
Kerala	26,293	-	5,774
Madhya Pradesh	405,786	58,375	173,063
Maharashtra	105,094	19,953	70,950
Mysore	15,864	5,017	2,123
Orissa	185,783	84,456	96,464
Punjab and Haryana	14,739	-	3,601
Rajasthan	432,868	8,391	84,781
Tamil Nadu	51,330	21,899	16,394
Uttar Pradesh	435,458	38,296	210,091
West Bengal	12,960	-	3,898
Delhi	300	-	180
Total	4,166,810	568,885	1,215,795
Total März 1962	4,177,572	-	868,737
Total Juni 1958	4,423,132	-	761,499

\* to be checked and distributed



while the untouchables and similar social groups as victims of counter-revolutionary violence often did not dare to resist and defend themselves. In a certain respect, the naxalite movement can be perceived as expression of deep-rooted social dissatisfaction, though its organizers largely were not of smallholder origin. The naxalite activity can be explained as revolutionary terrorism in the villages, intended to counteract the pressure on the oppressed, to encourage and motivate them to self-organization. Organizers and activists to a large extent originated from leftist student circles in West Bengal. But there is no doubt, that they met response among the rural poor. State governments and the central government have fought the naxalites by hardest methods of police and army, quietly executed many of their cadres, hereby widely transgressing their legal competences.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.4.5 Successful agrarian reform in Kerala

As mentioned above, agrarian reform has been implemented successfully in Kerala only (and partly in West Bengal).<sup>23</sup> This can be ascribed to the fact, that communist-led state governments have promoted legislation over a long period and in deep earnest, surmounted the resistance of large landlords and state machinery, and that a well-organized peasant movement supported the government, put pressure to bear on the bureaucracy and pushed it ahead. Administration was »supported« and controlled by newly established land-tribunals and village committees. Campaigns by the two communist parties and their kisan sabhas and impressive demonstrations provided the necessary pressure from below on the official bodies.

Setting out from four possible scenarios (see above 2.4), Oommen periodized the measures and laws concerning agrarian reform in Kerala, that have been started already before 1947 and continued until the recent time.

In the first phase, before independence, legislation took the front, but an organized movement was missing. During the second phase from 1947 to 1956, the movement gave the impulses, while legislation only indicated the change. In the third phase – from 1957 to 1969 – a radical movement acted in dialogue and in cooperation with legislation. In the fourth phase – from 1970 onwards – the movement dominated and determined the content of legislation.

Administration, not only in Kerala, largely recruits itself from the upper classes of landlords and in its local field-activity depends on this class. Thus, it is not particularly inclined to »cause harm and damage« to its social peers by active implementation of agrarian reform laws. Therefore, agrarian reform in Kerala could succeed only, because administration was put under pressure from two sides – from government and from the kisan sabha – and by many instruments – demonstrations, lock-ins, new democratic control

22 About the naxalites see particularly Dasgupta (1974).

23 The development of agrarian reform in Kerala was widely described and analyzed. See also Paulini (1979) with extensive bibliography.

bodies. The movements also counterbalanced the landlords' counterreform, which got support up to the supreme court in New Delhi.

Kerala is the Indian state with the highest population density, highest literacy rate, lowest percentage of harijans,<sup>24</sup> highest share of communist votes. So far it is an exception in the sub-continent. But it also has the smallest average size of holdings and the most complicated land tenure system. Thus, it is uncertain, how far the success of agrarian reform can influence other federal states. In adjacent Karnataka it has compelled the politicians to try the same, at least formally. Fic (1970) speaks of Kerala as the potential Yenan of India, implying, Kerala might become the berth of a nationwide agrarian revolution, because agrarian relations are particularly difficult, contradictions and problems aggravated to the utmost.

### 3.5 The weaknesses of the kisan sabhas

Movements do not follow a straight way, do not go from success to success. They are exposed to distinct social forces and interests, to parallelograms of forces; thus, they form a resultant of these forces, have their peaks and lowest points, victories and defeats, rather follow a course of zigzag. That is particularly true of agrarian movements in India. Since they often need a leadership originating outside the rural social class they represent, the goals and intentions of these outside leaders influence the movement's direction of attack.

The »material« difficulties for agrarian movements in India were mentioned above (2.3). In addition, the CPI often submitted to frequently changing advice and directives from their Soviet friends. Thus, the switches and changes responded much more to external factors of world politics and hindsight beyond India than to the social reality and the internal conflicts.<sup>25</sup> The new lines were prescribed to the kisan sabha. The split of the CPI in the mid-sixties led to a split of the kisan sabha, too, into one led by the CPI and one led by the CPI-(M). The Congress has tried to form a loyal peasant organization, that, however, is activated mainly before elections as rural auxiliaries. Kerala peasants in their daily travails and struggles might not be fully aware of the political split, since the two communist parties sometimes are cooperating, while they blame each other for »treason against the agrarian reform«.

Being organizations of the rural poor, the kisan sabhas cannot deal with more or less political issues only; they have to recognize the daily economic and social queries of their clientele and try to relieve them. They, thus, fill additional tasks beyond political functions, promote the foundation of cooperatives etc.

24 This expression is not fully precise. Harijans are the untouchables; statistics, however, show them together with the scheduled tribes. Their share in Kerala – 9,6 % – is the lowest for India and far below the national average of 21,5 %.

25 Desai (1979) refers to several cases, where political movements of the peasantry were stopped for such reasons.

### 3.6 Government promotion versus self-organization

Gandhi and Bhavé did not wish own political activity and pressure from the rural poor. Public authorities, who are responsible for agrarian reform or for support in social distress, in the best of cases, with best intentions and personal distance from the powerful in the village show a patriarchal attitude against the social strata they ought to promote. They do not desire independent, uncontrolled actions in the field of economy, much less political activities and control of government institutions. There is, though, a narrow and multivarious connection between politico-social liberation and economic activity and innovation. From the experience of development aid, but also from planning in industrialized countries we ought to know, that democratic participation of the people concerned or of those to be promoted in all project-phases – from conception to implementation – is an essential prerequisite for active collaboration, for the necessary increased effort in difficult situations and for the success.

But genuine (political) organization and representation of interests of the rural poor cannot in the long run be controlled, tutored and be given advice by the promoting agencies.<sup>26</sup> Such an organization is efficient only and, thus, attractive for the people in question, if it represents their interests without restraint und tutelage. This is the dilemma of tutelage and advice by national or international development agencies or agents. They face the difficult choice between the scylla of slow development, political tutelage and control and the charybdis of uncontrollable genuine political activity, huge economic efforts and technical innovativeness. In the name of »political stability« the political and administrative representatives of old order choose the political road of the smallest, most cautious and slowest steps.

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ding, preserving and loosing identity is influenced by geographical factors. Although both groups are similar in many respects, the different socio-economical systems deeply influence the degree of change in identity.

## **The interaction of agrarian movements and political changes in India**

By *Theodor Bergmann*

The introduction stresses the role of the peasantry in the shaping of history. – Thereafter, some functional definitions of agrarian movements are offered. They express the basic social needs of the rural masses in a countryside, which is clearly stratified and rent by social tensions and struggles: land, irrigation, the right to dispose of the produce. In a feudal society, the landlords are the given enemies of the cultivators. But even after the feudal order is removed, the shortterm interests of the peasantry might clash with the objectives of society. – Agrarian movements are manifold and take many forms; they are distinct from social movements of the urban proletariat by several traits. The delimitation of the rural social strata is diffuse, and there exist clientele relationships across the strata.

Agrarian movements have had an important share in shaping the political development of India from the start of the independence movement in the 1880's to the split of the Congress party in the late 1960's. Several researchers have tried to build a theoretical framework and to offer analyses of the many local and regional movements and their impact on the nation as a whole.

The Congress was in fact split on the approach to the rural poor. Nehru was willing to use their strength fully and to remunerate them after independence by a thorough agrarian reform. Gandhi and his later disciple Vinoba Bhave hesitated in face of these uncontrollable forces. This was also the cause of the final failure of Bhave's land-gift movement.

Legal agrarian reform was successful in Kerala and West Bengal, where there was an intensive interaction and mutual support of peasant movement from below and radical state government from above. In most other states land reform was abortive. – The radical Telengana movement, on the other hand, was widespread and created a parallel »soviet« government in large parts of the erstwhile state of Hyderabad. Though it was quelled brutally, it triggered off the demise of the Nizam of Hyderabad, the integration of the state in the Indian union, Bhave's land-gift movement, the administrative reform of India and a legal land-reform in the state of Andhra Pradesh in the 1970's.

In spite of defeats, new movements emerge again and again, e.g. the naxalites, the land-grabbing movement in the early 1970's, and heavy struggles between landlords and cultivators are frequently reported, leading to convulsions in state and central politics.

The peasant movements are largely dominated and led by the two main communist par-

ties and are affected by their political swings and outside advice. However, they largely express the needs and hopes of their members. – Finally, the dilemma of those officials is discussed, who want to organize the peasantry for their economic and social promotion, but without any political activity. This patronizing approach is doomed to failure.

## **Indebtedness, Indebtedness Crisis and Adaptability of Developing Countries**

*By Joachim Betz*

According to this essay there is no generalized debt problem of developing countries nor severe capital constraints by the international banks (due to portfolio constraints, lack of equity capital or mounting regulation) to service them on past volume standards. The external debt of some developing countries will, however, become unmanageable, if the present global recession continues and if they are not undertaking serious and far-reaching adjustment efforts.

Developing countries have shown in the past – particularly after the first oil crisis – fairly different adjustment capabilities to deteriorating external economic conditions. The countries with the poorest record are those mainly commodity exporting countries, who have pursued import substitution strategies beyond the first stage and who have relied heavily on indiscriminate state regulation of the economy. Even if external causes are of secondary importance for their worsening resource balance, it would nevertheless be dangerous to expect those countries to improve their situation by belt-tightening alone. This would neither be sufficient nor politically feasible. There is such an urgent necessity to assist the adjustment efforts of the hard core problem countries of the Third World, if continuing and cumulative debt crisis are to be avoided.