Women and Rural Revolt in India

BETWEEN 1969 and 1975, an important debate on the "mode of production in agriculture" in India took place in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, a leading Bombay publication. Behind the debate lay the issues raised by the "green revolution", the partial growth of capitalist agriculture, and concurrent poor-peasant and agricultural labour upsurges most dramatically highlighted by the Naxalbari revolt in 1967. The debate was inaugurated by reports of western experts Daniel Thorner[24] and Wolf Ladejinsky[25] who toured parts of the country and hailed a new type of capitalist farming. But it really began when Ashok Rudra and Usha Patnaik, two Indian economists, published their work on the phenomena and began to debate among themselves and with Paresh Chattopadhyay and N Ram as to whether this meant the emergence and dominance of capitalist relations in agriculture. It was they who began to formulate the question clearly for both contemporary India and the colonial period, as to what a capitalist mode of production as compared to a feudal or semi-feudal one, meant. Other writers inclined to defend the dominance of semi-feudal relations, such as Pradhan Prasad and Ranjit Sau, also began to publish and finally a set of cosmopolitan Marxist theorists--Jairus Banaji, Hamza Alavi and Harry Cleaver among them--also joined the debate.

he debate has generally been expressed in terms of whether the dominant mode in Indian agriculture has continued to be one of semi-feudalism, developing capitalism, or some alternate form requiring a specific concept such as a colonial mode of production. Although the implications of this issue have not always been clear to a casual reader, for Indian Marxist activists they are very important. The mode of production in agriculture is vitally connected with the question of who is the main enemy, and how to orient rural organizing strategy. If semi-feudalism continues to be dominant, it implies that the "contradiction between feudalism and the masses of the people" is the main one. That is, merchants and feudal landlords alone are the enemies: rich peasants can be made allies or neutralized, and while poor and landless peasants may be said to be the "main force" in the countryside, still general peasant committees are likely to be the main form of mass organizations. However, if capitalism is coming to be dominant in agriculture, the main contradiction would have to be expressed more as the "toiling masses versus the bourgeoisie." Wage labourers and poor peasants are posed as the main revolutionary force not only against feudal landlords and merchants, but also against the rich peasant-becoming-kulak farmer; the rich peasant is an enemy, not a possible class ally, and the middle peasant is a wavering force. Middle peasant, or "all-peasant" issues may be taken up, but only in an alliance form, and middle peasants should not be part of the class organization of poor peasants and agricultural labourers; it is the latter which must be given a firm priority. Agrarian revolution (land to the tiller) may still be the main revolutionary demand in both cases, but the lines of class conflict are different.

CHANGING MODE OF PRODUCTION

My conviction is that census and other governmental surveys as well as the facts and definitions brought forward in the mode of production debate, along with the analysis of many field organizers, show the latter to be the case. Broadly speaking, while British rule instituted commodity production and established private landownership, it did not lead to a capitalist development of agriculture. But with independence and the coming to power of the national bourgeoisie, limited anti-feudal land reforms and a limited but significant investment in agriculture by the state, there has been an increasing development of capitalist relations in agriculture and an increasing entrepreneurial orientation by a significant number of rich peasants (the new kulaks) as well as some former landlords. The process has continued to be enveloped in feudal remnants and it has not led to any sustained growth in agricultural production, but rather to an increased marginalization as well as proletarianization of the rural population. But it has meant that the focus of conflict in rural areas has shifted. Before independence, when feudal relations were

dominant the main contradiction was between peasants as a whole and landlords and merchant-moneylenders. Poor and landless cultivators may have been the most militant force, but only as part of a general peasant movement that also included big tenants and richer peasants, as seen in the *kisan sabhas* (peasant leagues) and Telengana armed struggle. But since the 1930s and 1940s and more particularly since independence, this contradiction has shifted, so that now the main contradiction is between poor peasants and labourers on the one hand, and rich peasants and landlords on the other. Especially in the last decade there has been a significant upsurge in agitations by poor peasants and agricultural labourers acting in their own class interests, and this has meant an increased role for women, Dalits and Adivasis.

Let us review the evidence. First, some definitions. It is important to distinguish between mode of production and social formation. Marxist theory distinguishes between a very few basic modes of production characterized in terms of an articulated combination of relations of production (the relation between the direct producers and those who appropriate the product, defined in regard to how the surplus is appropriated) and forces of production (technology, the labour process or relation between man and nature, the division of labour) with the relations of production as the dominant factor.[26] These modes are roughly primitive communism, ancient society, feudalism, capitalism and socialism-communism. But a mode of production is correlated with particular superstructural forms (state, ideology, family structure, religion) and it is always concretized in a particular social formation, a term generally used for a specific society. In addition, a social formation may be a mixed or transitional one, including more than one mode of production or a change from one mode to another. Colonial societies are always mixed social formations, often including both feudal and capitalist relations, and even if capitalism is coming to be dominant it is never exclusive but always enveloped in or coexisting with precapitalist or feudal relations. "Semi-feudalism" in these terms does not define a mode of production but rather (this is how Mao seems to have used the term) a situation in which both capitalism (in the cities) and feudalism (in the countryside) coexist, though the importance of the countryside makes feudalism dominant.

Capitalist Farming

Feudalism in agriculture means that the surplus is appropriated primarily in the form of rent, and that the direct producers are mainly tenants, poor peasants, or semi-serfs bound by particularistic ties of dependence to those who control the land. Most typically, the landlords and merchant-moneylenders use the surplus they accumulate through rent and usury not for investment in agricultural development but rather for personal consumption and control. Capitalism in agriculture

means that the surplus is appropriated primarily in the form of surplus-value, through wage labour. The direct producers are landless or land-poor workers compelled to sell their labour power but generally free of bonds of dependence to any particular landholder; and the farmers use their surplus to a significant degree for accumulation and investment in agriculture. A basic question is the degree to which there is something like free wage labour in agriculture, and we can take one representative quote from Lenin given by Chattopadhyay, who has been most insistent on the classic understanding and most clear in his application of it:

> The essential features of capitalism, according to Marx's theory, are (1) commodity production as the general form of production (2) not only the product of labour, but also labour itself, that is human labour power, assumes the form of a commodity. The degree to which the commodity form of labour power is developed is an indication of the degree to which capitalism is developed.[27]

What were the effects of colonialism? As Chattopadhyay points out, "the British preserved as well as destroyed the conditions of India's precapitalist economy, accelerated as well as retarded the development of capitalism in India".[28] Specifically, the British brought India into the world market, introduced and enforced private property in land, and built up railways and certain other infrastructural elements (designed primarily for integration into the world market, not integration of India's own economy). The results included a destruction of traditional handicraft industry and a pauperization of the rural population that left a very high proportion of Indians landless or land-poor and forced to seek work as "agricultural labourers".

Slow Process

Nevertheless, this was not a true growth of capitalist relations of production. First, in terms of the market economy, towards the end of British rule only about 35 per cent of the total agricultural output was produced for the market and most of this was marketed primarily in the village itself.[29] Second, while there was a high proportion of agricultural labourers up to 1931, these were generally not free wage labourers. On the one hand, though there was a separate category for tenant cultivators, many of those classed as agricultural labourers by the census were in fact tenants also; this seems to have been true in areas of *ryotwari* settlement where there was really no "recognized" tenancy.[30] The change between 1931 and 1951 was likely due to the fact that many of these actual tenants classed as agricultural labourers gained official recognition as landholders.

On the other hand, the poorest of the "agricultural labourers", especially in the early period, were not free wage earners but rather men and women who were farm servants bound to particular families of land-owners but traditional ties, in relationships that nearly always had a

TABLE VI

AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS 1891-1971

	All-India	*Southern triangle*	*Eastern region*	*Great north*
1891	13.00			
1901	25.10	34.00	9.60	17.40
1911	22.00	31.30	16.30	14.90
1921	26.00	36.50	22.00	14.80
1931	38.00	53.80	32.90	19.90
1951	19.75			
1961	24.04	30.32	25.75	12.26
1971	38.03	44.79	43.63	24.09

SOURCES: For 1891-1931 Surendra J Patel. *Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan*, Current Book House, Bombay 1952; For 1951-1971 the figures were computed from Census of India, 1974.

NOTES: 1 "All-India" up to 1931 includes Pakistan.
2 "Southern triangle" includes Bombay, Madras and Central Provinces to 1931. Kerala, Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka in 1951-1961.
3 "Eastern region" includes Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa for 1961-1971, and these plus present-day Bangladesh from 1901-1931.
4 "Great north" includes Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan and UP for 1961-1971, and in addition what is now Pakistan for 1901-1931.

traditional name and included "feudal" obligations by the dominant landowners to their servants that pretended to compensate for unfree status.[1] Studies of changes in such relationships illustrate the earlier form. As Breman describes the situation for a group of such low-caste labourers in south Gujarat,

> Increasing market production put an end to the traditional arrangements that were based on widely varying mutual obligations of an economic, political, cultural and social nature. The relations between *dhaniamo* and *hali*, landlord and labourer, gradually became more impersonal and contractual. The daily grain allowance which, together with other daily and seasonal perquisites, guaranteed a subsistence livelihood for the Halpatis, was transformed into a wage paid in cash, in exchange for a more specific labour performance. The firm and intimate bonds between the households of landlords and their labourers, often continued from generation to generation, dissolved to be replaced by loose and limited contacts. The percentage of casual wage earners rapidly increased. To the extent that farm servants are still required, they are hired nowadays on a contractual basis.[2]

The traditional relationship was feudalistic, the new one capitalistic. In Breman's area this change began in the 1930s but has really only been completed in the modern period. For most of India in the colonial period, a very large proportion of "agricultural labourers" included either such semi-serfs or disguised tenants; as a result it can be said that tenancy and a pauperized form of feudal relations were dominant.

Correspondingly, the dominant landholders in the countryside continued to be non-cultivating landlords and merchant-moneylenders who found it more profitable to live off rent and usury and sublet their land rather than invest in it. Their political alliance with British imperialism was a major factor in maintaining their power.

Nevertheless, there was a slow process of change. A section of the "agricultural labourers" were, in fact, free wage-earners and their proportion increased over time. There was, in addition, a process of capital accumulation in agriculture seen in the growth of capital stock in agriculture and some increase in the area under irrigation and improved seeds, and in such things as the development of iron ploughs in the Deccan. As Chattopadhyay says,

> Rate of capital accumulation was undoubtedly slow...This was bound to be the case if we remember that the change was taking place in an environment dominated, on the whole, by precapitalist relations, as shown in the widespread prevalence of parasitic landlordism, usury, sharecropping, rack-renting and different forms of servitude of agricultural labourers. These precapitalist relations could remain because imperialism preserved them, and, thereby put obstructions to the growth of capitalism in India. But we have no doubt about the reality of capitalism as a trend in Indian agriculture—haltingly, partially, locally, unevenly over space and slowly over time—in the British period itself.[38]

Forces behind Capitalistic Development

These trends represented capitalist relations emerging within a general semi-feudal formation. But it took the struggle against imperialism to bring them to some kind of dominance. The national movement included not only workers and poor peasants, but also the "national" bourgeoisie aiming at capitalist development free from the barriers imposed by British rule. Their equivalent in the countryside were the big tenants and rich peasants (often from non-Brahmin cultivating castes) attempting to shake off the dominance of moneylenders and landlords (usually of higher castes with a traditional disdain for manual labour). These joined the kisan sabhas along with poorer peasants and often dominated them. Unlike China, these bourgeois and upper-caste elements dominated the national movement throughout. With independence—in response to demands of the rural poor as well as the needs of rich peasants and the national bourgeoisie—the state instituted limited land reforms. But though the rhetoric of "land to the tiller" was used, the reforms were designed in fact to support capitalist farming. Land ceilings were set high, and the tenancy acts defined "tenant" and "self-cultivator" to include those who merely supervised farming and hired wage labour. While big tenants gained control of some land, the more feudal landlords lost only a limited amount and were under pressure to

farm more capitalistically on the rest (and ... given compensation funds to do so) and many of the poorer tenants lost whatever security they had before. The land reforms did nothing—and were never designed to—ease rural poverty or halt land concentration, but they laid the basis for the consolidation of rich peasant power and for the adoption of "green revolution" technology in the 1960s.[34] Thus, it was not imperialism as such that promoted capitalist development in agriculture, but rather the class struggle as embodied in the nationalist struggle against imperialism and its landlord allies.

Recent Trends: Output and Tenancy

How do we document the recent growth of capitalism? First, in terms of growth of production: while growth in agricultural production was slightly less than nil up to 1947, between 1950-51 and 1960-61 it was 3.2 per cent and between 1960-61 and 1970-71 it was 2.6 per cent. This indicates a limited growth in the forces of production, in irrigation, improved seeds, opening up of land: the trend downwards in recent years (which was a trend towards stagnation relative to population growth) shows the limits of this growth.

TABLE VII

TENANCY IN INDIA

	Percentage of holdings reporting land leased in	*Area leased in as per centage of total operated land*
1950-51		35.70
1953-54	39.85	20.34
1960-61	27.33	12.53
1961-62	23.52	10.70
1970-71	8.00	8.50 (10.57)

SOURCES: D Narain and P C Joshi, "Magnitude of Agricultural Tenancy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Review of Agriculture, September 1969; P C Joshi, *Land Reforms and Agrarian Change in India and Pakistan since 1947*, Reprint from Studies in Asian Social Development, no. 1; P S Appu, "Tenancy Reform in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* Special Number, August 1975. Pranab Bardhan's articles in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1970, 1973, 1974 and 1976.

Second, in terms of a decline in tenancy (see table VII) several points have to be noted. First, there is still some question about the validity of official statistics. Some writers (P S Appu and S K Sanyal) feel that land reform has resulted not so much in a decline in tenancy as in driving it underground, so that concealed tenancy exists in the form of sharecropping and actual tenants counted as agricultural labourers. D Narain and P C Joshi feel there is not much concealed tenancy; they cite the difference between figures for leased-in and leased-out land; the former show much less tenancy and are less likely to indicate landlord

desire to conceal. Some case studies,[85] would argue that while there is much concealed tenancy these tenants are not officially counted as "agricultural labourers" but as "owner-cultivators" and they included rich peasant (capitalistic) as well as poor tenants. Tenancy, as this suggests, does not automatically indicate "feudalism"; in a capitalist type of tenancy an entrepreneur rents land and farms it with labourers. Thus P C Joshi argued earlier that a larger number of big tenants in the Punjab, as compared to West Bengal, indicated more capitalistic tenancy. This is likely to be on the increase generally in India. It is shown both by the fact that the decline in the number of leased-in holdings is greater than the decline in their area and by the growth in the proportion of tenanted area operated by landed as opposed to landless tenants, to the point where it was 85 per cent of the total area by 1970-71.[86] Both facts show an increase in bigger, richer, and more likely capitalistic tenants.

Statewise data, analyzed by Bardhan, helps to specify the capitalistic trend. Generally there has been an overall decline in tenancy between 1953-54 and 1970-71, but this was most significant in the 1950s. In the 1960s, the all-India tenancy figures stayed the same, but tenancy went down significantly in the Punjab and Haryana (the northwest) and most of the south and central-western states, while it went up in the eastern and northern states of UP, Bihar, Assam, and Orrisa. (These states, plus Tamil Nadu, Mysore, and Punjab, were the high-tenancy states generally.)

Sharecropping and Wage Labour

The declining-tenancy states included the states of high agricultural growth rate as well as those which had significant tenancy legislation. The states with high and rising tenancy were also the states in which sharecropping (as opposed to fixed-rent) as proportion of total tenancy was highest, though sharecropping overall was tending to grow. These northern and eastern states could be called more "feudalistic" in contrast to the south, central and western states which had lower, declining, and less sharecropping tenancy and also had a higher proportion of agricultural labourers (see table VI, where they are the "southern triangle") and were thus more "capitalistic". (Punjab and Haryana, the high-growth states in the northwest, have had high tenancy and low agricultural labourers but show a great rate of decline in the former and rise in the latter.) Finally, to qualify the general characterization of the northeast as more feudal, it should be noted that some economists argue strongly[87] with data from Bengal and Bihar, that sharecropping itself is becoming more capitalistic, with the landlord making more investment and acting in a more entrepreneurial manner. Among these states Bihar and Bengal also show a high percentage of agricultural labourers, who seem to constitute a class below the sharecropping tenants.

The most crucial factor is wage labour and its nature. The data indicate a clear and dramatic increase from 19 per cent in 1971. These are increasingly paid in cash rather than kind (by 1964-65, 62.2 per cent of men's wages and 56.8 per cent of women's wages were in kind, and the proportion is said to have increased since then) and the percentage of landlessness among them has increased from about 50 per cent in 1953-54 to 61 in 1965-66.[38] While a large proportion of these landless households do rent in some land,[39] as noted earlier they are an insignificant proportion of a generally declining tenancy. Thus, most agricultural labourers may own or rent small fragments of land, but it is of minor significance in their economic life. Does this continuing connection with the land constitute a form of tying them to it (maintaining them as de facto serfs)? It appears not. A certain amount of sharecropping tenancy may be used by landowners as a way of insuring cheap seasonal labour.

But wage labour is still the main form of extracting surplus in this case and it is the existence and nature of the labour market and not "feudal" serfdom that keeps the relation going. In spite of the Emergency focus on "bonded labour" the pure form seems to be minor. The particularistic, generation-to-generation tied feudal relations that characterized the position of many low-caste labourers in British times is no longer prevalent. Instead, indebtedness is more seasonal; year-labourers (working for the year for an employer from whom they often take a loan in advance) are more likely to change their employer; and more and more the factor behind all forms of "tied" indebtedness is not the traditionalistic dependence that keeps one family bound year after year to an upper-caste landlord, but the market relations that make other employment impossible, force a high rate of migration and wandering and a willingness to take a loan and tied relationship when it is offered. The basic masses in the countryside are primarily freel marginalized lobourers with nothing to sell but their labour power and forced to take very bad bargains in doing so

Feudal Remnants

Nevertheless, capitalist rela- -s remain enveloped in feudal remnants. On the one had, poor pe..ants with some claim to the land but indebted and oppressed by merchants, frequently working as sharecroppers, are a major force along with agricultural labourers, and in some regions of the country (very frequently in tribal areas) they are dominant. On the other, among agricultural wage labourers themselves indebtedness, concealed and partial sharecropping tenancy, and caste divisions remain. These can be looked upon as weapons of class struggle used by capitalistic farmers as a means of keeping their wage labourers divided and dependent. These features may not always have been this, but now, I would argue, they are. For example, a farmer fearing shortage of labour during harvest season (but not all the year round) may find it

advantageous to hire only a few permanent labourers but keep others as sharecroppers or indebted poor peasant dependants in order to have a cheap source of seasonal labour. Giving some land out in tenancy and switching the tenants from year to year, maximizing caste tensions, giving certain privileges to some and maintaining some feudalistic relations help to keep the general village population of landless and land poor labourers divided." But these factors of caste, debt-bondage, and use of tenancy, are no longer factors which define relationships between producers and appropriators as a feudal one, but factors which modify a basically capitalist relation and serve as barriers to class organization. That is, they hamper the formation of agricultural labour as a class-for-itself but do not prevent them from being a class-in-itself. This, I think, is an important difference. The objective basis for organizing agricultural labour has increased vastly; when labourers do organize they may repudiate debts, fight caste divisions, and negotiate contracts as year-labourers in what was once a traditional tied relationship.

It may be argued that the feudal remnants, which are a barrier to development of production as well as class organization, continue to exist due to imperialism. High prices of agricultural inputs (ultimately a factor of unequal exchange) mean that landowners cannot easily modernize the forces of production and are forced to increase absolute and not relative surplus value; some tend to refeudalize (return land to tenancy or middle-peasant control); in most cases they must simply resist all efforts to organize and raise wages. Under India's "dependent capitalism" a limited number of industrialists might allow high wages and controlled unionization, but the millions of kulak farmers are compelled to resist this, and thus all methods from debt-bonding of labourers to the use of caste divisions to violent suppression are to be seen in the countryside. Thus even struggles for wages and minor economic gains have resulted in intense resistance, while the fight of agricultural labourers to organize very quickly comes up against the basic forces of society.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUGGLE

As a result of changes in the relations of production, the struggle of poor peasants, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers is now the crucial form of agrarian class struggle, and not simply a major force behind anti-landlord struggles of the whole peasantry. The dramatic upsurge in these struggles in the last decade has been the major factor behind the growth of women's organizations.

Where there has been serious, sustained organizing of the masses of working-class or agricultural-labour women in India, it has generally been done by communists of various types. There have been middle and upper-middle class women's organizations doing social work, often connected with the Congress Party; there has been a widespread of *mahila*

mandals (women's clubs) often with a low middle-class or middle-peasant base; there have been Gandhian groups with village organizations involving poor women; and there have been a fair amount of agitations led by socialists. But where toiling women have been involved in ongoing organization and struggle, it has nearly always been under communist leadership.

Communists and the Woman Question

Nevertheless, communists of all types have had, until fairly recently, a "liquidationist" approach to the woman question, that is, they have dealt with working women's problems primarily as class problems. Here a distinction must be stressed: a party or organizing group may proclaim women to be oppressed and organize them in some fashion, but if they say women's oppression will be solved only with the revolution, if they organize women only in terms of demands shared by the men of their class and refuse to deal at all with contradictions of interest between men and women, and subordinates a women's front entirely to the political goals of the party, we cannot say a "women's movement" exists. This has been generally the case with Indian communists. Prior to independence, communists worked in the All-India Women's Congress AIWC) and gave this mainly middle-class group a more mass orientation, but after independence when they were expelled from the AIWC they established no women's organization of their own for many years, and women cadres were sent instead into union or other front activities. The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) was founded in 1956 and remains the mass front of the Communist Party of India (CPI) but for many years it was inactive and when the Communist Party of India, Marxist, CPI(M) split from the CPI, it formed no national women's organization of its own and still has only state-based organizations. Nor did the Marxist-Leninist communists, CPI (ML), the "Maoist" party formed in 1969, consider the women's front a priority, and regionally based communist or Marxist organizations (like the Lal Nishan Party of Mahara-htra) have also concentrated on class organizing. Nevertheless, there has been a significant change in the last few years in the attitudes and organizing orientation of many communists, along with the rise of new left-led women's organizations, and this has followed from and in significant ways resulted from the role of women in the upsurge of the rural poor.

This rural upsurge has dated particularly from 1967, and has taken three main forms: (1) Armed struggle has occurred, most often under "Naxalite" or CPI (ML) leadership and most often among indebted poor tribal peasants in border regions. This has included the Naxalbari and Debra-Gopalibravapur areas of West Bengal (1967, 1969), the Muzaffarpur area of Bihar (1968-69), the Srikakulam area of Andhra (1968-70) and some parts of Kerala. (2) Intensive, mass union-type

organizing agricultural labourers over demands for wages and sometimes land has occurred in localized plains areas, most often involving Dalits and other low-caste labourers. This has included Kerala, some parts of Andhra, Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, Ahmednagar and more recently Dhulia district of Maharashtra, and some districts in Bihar. The leadership has been primarily from the established communist parties, but more recently different groups—communists, independent Marxists, and radicalized tribal leaders—have been involved.(3) Extensive mass campaigns on particular issues have occurred, including the nationwide CPI-led "land grab" campaign of 1970, the more militant and massive campaign led by the CPI (M) in West Bengal between 1968 and 1970 to seize illegally-held lands of landowners, and the widespread famine agitation in Maharashtra from 1970-73 primarily led by the Lal Nishan Party.

Women's Participation

Though the "Naxalite"-led revolts have occurred primarily among tribal groups where there is a high work participation of women, the role of women in these has been undocumented. It has been said that it was the tribal women of Naxalbari who were the first to launch an attack on the police, and the Naxalite petty-bourgeois activists themselves have included women. However, because the early revolts were so heavily repressed and the early Naxalite tendency was to disdain "open" mass organizing, there was little opportunity for the dynamics of women's participation to have an effect.

The mass campaigns have varied in their effect. Women may have participated in the highly controlled and one-shot CPI "land grab" but little direct result is visible. The CPI (M)'s *benami* struggle in West Bengal was in an area of low work participation by women, and did not focus on issues of agricultural labourers but rather on land issues that sought to unite middle with poor peasants and sharecroppers. Thus there was no reason impelling the unique participation of women, and Bengal communist leaders continue to be indifferent on the issue, though the women's federation did show significant growth in this period. The Maharashtra famine agitation, in contrast, focused on wage and work issues of concern to the poorest peasants; here women were very much involved and the result was dramatic.

On the whole, it has been the second type of rural upsurge—intensive, localized mass organizing of agricultural labourers and poor peasants—that has most consistently brought women's issues forward. Not only have these taken place in districts with high women's work participation, but it has taken years of struggle, not only for the women's militancy to prove itself, but also for women's leadership to develop and for the interaction between the women and the usually all-male organizers to make it clear that here were issues that

had to be taken up and a unique social force that had to be mobilized.

For instance, the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu has long been a centre of agricultural labour agitation, largely because here the class lines have been fairly clearly drawn: a high proportion of agricultural labourers, largely Harijans, facing a largely Brahmin landlord class. From 1966 a new intensity developed in the struggles, resulting in 1968 in one of the most notorious atrocities in recent Indian history, when landlords in Kilvenmani village barricaded 42 men, women and children Harijan labourers in a hut and burned it to the ground. Both CPI and CPI (M) have been working in the district, but the CPI (M) seems to have done the most intensive work, including efforts to maintain village-level organizing with study groups to develop local leadership.[41] Work began to focus on women, and organizers reported that while women had always been involved in the struggle, the formation of separate women's committees gave an opportunity to really develop their enthusiasm and leadership. Six years after the Kilvenmani incident the first meeting of the Democratic Women's Federation of Tamil Nadu, a CPI (M) front, was held 12 miles away in December 1974, with a reported 70 000 women participating in the concluding rally. The Harijan women labourers of Thanjavur district were the main force, and a march of the women of Kilvenmani lent a particular militancy to the occasion.[42]

Liberationist Issues

Kerala is perhaps the state ..... the longest history of successful agricultural labour organizing, mostly under CPI (M) leadership in recent years, that is said to be responsible for the highest wage rates for such work in India.[43] Again, this took on new intensity and spread in new districts after 1967. The CPI (M)'s Kerala Women's Federation took on real organizational form only in 1968, and its leaders reported a curious dialectical process: in many cases the involvement of agricultural labourers in the federation actually preceded and led to the formation of agricultural labour unions, but after this the male labourers resisted the desire of women to join the women's federation as well as the union, fearing that the women in this way would get out of their control.[44] However, by 1975, consciousness of this by party and women leaders as an aspect of male chauvinism which had to be struggled against was beginning.

In Andhra, there was a wave of strikes over wages and land in 1968 leading to a 50,000-strong "Coolie Dandu," or agricultural labourers' march, in Hyderabad city in February 1968 followed by more strikes and union organizing. This was primarily in a CPI area and was a major factor leading to the CPI's formation of its All-India Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Sangh (Agricultural Labourer Association), in that year. Women's participation again was strong, though there is little direct

evidence. But it is noteworthy that it was in Hyderabad city in 1973-74 that the first real "liberationist" women's organization, the Progressive Organization of Women (POW) was founded with a draft manifesto that proclaimed women as a crucially oppressed section of society that required a separate mass organization based on social and cultural as well as economic demands.[45] The POW grew out of a radicalized student movement and found its primary base among students and some slum women, rather than among working women or agricultural labourers. But the context of Andhra and the role of rural women was undoubtedly also important.

Famine Mobilization

It was in Maharashtra, however, where I did field work in 1970-71, 1973, and 1975-76, that the process of the development of liberationist issues out of class struggle can be most clearly traced. In Maharashtra, the real upsurge of the rural poor began not in 1967, but in 1970-73, in the years of drought and famine. India has known famine and drought before, though this was said to be the "worst in a hundred years" for the area. What really made it unique was both the magnitude of governmental response and the massive, left-led agitation that provoked that response. In village after village poor peasants staged marches, demonstrations, gheraos of officials demanding that the government provide work. The government fearing a genuine rural revolt, did set up relief works, mainly stone-breaking road projects, but occasional dam and bunding projects; the number of people employed on these grew to a total of nearly 5 million in 1973. The agitations, too, grew to a climax marked by a massive rural workers' strike of nearly a million and a half on 15 May.

Women were a majority of workers on the projects and reportedly the most militant in the demonstrations. They initiated many actions, including gheraos and blockages of roads. The reason was not hard to seek: it was the women who directly faced the problems of expense and often unavailability of food as the managers of consumption as well as the back-breaking work on the projects and petty tyranny and often corruption of supervisory officials. One result was an increased attention to the issue of work and equal pay. As elsewhere in India, women in Maharashtra regularly got less pay for work in the field than men, and initially they also received less on the relief projects; but by 1973 the government granted them equal pay. And the militancy of the women in the famine days led directly to a recognition by the state of their right to work as well as equal pay. The Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme provided for guaranteed work in rural areas for women as well as men, and by the end of 1974 a bill for minimum wages in agriculture was passed which provided a minimum of three rupees a day for both men and women equally. While these are usually not implemented, they

when women from Lal Nishan, the Ma va-Shramik Sanghatana group, and student groups came together to organize a statewide "United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference" on 18-19 October 1975. Held during the Emergency, mass actions were forbidden but the conference brought together 750 women, half from outside Poona, two-thirds working-class women or agricultural labourers in an enthusiastic two days involving songs, picture exhibits, lectures, and enthusiastic and angry accounts of their own lives and experiences by the working women themselves. CPI, CPI (M), and Socialist women had initially been asked to help organize the conference but withdrew: the CPI (which was backing the Indira Gandhi government) stayed out of the mainly though mutely oppositional conference, but women from the CPI (M), the Socialist Party, and the Republican Party (a Dalit political organization) did attend the conference. While no permanent organization was formed in October, the conference was successful in giving a thrust to much local organizing, and meetings, campaigns (including anti-alcohol, anti-dowry and minimum wages programmes), cultural programmes and local conferences were held in a wide variety of villages and towns involving women from the conference, and local women's organizations began to take root in Bombay, Pune, Kolhapur, Ahmednagar district. Nagpur and elsewhere.

At the same time efforts by other groups expressed the rising consciousness of women (and male organizers) in Maharashtra. Socialists helped to organize a Devadasi conference (involving temple prostitutes) in September, and a socialist magazine *Sadhana* published a women's special number in August. Muslim women, perhaps the most oppressed in terms of their traditional role, also held a conference which opposed the Muslim *talakh* or divorce procedure. *Janwedana*, the only newspaper in the state and perhaps the country published by Dalit students, began to republish as a bi-monthly after a two-year closure and its first issue in November was also devoted to women under the heading "In the Third World Women Hold Up Half the Sky" and included interviews with prostitutes and agricultural labourers.

Trivandrum Conference

These events, and a burgeoning atmosphere of women's self-expression, was giving Maharashtra something of a reputation in India as a "women's movement" centre. But the final event of International Women's Year took place in the far south, Trivandrum in Kerala state, one of CPI (M) strongholds. This was the All-India Women's Conference, held during 27-29 December which brought together activist and academic women from all over the country as well as a few from outside (including British economist Joan Robinson). The Kerala conference was more of an academic nature than the Maharashtrian "women's liberation" conference; unlike the Maharashtrian one, it included men as well as

women and was thus not so "feminist". But it involved the same potent combination of lower-class women militants (much of the discussion involved necessary translation from Malayalam to English) and educated, increasingly conscious women activists. And it resulted not only in resolutions that took up social and cultural issues, but also in a certain amount of criticism of male chauvinism in party and union leaderships. Women activists from Kerala were forceful in dealing not only with social and cultural problems (alcoholism and wife-beating), and the problems of the relationship between the Kerala Agricultural Labourers' Union and Women's Federation found expression.

In conclusion, 1975 or "International Women's Year", had in fact witnessed the beginnings of a stirring at a mass level among significant sections of Indian women. But the basic causal factor was not so much the influence of new liberationist ideas from outside (though these affected the leadership) but rather the role of women in the growing movements of the rural poor. The new trend that had set in was barely reflected in Delhi, Bengal and north India, where women had low work participation and a more minor role in poor-peasant struggles. Rather, it was in Andhra with the POW, and in Maharashtra with the Women's Liberation Struggle Conference (WLSC) that the new ideas—the need for a broad, united mass women's organization, the significance of social and cultural issues (of dowry, alcoholism, relief from the "double burden" of housework and childcare) as well as economic (equal pay, the right to work)—found expression. And these were the states with the highest work participation of women as well as a high proportion of agricultural labourers. Correspondingly, the leadership of both the Andhra POW and the Maharashtra WLSC came from outside the two communist parties.

Politics of Women's Revolt

The contrast between the two parties, the CPI and CPI (M), is also instructive. The CPI has appeared as a very skilful and flexible organization in taking up women's issues; countless articles were published in its journals during IWY, meetings were held, and a sophisticated national organizational structure exists. But the CPI's rural base has been primarily among middle and richer peasants, and there has been little sign of ferment and discussion within the party on women's issues. The party has stayed out of mass oppositional activities (it also withdrew from the Bombay Women's Anti-Price Rise Front by early 1975) and it has fairly easily subordinated its women's fronts to the main theme of supporting the Congress and opposing "fascism", that is, trends which it claimed to be dominant in the opposition to the government.

In contrast, the CPI (M) has had strong mass women's organizations in the states of its greatest strength among the rural poor (including

Kerala, West Bengal, and to some extent Tamil Nadu) and the result has been a good deal of ferment and struggle within the party itself over the handling of women's issues and what it has been led to identify as "male chauvinism."[24]

Thus the change in agricultural class relations, and the growing self-assertiveness of agricultural labourers and poor peasants resulting from it has led to the growing militancy of working women in India and to a growing consciousness of women's oppression and the importance of the fight against it. Today it is possible to say that a women's movement has begun in at least some crucial areas of India. Its future will undoubtedly be closely linked with the outcome of the tumultuous political uncertainties of the subcontinent.

(CONCLUDED)

24 Daniel Thorner, "Coastal Andhra: Towards an Affluent Society", *Economic and Political Weekly*, (*EPW*) Annual Number, February 1967 and "Capitalist Farming in India" *EPW* Review of Agriculture, December 1969.

25 Wolf Ladejinisky, "Green Revolution in Punjab: A Field Trip", *EPW* Review of Agriculture, June 1969 and "Green Revolution in Bihar: The Kosi Area: A Field Trip". *EPW* Review of Agriculture, September 1969.

26 For a recent discussion of these issues and an analysis of the feudal mode, see Barry Hindness and Paul Hirst, *Precapitalist Modes of Production*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1975.

27 Paresh Chattopadhyay, "Mode of Production in Indian Agriculture: An Anti-Kritik", *EPW* Review of Agriculture, December 1972, p A-186.

28 Ibid., p A-189.

29 Ibid., p A-190.

30 Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Nonbrahman Movement in Western India*, Scientific Socialist Education Trust, June 1976, pp 88-91.

31 Surendra J Patel, *Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan*, Current Book House, Bombay 1952, pp 75-97.

32 Jan Breman, "Mobilization of Landless Labourers: Halpatis of South Gujarat," *EPW*, 23 March 1974, p 490.

33 Chattopadhyay, op cit., p A-191.

34 Hari Sharma, "Green Revolution: Prelude to a Red One?", in Kathleen Gough and Hari Sharma (eds.), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, Monthly Review Press, New York 1974.

35 Joan Mencher, "Problems of Analyzing the Rural Class Structure", *EPW*, 31 August 1974.

36 Pranab Bardhan, "Variations in the Extent and Form of Agricultural Tenancy", *EPW*, 11 and 18 September 1976.

37 Ashok Rudra, "Loans as a Part of Agrarian Relations", *EPW*, 12 July 1975, and "Sharecropping in East Bengal," *EPW* Review of Agriculture, September 1975.

38 Parthasarathy and Rao, op cit; Paresh Chattapadhyay, "Dependent Capitalist Development in India" in Kathleen Gough and Hari Sharma (eds.) *Imperialism and Revolution in India*, Monthly Review Press, New York 1973.

39 Pranab Bardhan, op cit.

40 Mencher, op cit., Sheila Bhalla, "New Relations of Production in Haryana Agriculture" *EPW* Review of Agriculture, March 1976; Kathleen Gough, "Changing Agrarian Relations in Thanjavur, 1957-76", *Kerala Sociological Review* forthcoming.

K lexander, *Agrarian Tension in Thanjavur*, National Institute of Community Development, Hyderabad 1975.

People's Democracy, 19 January 1975.

A V Joshi, "Wage Rates of Agricultural Labourers in Kerala", *EPW* Annual Number, February 1973; Pranab Bardhan, "Variations in Agricultural Wages: A Note" *EPW*, 26 May 1973.

"Women of India", Report of the All-India Conference on Women 1975, in *Social Scientist 43*, p 66.

Progressive Organization of Women (POW) *Draft Manifesto*, 1974; "Development of the POW" *Stree-Vimukhti*, number 2, 1975.

Maria Mies, "The Peasant Struggle in Shahada" *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 1976; Chhaya Datar, " The Relations between Women's Liberation and Class Stuggle—the Shahada Movement", paper read at All-India Conference on Women, Trivandrum, 27-29, December 1975.

"Women of India", op cit.