COMMENT

Changing Agricultural Scenario

THE VAST MAJORITY OF INDIAN poor just feed themselves, and rely on government subsidies of grains. But the expanding middle class is demanding more and better quality food. And here lies the social base for agri-business. Compared with a record output of food grains of 241.6 million tons in 2010-11, by 2020-21, Indians are estimated to consume 280 million tons of food grains every year. Since the acreage is small, Indian farms traditionally use far fewer farm machines than other comparable countries. More than 83% of India's farms are on less than 2 hectares per capita, well below global averages of 3.7 hectares. India still uses less than half the amount of power on farms that China utilises, and a tenth that of Japan. In recent times, as in the sugar cane fields along the banks of the Krishna river in Maharashtra, farmers have been buying new tools and machines, to tackle a labour shortage, caused by government policies aimed at promoting non-agricultural work. Government efforts to ensure a minimum wage for rural households have pushed up labour costs over the last one year. Labour costs have been increased by urbanisation too. Population rose to 31.8% in urban areas for 2001-2011, in comparison to growth of 12.2% in rural areas.

Tractor sales have increased 42% over the last five years in India. It is estimated to be 552,434 in 2011-12. Boost to agricultural productivity is helping farmers to sustain more expensive life styles. Animals per acre are now used for about 300 to 400 hours a year, compared with over 1500 hours in the 1960s. India is one of the world's largest manufacturers of tractors. Traditionally tractors have been used on construction sites or for ferrying any heavy item, from wedding decorations, farm produce and field labourers. With the current demand for small size tractors booming, most of the tractor manufacturers are shifting production to smaller and low cost tractors. Marginal farmers are being attracted by specialised tractors. Renting out tractors and farm equipment to many farmers, whose plots and income are too meagre to justify outright purchases of expensive vehicles and tools, has become economically viable. Intermediaries are purchasing harvesters and other agricultural machine tools, including commonly used pump sets and providing them to farmers on a custom hiring basis. But decline in the use of cows and bullocks to plough land has led to less collection of dung and manure. Insufficient fertilisers are forcing farmers to purchase chemical fertilisers. As almost 20 million tons of chemical fertilisers are imported annually, the government has to subsidise imports to hold down prices.

The changing pattern of Indian agriculture over the years is being ignored by the left. As a result they are in no position to offer any meaningful resistance to massive industrialisation of agricultural practices even in most backward areas of the country where the entry of tractors, power-tillers and harvesters is thwarted for the time being for political and security

compulsions. In the '80s the farmers, rich and middle farmers to be precise, used to agitate for remunerative prices of their produce. But the phenomenon of Joshi-Tikait didn't last long as they didn't pursue the issue beyond the *mandi*—the place of wholesale marketing. Nor was it possible for them to articulate the peasant question in its entirety because of their narrow political vision. It appears from the discourse of the traditional left that they too are willing to swim along the current, somewhat passively though. Now FDI in retail is a reality but what is being overlooked is retailers with MNC tag are going to give a further push towards massive industrialisation of Indian agriculture which in effect eliminates small-holdings, making a vast number of peasants destitutes and shanty-dwellers on the edge of metropolitan cities. Given the emerging agricultural scenario what is urgently needed is rethinking the peasant issue which is precisely not on the agenda of the left—traditional or non-traditional. ▢▢▢