

In the Midst of the Land Grabs – Re-visiting the Peasant Question

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Under capitalism, the underlying basis of the dispossession of people from their lands is what potentially brings the highest rate of return from the private profitable use of those lands. Such dispossession usually takes place by the application of the law *and* the use of the threat or the actual use of force. These are the means by which land is “liberated” from the obstructions to its most private profitable use. One of these obstructions is ‘customary rights’ (e.g., community ownership of common lands, customary tenures, and so on), which are put an end to because they interfere with the capitalist process. Property rights have to be “private” and “exclusive”.

One can examine the dispossession process and its aftermath in the wake of the agricultural revolution in England during the first half of the 18th century or in the 19th century in the US southeast in the wake of the cotton boom – the expropriation of the Cherokee and other Indian tribes and the cultivation of cotton by slave labour over there, and in parallel, the growth of the Lancashire mills with the low-wage labour of the displaced peasants and artisans. But in all of these happenings, one should never lose sight of the role of Atlantic high finance in London and New York City, which steered the whole process of “accumulation by dispossession”. So also in India over the last two decades – a “financial aristocracy” that has gotten rich, not by production alone, but by pocketing the already available wealth of others by means of the law *and* by the threat or actual use of force.

Examples abound, whether it’s the DLF group that acquired agricultural lands on the outskirts of New Delhi dirt cheap and converted them into expensive real estate, or, more recently, the Adani group which has ruined the coastal communities and ecosystems through corporate plunder of the Kutch, striking a win-win partnership with the then Chief Minister Narendra Modi. Such capitalist tie-ups of business and politics have rewarded the most blatant anti-social business and political behaviour even as they have severely punished the communities of ordinary people who had put in place the shared use of common resources. Take another example, that of the National Highways Development Project since 2000 – the Golden Quadrilateral and the North-South and East-West Corridor. Or take the Greenfield, the modernisation and expansion projects of the Hyderabad, Mumbai and Delhi international airports. Probe into all of these projects, and some others, and you will know why the Gautam Adanis,

the G M Raos, the Jaiprakash Gaurs and the G V K Reddys are in the dollar-billionaire brackets.

Let's then come to "where money, filth and blood comingle" – in southern Chhattisgarh where in June 2005, the state government, financed by the central government, created an armed private vigilante force called Salwa Judum to cut off the villagers from the Maoists, and companies like Essar and Tata Steel contracted with this force for the provision of protection and "ground-clearing" services. A draft report authored by a sub-group of an official committee of the Ministry of Rural Development (quickly disowned and withdrawn from the ministry's website) said that Salwa Judum was being "supported by the fire power and organisation of the central forces". More to the point, it drew attention to what it called "the biggest grab of tribal land after Columbus" that was in the making, this being initially "scripted by Tata Steel and Essar Steel who want seven villages or thereabouts each to mine the richest lode of iron ore available in India." In an operation backed by the security forces – a *desi* version of what in the times of the Vietnam War was called the "strategic hamlets" programme – the Salwa Judum evacuated hundreds of villages, hounded the inhabitants into police camps, and forced many more to just run any which way they could choose to save life and limb.

The arbitrary allocation of blocks of already explored coal deposits instead of opening auctioning them to the highest bidder is another huge natural resource grab, but the complicity of corporations such as Tata Power, Essar Power, Hindalco, Adani Power, GVK Power, Arcelor Mittal, BALCO and Sterlite Energy, the latter two, part of Vedanta Resources, are seldom mentioned. Talking of Arcelor Mittal and the so-called "Metal King" of the world, Lakshmi Mittal, this corporation has been in the acquisition race to get control over the most lucrative iron ore mining leases in the Chiria and Gua areas of Paschim Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. Indeed, there's much more at stake in the Saranda forest range of the same district, where in 2011, in a massive counterinsurgency campaign called "Operation Anaconda", paramilitary and armed police tried to "flush out" (the official counterinsurgency discourse) the Maoists in order to make the area safe for the exploitation of the huge deposits of iron ore which are the object of attraction of companies such as Arcelor Mittal. Complementing Operation Anaconda, soon thereafter, the Ministry of Rural Development launched the Saranda (Development) Action Plan to wean off the people from the Maoist revolutionary path.

I think I've said enough on dispossession in the present, for which I had to necessarily dwell on the concrete. Now let me touch a bit on theory, which is necessarily abstract. I am an old-fashioned intellectual who still insists that wealth comes from the

exploitation of human labour *and* nature. I will be drawing on one of the finest intellectuals of the 19th century, Karl Marx, and one of the most outstanding intellectuals of the 20th, Karl Polanyi. The charge of Prometheanism against Karl Marx, in somewhat more recent times, goes back to Leszek Kolakowski, and this accusation has been echoed widely by the pop social scientist Anthony Giddens, all the more in the atmosphere of the Cold War. But it's now 25 years since the Cold war has been won by the United States and NATO under its control, and yet many intellectuals continue to repeat what Giddens wrote then, especially in India, where copycats are a dime a dozen. John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) has debunked the widespread characterisation of Marx as an anti-ecological thinker, and so it might be useful to paraphrase a sentence from Marx's *Capital*, Volume I, this in chapter 10, "The Working Day", as follows:

Capital is dead labour [and out-of-play nature] that vampire-like only lives by sucking living labour [and extant nature], and lives the more, the more labour [and nature] it sucks.

Value is then nothing but congealed labour and defunct nature incarnate in commodities. But capital doesn't just engage in the subsumption of labour and nature; in today's world, one witnesses the subsumption of even democratically-elected governments to capital (in its avatar of high finance). Yes, the bond markets – the funds and financial institutions that buy government bonds, not the people who elected those governments – are able to very significantly influence public policy, for it is they who specify the conditions under which they will buy those government bonds. In India, high finance and the public-sector banks & financial institutions are the main players in the government bond markets, with the public sector entities in the pockets of the alliance of politics-as-business and big business. The massive inroads that the big bourgeoisie has made into the energy, mining, telecommunications, civil aviation, infrastructure (ports, highways, etc), banking, insurance, and other sectors opened up to private capital in the last two decades would not have been possible without the cementing of such an alliance, and the political directives to the public-sector banks & financial institutions to finance the projects in these lines of business.

It's time then to get to insights that might come from Karl Polanyi. At the heart of capitalism is the commodification of land (and other natural resources), the proletarianisation of labour, and the marketing of money and finance. With these in place, the "economic sphere" gets separated out of the totality of the social process ("disembedded" was the word Polanyi used). Capitalism then undermines the sources of wealth – human labour and nature. The right of a human being to subsistence is denied; hunger becomes the whip to enforce discipline; workers are not merely

exploited, they are degraded and de-cultured, reduced to mere toilers in Blake's "dark Satanic mills". With land and other natural resources reduced to commodities, the existential environmental dangers multiply. Nevertheless, and because of these depredations, a "countermovement" arises to socially protect labour; to preserve the habitability of the natural environment and the security of individuals in their socio-cultural environments; to protect productive enterprise from the implications of treating money & finance as commodities; and to safeguard and advance the democratic ideal of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Talking of the exploitation of natural resources – oil & gas, coal, uranium, bauxite, iron ore, etc – under capitalism, it's the giant oil and mining companies supported by their home states and "safe" client host states, and a network of financial institutions that are at the heart of the process of "accumulation by dispossession". Safe client host states and their "internal colonies" ensure cheap labour-power, low-cost, low state royalty rate, high profit minerals, and huge capital gains in the exercise of options, as also a predatory public administration and paramilitary & armed police that overwhelm the indigenous peoples in these regions.

It's clear then that Polanyi's countermovement has to struggle to change structures (through a socialist revolution), not merely remove the worst politicians.

You might now ask: What do the land (and resource) grabs have to do with the peasant question? Indeed, a younger generation might ask: What is the peasant question? One of the clearest articulations of "the peasant question" I can think of is what my teacher and comrade, the late Nirmal Chandra provides: "How can the mass of peasantry be drawn into a revolutionary movement spearheaded by the socialists, representing above all the proletariat?" And he goes on: "The difficulty, at bottom, stems from the fact ... that the peasant possesses 'two souls', one of the proprietor, and the other of a worker."

At the heart of the peasant question is political strategy & tactics concerning the transition from capitalism to socialism, and in this, the most difficult problem is how to reconcile the needs of the oppressed for immediate improvements with the necessity of overthrowing the whole system in order to do away with the oppression of the oppressed. Reconciling reform with revolution is not any easy task, but in our articulation of the peasant question, we must try to accomplish this undertaking.

In India, since colonial times, a massive number of people have been dispossessed, uprooted and displaced.

“You take my life

When you take the means whereby I live.”

- William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1.

The means whereby the peasants lived have been and are being taken away in the name of “development”. In rural areas, poor peasants who are in possession of a small plot of land have lost their non-market access to the means of subsistence from what used to be the commons (shared pastures, fields, forests, fisheries, and irrigation systems). And, now with the agro-food corporations and their agents in the business of contract farming, they cannot even decide what to produce, how to produce (some of these techniques rendering them vulnerable to environmentally destructive techniques of cultivation) and for whom to produce. And, when they are dispossessed of their land by the projects of the financial aristocracy, they join the section of the reserve army of what Jan Breman calls “footloose labour”.

Now, the classic peasant question focussed on the class differentiation of the peasantry in the process of capitalist development, the dénouement of which was supposed to be its differentiation into capitalists and proletarians. In between, the class categories were landlord, rich peasant, middle peasant, poor peasant and landless labourer (what Mao conceived of for the Chinese peasantry in 1930) or big landowners, big capitalist peasants, middle peasants, small peasants, semi-proletarians/tiny peasants, and the agricultural proletariat (Lenin for Russia in 1920), or some combination of the two (for India today?). And, of course, one also has to take into account Chayanov’s “demographic differentiation” which also propels the peasant economy, and which in India also manifests itself in the labour-intensity of cultivation.

Now, to this classic schema of dispossession through class differentiation of the peasantry one must add dispossession through displacement, this to take account of the impact of the processes of development, modernisation, industrialisation, globalisation and progress on the dispossession of the peasantry in the present reality of our times (Farshad Araghi, “The Great Global Enclosure of Our Times: Peasants and the Agrarian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century”, in Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster and Frederick H Buttel (eds.): *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food and the Environment*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2000). Drawing on Araghi, I too would pose the peasant question multi-dimensionally as a series of questions:

- *The question of landlessness, or near landlessness, especially of dalits.* The colonial period itself produced a large segment of displaced persons when forest, river and mineral resources were exploited, as also due to the processes of

deindustrialisation and forced commercialisation of agriculture. The adivasis, in particular, were forced to make an “illegal” living in the hostile environment created by the revenue, forest and police departments. Already at the time of Independence, there was a large contingent of displaced persons and these people were further marginalised by the development projects that followed. Lower class and caste, and adivasi people among the displaced are looked upon as a law & order problem, and even when there is an R&R policy (usually considered as a necessary evil whose cost has to be minimised) for them and it is implemented, they have to wait for a long time before they get reintegrated into the wider society/economy.

- *The adivasi/indigenous people's question* that addresses the tribal peasantry's precarious existence in the forests. The Forest Acts right since 1865 have failed to record the rights of adivasis and other forest dwelling communities, rendering them, in effect, illegal occupants and illegal users of the forests. Their denial of the resources of the forests only deepens their vulnerability, in many an instance, reducing them to migrant workers. Nevertheless, any attempts to seize the forests have invariably been met with fierce resistance, a whole series of adivasi uprisings, and now, Maoist-led resistance, being witness to this. Even today, the prohibition of alienation of adivasi lands in Scheduled Areas to non-adivasis, as also the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the PESA, 1996, are observed more in the breach.
- *the housing/homeless question* in the context of the launching of urban and infrastructural projects that displaces the urban poor, more than once in the same city when “more valuable real estate” appears.
- *the informal workers question* in the setting of the casualisation of work, subcontracting, modern putting-out arrangements, etc.
- *the migrant question and the question of their “alien” cultural and political context*, these concerning both internal migrants and migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal, in particular.
- *the question of mass hunger* amidst an abundance of food in the context of the increasing commodification of food with freer trade (that renders peasants vulnerable to international price fluctuations), the diversion of land from food grain cultivation to cash crops and exportable agricultural commodities, the diversion of grain to the production of bio-fuel in the developed capitalist countries, and direct cash payments to the “targeted” poor, this in the midst of a tendency of declining food consumption per person. The question of mass hunger is crucial in the light of the significantly higher poverty estimates based

on NSS figures of calorific intake per person per day obtained directly rather than based on estimates obtained by adjusting the set of 1973-74 nominal expenditure figures adequate to obtain the 2400 calories per capita per day in rural India and 2100 calories per capita per day in urban areas for inflation.

- *the ecological/environmental question* in the context of deforestation, large dam projects etc. In articulating this question, one must never remain silent on the question of the underlying capitalist social system, which is really at the heart of the problem. As Marx understood the problem: nature requires long cycles of evolution, development, and regeneration, whereas capitalism is governed by the imperative of short-term profits. Also in India, caste discrimination and the racial oppression of the adivasis are intimately implicated in ecological devastation.