

Modi's Agriculture Bills Push Imperialist Agenda*

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The two bills rammed through parliament last week were objectionable in every conceivable sense. The very fact of their being rammed through the Rajya Sabha, without being put to vote despite demands for a division, was grossly anti-democratic. The fact of the Centre making unilateral and fundamental changes in agricultural marketing arrangements which fall within the State List of the seventh schedule of the Constitution was a blow against federalism. To resurrect the pre-independence arrangement under which the peasantry was exposed to the capitalist market without any support of the State, and which crushed it during the Great depression of the 1930s, was a betrayal of the promise of independence. To pit millions of small peasants against the might of a handful of private buyers, as the bills propose to do, was to open them up to monopsonistic exploitation.

Modi of course has been claiming that the State is not leaving peasants to the mercy of the monopsonists, that the government-guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP) regime will continue to remain. But the bills contain nothing on this; and the government refuses to incorporate into law, which testifies to its bad faith. The right of the peasantry to get a minimum support price in accordance with the Swaminathan Committee recommendation that puts the MSP at Cost C2 plus 50 percent. The peasants in short are being thrown, as under colonialism, to the mercies of a market where price fluctuations have a notoriously high amplitude; and they are rightly putting up a fight against their descent into debt and destitution.

In this entire debate however an important dimension has been missed. The debate has been entirely about the condition of the peasantry. But one must also take into account the question of food security, which immediately brings imperialism into the picture.

Imperialism has for long been attempting to push countries like India to become food-import-dependent and to divert their land area currently devoted to foodgrains towards other crops which imperialist countries cannot grow, as these can be grown only in tropical and semi-tropical regions. This however would mean the tropical and semi-tropical countries abandoning food security.

Food security in a country like India requires self-sufficiency in food production. Food imports are no substitute for domestic food production for several reasons. First, whenever a country the size of India approaches the world market for foodgrain imports the world prices shoot up, making imports exorbitantly priced. Secondly, quite apart from the fact that the country may not have sufficient foreign exchange to pay for such import, there is also the additional fact that the people may not have enough purchasing power to buy food imported at such exorbitant prices. Third, since food surpluses exist with the imperialist countries, even buying food at such exorbitant prices requires the blessings of imperialism. In fact denying food to a country at a crucial juncture is a powerful lever in the hands of imperialism to browbeat countries to kow-tow to its demands.

All this is not an abstract matter. India was a foodgrain importer under PL-480 from the latter half of the 1950s. When there were two disastrous harvests in 1965-66 and

1966-67, and Bihar in particular faced famine conditions, India was forced to become a virtual supplicant before the United States for food imports. It became a case literally of carrying food from “ships to kitchens”. That is when Indira Gandhi asked Jagjivan Ram, the then food minister, to expedite the drive towards food self-sufficiency, and the Green Revolution was ushered in. The country is still far from being self-sufficient in the sense of growing enough to provide everyone adequate food. But at least it is no longer import-dependent; on the contrary so drastic is the squeeze on purchasing power in the hands of the people that it has been making regular and substantial exports every year despite our people being among the hungriest in the world.

Africa by contrast was cajoled by imperialism into abandoning domestic foodgrain production and shifting area towards export crops. The consequences in terms of recurring famines in Africa in the recent period are too well-known to need repetition.

After 1966-67 an elaborate arrangement in terms of MSP, procurement prices, issue prices, procurement operations carried out in the mandis, a public distribution system, and food subsidies, has been devised which seeks to ensure that the interests of the producers, and the consumers are reconciled and the country grows enough food to obviate any need for imports. This mechanism is fundamentally antithetical to neo-liberalism; not surprisingly it has been getting whittled at the margin, through for instance the distinction introduced in the mid-1990s between the Above-Poverty-Line (APL) and Below-Poverty-Line (BPL) populations, with only the latter being eligible for subsidized foodgrains. Even so it has prevented the country’s becoming a mendicant for food in the world economy.

Imperialism has made strenuous efforts to dismantle this arrangement, the most obvious being at the negotiations centred on the Doha round of the WTO where the United States has been arguing that India’s procurement operations at a pre-announced price are against the principles of free trade and should be wound up. No government in India until now was so timid or so gullible as to cave in to this imperialist pressure, because of which the Doha round has been stalled. Now alas we have for the first time a government which is either too scared or too ignorant to stand up to imperialism on this issue. In the name of “modernizing agricultural markets” “twenty-first century technology” and such like, it is taking us back to the colonial days when per capita foodgrain output was declining even as land was being diverted towards export crops. It is in reality pushing the imperialist agenda.

True, the immediate beneficiaries of the new agricultural marketing policy will be the Ambanis and the Adanis, but they will be entering into contract farming arrangements not so much for foodgrains as for fruits, vegetables, flowers and a range of other crops which they will not only sell in the domestic market but also process for exports. An essential corollary of contract farming by private monopsonists is a shift of acreage from foodgrains to non-foodgrains, exactly as had happened in the colonial period when a host of export crops like opium and indigo had come up in lieu of foodgrains in the Bengal Presidency. And the exploitation of peasants by indigo merchants, famously captured in Dinabandhu Mitra’s nineteenth-century play *Neel Darpan*, is exactly what the peasantry today is apprehensive about and wishes to avoid.

What has been striking about the agricultural arrangement till now is that while looking after (however inadequately) the interests of the peasants, it has prevented the

large scale diversion of land-use towards non-foodgrains and export crops. The dismantling of that arrangement will not only hurt the peasantry but also lead to a diversion of area from foodgrains to non-foodgrains and export crops, thereby undermining the country's food security.

The matter indeed is simple. Since land is a scarce resource, land-use must be socially controlled. It cannot be dictated by considerations of private profitability. True, since land is in the possession of the peasants, they have to be looked after even while land use is being socially controlled. They must in short get a remunerative price even as land-use is being socially controlled. This is what the existing arrangement tried to achieve, which the present government wants to destroy; whatever failings it had need to be rectified within the ambit of that arrangement itself. Destroying that arrangement without even being aware of the need to have social control over land-use is precisely the kind of folly that one associates with this BJP government. Imperialism would like such a destruction; and the BJP government is happily obliging.

The only region in the entire non-socialist third world that has shown an acute awareness of the need to have social control over land-use, since land is a scarce resource, is Kerala which has enacted a legislation against the diversion of paddy land for other purposes. That legislation showed perspicacity; the BJP government's agriculture bills show just the opposite.

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