

Jens Lerche, [Alpa Shah](#) and Barbara Harris-White Introduction: agrarian questions and left politics in India

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Introduction: Agrarian Questions and Left Politics in India

JENS LERCHE, ALPA SHAH AND BARBARA HARRISS-WHITE

This special issue is concerned with agrarian questions in India and their importance for, and impact on, political analyses and strategies of the Indian Left. In the 1970s, the development of Left politics generated the modes of production debate and many of the communist parties used their interpretations of agrarian change then to guide their Indian path to socialism. More than 40 years on, ongoing changes in economic and social relations in the agrarian sector and in society at large make it important to revisit those earlier debates and conclusions. On the basis of the papers of this special issue, the introduction outlines the development of capitalism in the Indian countryside, its relation to the development of capitalism in India and to neoliberal globalization. It raises the question of how rural class relations have developed in different parts of the country and discusses the extent to which Indian Left politics has analysed and strategized such development.

Keywords: India, agrarian questions, semi-feudalism, Naxalites, Communist Party of India (Maoist), Communist Party of India (Marxist)

INTRODUCTION

This special issue is concerned with agrarian transitions and agrarian questions in India, and how the political analyses and strategies of the Indian Left are influenced by them.

This is a discussion with a long scholarly and activist pedigree. In the wake of the radical political mobilization of the 1960s, the 1970s saw an abundance of research: theoretical discussion and empirical analysis of issues related to the modes of production in Indian agriculture and in India in general.¹ The debates dealt with the extent to which capitalism had penetrated agriculture in India, and, in particular, the question of whether Indian

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The special issue develops the agenda of the relationship between agrarian transition and Left politics first discussed in a two-day workshop organized in July 2011, supported by the Economic Social and Research Council, Goldsmiths College University of London and the Contemporary South Asia Studies Programme at Oxford University. An initial commentary on the workshop was published by Shah and Harriss-White (2011) in *Economic and Political Weekly*. We are grateful to the participants of that workshop for the rich papers and discussions that have informed this special issue and to Terry Byres, Deepankar Basu and Debarshi Das for helpful comments on the introduction. The usual disclaimers apply.

¹ Alice Thorner did, in fact, compile such a list and reviewed their contributions (Thorner 1982, p. 1962).

agriculture was best characterized as 'semi-feudal' or capitalist.² They explored the configuration of the principal rural classes and class relations, and the main contradictions in rural society and in society at large. Though the results of these debates did not always feed into praxis (Harriss 1980), their initial agendas were influenced by the development of Left politics. The analysis of agrarian transitions mattered at the time, to determine the Indian route to socialism. The Naxalite movement had just erupted in the countryside, its leaders challenging the analysis of the main communist party of India, arguing that the Indian economy warranted the Chinese Maoist path, of protracted people's war from the country to the town, rather than the Russian route, which prioritized urban struggle in preparation for the moment of insurrection (CPI(Maoist) 2004b). Other communist parties emphasized, to a varying degree, rural struggles but within the existing democratic framework (CPI(M) 2000). The analysis of whether semi-feudal relations in agriculture persisted or had been swept aside, and capitalism in the countryside was developing, determined to what extent a Maoist path of agrarian revolution should be followed.

Since the 1970s, the Indian economy has undergone fundamental shifts in the economic and social relationships between the rural and the urban, agriculture and industry, and within agriculture itself. Politically, it has shifted from a national state-led development policy towards a neoliberal form of economic regulation and has become integrated into the global economy. At the same time, the Maoist or Naxalite armed insurgency has grown into a movement controlling or contesting swathes of less developed densely forested interior parts of central and eastern India. After four decades of capitalist development since the modes of production debate, it is time to re-examine the relation between agrarian change and Left politics.

The research presented here is a means through which we may reflect on and understand the movements that have erupted. It is also a means of asking some key questions. For instance, to what extent have the questions of the modes of production debate been resolved and new ones emerged? To what extent are there different agrarian questions in different parts of the country that need to be accounted for in any political strategy? Have, indeed, the tactics of the various Left parties, regarding specific policies and struggles, moved beyond and ahead of their longer-term strategies, including overarching concerns such as guerrilla warfare versus open class struggle? Are the 'classical' political strategies of the Left therefore still relevant? Or does the way in which capitalism is developing in India pose new challenges to signify a rethinking of the strategy and tactics of Left politics?

Today's answers must consider the classic themes in Marxist agrarian political economy and its analyses of the 'agrarian question'. Byres (1996, 2003) and Bernstein (1996) have shown that there are three main aspects to this question. The agrarian question was first formulated as a political issue. In the context of the continued existence of large, differentiated peasantries in parts of Europe in the late nineteenth century, the social democratic parties had to confront the question of how to build alliances for democracy and socialism between urban labour and rural wage labour and the poor peasantry. The politics of class struggle and the building of strategic class alliances constitute the first meaning of the agrarian question.

² The modes of production debate did not produce a single undisputed definition of semi-feudalism (see also below). Here, it suffices to note Bhaduri's overarching definition: that semi-feudalism denotes that the existing relations of production in agriculture 'have more in common with classical feudalism of the master-serf type than with industrial capitalism' (1973, 120) and thus that they are in a transition, if slow, to capitalism.

The second meaning is linked to the first but is derived from concern, notably by Lenin (1960 [1899]) and Kautsky (1976 [1898]), with the development of capitalism in the countryside and the class-based obstacles to it.³

The third aspect is concerned with the contribution of agriculture to industrialization; that is, the question to what extent, and how, agriculture contributes to the overall transformation of society from agrarian to industrial. While this theme only emerged fully in the Soviet debates on industrialization in the 1920s, it also lay 'secreted in the writings of Kautsky and Lenin, as, indeed, those of Marx' (Byres 2003, 175). Allowing for 'infinitely diverse combinations of elements of . . . capitalist evolution', Lenin (1960 [1899], 33) had analysed two routes to capitalist agriculture, the American Road and the Prussian Road. Widening the scope, Byres showed that historically specific paths of agrarian transition had developed in different countries in Europe and elsewhere, shaped by the regionally varied technical and class-based relations in agriculture and their articulation with overall class dynamics (Byres 1991, 1996).

The Indian modes of production debate focused primarily on the two first aspects: the development of capitalism in the countryside, and related class struggle and Left politics. The role of agriculture in industrialization was also an important issue in India in the 1960s and 1970s, but it took a back seat in the modes-of-production debate.⁴ However, an analysis of capitalism in the countryside as well as the political agrarian question both need to be contextualized in an understanding of capitalist development that includes industrialization.

Furthermore, as we argue here, not only is it necessary for the debates on India to analyse the different meanings of the agrarian question, but there is arguably a plurality of agrarian questions in India in a different sense as well: a set of regionally specific agrarian questions. There are important regional differences in agricultural productivity, in the significance of agriculture in the economy and, not the least, a plurality of underlying class relations and processes of class formation. It is well acknowledged that there are major agrarian and class-based differences between agriculturally dynamic regions such as Punjab, Haryana, West Uttar Pradesh, parts of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and so on, on the one hand, and, on the other, less developed regions such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, the interior of Orissa and many states in the north east, as well as between the individual states and regions within these two categories.⁵ Although a comprehensive analysis of these differences is beyond the scope of this special issue, the understanding of agrarian questions in India will remain limited unless the specifics of these regionally different agrarian questions are taken into consideration.

Our stocktaking asks the following questions:

³ These range from the capacity of peasants to self-exploit (use of child labour, consume less, work to maximize production not profit) and undercut production that uses wage labour; through adverse relations of exchange that prevent accumulation; to debt-thralldom and bondage to landlords', usurers' or merchant's capital without interest in the direct possession of the land (Lenin 1960, ch II, part XIII). Kautsky could also observe the parallel concentration and fragmentation of land, not only through 'Leninist' obstacles, but also through the deliberate settling of workers on micro-patches of land to prevent them migrating and to depress wages (Kautsky 1976; Djurfeldt 1982).

⁴ See Mitra (2005 [1977]), on class relations and the terms of trade between agriculture and industry – for an exception.

⁵ See, among other studies, Bhalla and Singh (2009), Byres (1991), Lerche (forthcoming), Ramachandran et al. (2010), Rawal and Swaminathan (2011) and, for specific states, studies such as Djurfeldt et al. (2007), Mishra et al. (2009), Rutten (1995), Upadhyaya (1988) and Damodaran (2008).

- (a) How has the development of capitalism in the Indian countryside progressed? How is this conditioned by the overall development of capitalism in India and, more generally, by neoliberal globalization? How does rural capitalism in turn condition those overall developments, including industrialization? How have rural class relations developed in different parts of the country?
- (b) To what extent has Indian Left politics analysed and strategized such development, and why?

This special issue brings together a set of research papers, each of which analyses aspects of the agrarian question(s) and relates this to the understandings and strategies of some of the communist parties in India. Three of the papers deal with issues at a national level, while drawing on both all-Indian statistical evidence and existing case studies. John Harriss' essay provides a brief history of ideas about agrarian production relations after the modes of production debate and examines the extent to which 'semi-feudalism' is still in existence today. The focus is on what the Indian Left parties – the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) and the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI(Maoist)) (i.e. the Naxalites) – refer to as 'landlordism'. Deepankar Basu and Debarshi Das undertake a critical assessment of the analysis of agrarian transformations by the CPI(Maoist) in relation to contemporary developments in India's agrarian political economy. Jens Lerche outlines recent international debates on agrarian questions and globalization and how they resonate with sets of positions across the Indian Left parties: the CPI(M) and the CPI(Maoist). His main concerns are two challenges to the 'classical' agrarian transition perspective – first by the corporate food regime to the entire agrarian sector, and second by the receding relevance of agriculture to contemporary industrialization. He argues that, for now at least, the ongoing deepening of agrarian capitalism in India does not lead to the kind of contribution from agriculture to industrialization expected from the classical perspective.

Two further papers deal with questions of general relevance by focusing on in-depth case studies. The one by Isabelle Guérin uses a detailed empirical study in Tamil Nadu to focus on the issue of the interpretation of bonded labour, an issue of general relevance for the understanding of the development of capitalism in India. Analysing bonded labour in specific capitalist production processes and political contexts, Guérin argues that diagnosing semi-feudalism from the existence of bonded labour, as done by the Indian communist parties, is inaccurate. The final contribution from Alpa Shah, drawing on ethnographic research, analyses the relationship between the CPI(Maoist) strategy and tactics and the agrarian transition under way in one of their two main contemporary guerrilla zones in the country. Finding a deep disjuncture between the Maoist party's analysis of semi-feudalism and agrarian change in the hills and forests of Jharkhand, Shah's paper signals the need for regionally specific analyses and the challenges faced by Left parties in accounting for them. This Maoist case suggests that the day-to-day policy foci of Left parties may in fact accommodate changes in the agrarian transition that are yet to be captured in their official analysis of the character of Indian society and in relation to their overall strategy.

CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN AGRICULTURE

In addressing our main questions, we begin by considering the development of capitalism in Indian agriculture. In recent years, an increasing number of case studies have thrown light on aspects of agrarian capitalism and sought to develop an understanding of overall trends and

regional variations in agriculture.⁶ Limitations of space mean that we cannot go into fine detail, but suffice it to say that the evidence shows that important structural changes have taken place.

In the early 1970s, agriculture was the major contributor to GDP, but it has now been overtaken both by the service sector and industry (Reddy 2012).⁷ Whereas in the early 1980s agriculture still employed close to 70 per cent of the working population, by 2009–10 this had fallen to 53 per cent (Lerche, this issue). Moreover, in 1981–2, 46 per cent of landowners operated less than a hectare of agricultural land: by 2002–3, 63 per cent of all landowners were marginal farmers cum wage workers, with wage work forming the bulk of their income (NCEUS 2008).⁸

Alongside this structural change, the agrarian sector has experienced continued growth. Yields have increased, in line with major increases in levels of irrigation, mechanization, the use of high-yielding seeds and chemical fertilizers, pesticides and so on. However, this growth has been uneven, regionally as well as over time. It slowed when state investments, input subsidies and access to institutional credit declined in the countryside after the neoliberal turn of Indian economic policy in the 1990s, but since then it has recovered somewhat, as both output prices and state investments have increased.

The classical arguments for semi-feudalism in India were put forward by scholars such as Amit Bhaduri (1973), Nirmal Chandra (1974), Pradhan Prasad (1973) and R.S. Rao (1970).⁹ A core element of the semi-feudal position was that the dominance of landlords in agrarian production relations hampered the development of capitalist class relations and constituted a substantial obstacle to growth. In Bhaduri's theorizing of semi-feudalism (1973), the core of semi-feudalism is landlordism: landlords appropriating rents, combining tenancy relations with usury and speculative trading profits from the peasantry. As Harriss points out in his contribution to this special issue, referring back to the term coined by Daniel Thorner (1956), semi-feudalism works as a built-in 'depressor' to agricultural development: the landlords have no incentive to invest, while the peasantry have no means to do so.

Harriss traces the analyses of agrarian power and productivity in India from Thorner's work in the 1950s into the 1980s. Relating these changes to present-day case studies and statistical evidence, he concludes that landlordism has declined, a finding that is corroborated here by Basu and Das. Both contributions argue that large landowners have lost their extreme (semi-feudal) control over both land and people at the village level. Ex-landlord families may still be economically and politically powerful, but 'the class of landlords *qua* landlords is losing power' (Basu and Das, this issue). Tenancy has declined while reverse tenancy from smaller landowners to larger land operators has gained in importance, indicating that those who have the means to invest in agricultural production now actively seek rent in land. Meanwhile,

⁶ Overview studies include Basole and Basu (2011), Lerche (2011), Ramachandran (2011) and Shah and Harriss-White (2011).

⁷ Agriculture's share of GDP declined from 44 per cent in 1970–1 to 15 per cent in 2009–10. In 2009–10, industry's share was 28 per cent and services' share was 57 per cent (Reddy 2012).

⁸ According to NSSO data, 54 per cent of the income of all marginal farmers is from wages, 14 per cent from non-farm business, 6 per cent from husbandry and only 26 per cent from cultivation (NCEUS 2008, 34).

⁹ The category 'semi-feudal' was often used alongside 'feudal' (e.g. as in 'feudal landlords'), blurring the distinction between feudalism and semi-feudalism. See Bagchi (1975), who has listed and discussed the terms used in the debate relating to feudalism and capitalism; and Brass (2007), for the political confusions caused by the treatment of the process of transition as if it were a state. Other scholars rejected this spectrum: Alavi (1975) argued, instead, for a 'colonial mode of production' characterized by the deformations of property and labour, of increases in scale, expanded reproduction and generalized commodity production caused by the overriding need of the colony to extract surplus.

on the one hand, large landowners have consolidated their position outside agriculture, where they now defend pole positions in local non-agricultural accumulation not only through the investment of agricultural and commercial profits but also through their access to political power, government funds and public-sector jobs. On the other hand, rural assetless workers no longer depend on large landowners for employment or on micro-properties for own production, because petty trade/production and wage work in the non-agricultural economy – often requiring migration – has taken over as their main source of income. In line with Byres' conclusion from 1981,¹⁰ Harriss argues that they are still only partially proletarianized, as they seek to keep a foothold in agriculture whenever possible.

Harriss concludes that semi-feudal surplus extraction and its 'depressor' effect has been 'substantially transformed over large parts of India', even if agrarian power relations and agricultural productivity are still linked. Basu and Das make the case more strongly, arguing that it is no longer convincing to characterize the Indian agrarian system as semi-feudal. They point out that exploitation by merchants and traders might as well relate to capitalist monopoly relations as to semi-feudalism. They argue that land subdivision is eroding semi-feudal production relations: labour is commodified, peasants produce (at least in part) for the market, and surplus is now appropriated in different forms such as capitalist profit, mercantile profit and interest on credit, not necessarily through feudal rent.

Lerche's analysis points to the spread of investments in Green Revolution technology and to detailed case studies of class-differentiated productivity levels in agriculture and ongoing accumulation not only by big capitalist farmers (which include ex-landlords), but also by smaller capitalist farmers. He also finds that inequality of landownership and landlessness are increasing, with marginal farmers becoming *de facto* wage workers, whose earnings from agriculture have been reduced to a subsidiary income stream. Circular migration, informalization and casualization characterizes the labour market, while rural–urban labour market boundaries have become fluid. Lerche does leave open the possibility that in some of the less developed regions of India, semi-feudal patterns of exploitation may still exist. Harriss makes a related point when he alerts us to the 'enormous variation' across the country regarding the decline in dominance based on land control that he is tracing. Shah's paper makes a different point, namely that agrarian relations in the tribal-dominated hilly forested areas of Jharkhand were never feudal, and neither are they capitalist now. Here, farming is largely for the purpose of subsistence and capitalist accumulation in agriculture is isolated and rare.

Semi-feudalism along the lines modelled by Bhaduri would bind tenants and landless labour to the landlord–usurer, making labour 'unfree'. In this thesis, the loosening of labour-related ties to landlords indicates the breakdown of semi-feudal production relations. The existence of bonded labour relations (where labour is bound to undertake work by an advance payment or loan), which are still common, is interpreted by some as an indication of the persistence of semi-feudalism (e.g. Rao 1999). Guérin's contribution to the special issue, concerned with bonded labour in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, challenges this interpretation. Along with others (e.g. Brass 1990, 2007; Breman and Guérin 2009; Srivastava 2009), she argues that bonded labour today is a capitalist phenomenon, a labour relation between a 'capitalist entrepreneur' (driven solely by motives of profit and capital accumulation) and a labourer selling his or her labour-power, often seasonally and short-term. Guérin follows Breman's classification of such labour relations as constituting highly exploitative, capitalist 'neo-bondage'. She shows that today's bonded labour relations display varying

¹⁰ And contra Banaji, who argues that such wage working-producers are formally subsumed under capital and thus labour (if 'disguised') (1977).

degrees of 'unfreedom' and argues that unfreedom itself is a matter of degree under capitalism. Moreover, while many workers might be driven into such relations by extreme poverty, for others it is a means of achieving increments in consumption, through sometimes substantial advance payments.

This analysis takes us well beyond the semi-feudalism thesis, into a study of the specifics of capitalist labour relations. According to Guérin, capital seeks to implement debt-bondage only in certain contexts. These include labour-intensive industries such as brick kilns and manual rice-drying units, but also sectors with higher levels of capital intensity, such as sugarcane processing. And within a given sector, different types of capital also deploy different types of labour relations; for example, in sugarcane harvesting, the large-scale harvesting organized by the sugar mills makes use of debt-bonded labour, while harvesting on small individual plots, organized by the individual farmer, does not. Guérin argues that bondage enables the management of a large labour force and cheapens labour, but that the short-term and irregular labour requirement of small farmers is better covered by local casual labour.

Overall, it is hard to disagree with Harriss' conclusion that semi-feudal surplus extraction has been 'substantially transformed over large parts of India', both with respect to surplus extraction in agriculture and in other forms of production such as those analysed by Guérin. Harriss' formulation could also be seen as hinting at the limitations arising from the fact that most of the existing evidence based on case studies is from the Indian plains, leaving out the less developed parts of central, eastern and north-eastern India. Indeed, Shah's contribution to the special issue, from the forests of eastern India, indicates the vast differences between the hills and the plains, and shows the need to understand regional differences in agrarian trajectories and transitions. In a social formation as large as that of India, our special issue thus suggests the need to think not of a single agrarian question, but various different regionally specific agrarian questions. Agrarian capitalism in India may develop not only at different speeds but also in different regionally specific ways, based on different regional class relations.

Some of the contributors to the special issue go further than Harriss in their rejection of semi-feudalism, but this does not mean that they claim that Indian capitalism has developed into what Rao (1999) called 'canonical' capitalism; that is, capitalism dominated by industrial production and wage-labour relations. Capitalism in India, like capitalism anywhere, is a product of its history, transforming non- and pre-capitalist social and economic relations but also building on and making use of aspects of such relations. To note that caste forms a structure of Indian capitalism does not make Indian capitalism semi-feudal any more than ethnic divisions or expressions of gender subordination under capitalism make relations of production and distribution pre-capitalist. Nor does the fact that Indian capitalism was influenced by colonialism and is now shaped by neoliberal globalization. These are issues that are important in the thinking of the Indian communist parties and will be returned to below. First, though, this takes us on to a discussion of the contemporary significance of the diverse agrarian transitions in India.

A CLASSICAL AGRARIAN TRANSITION?

By 'agrarian transition', we refer to the contribution of capitalist agriculture to industrial development in India. In the classical agrarian transition model (Byres 1996), agriculture was squeezed to provide raw materials and capital for industrial development as well as labour-power (with labour being cheapened by the production of cheaper food by capitalist agriculture). In turn, rural populations constituted an important 'home market' for industrial production. Lerche (this issue) shows that neoliberal globalization has led to the questioning

of whether a classical agrarian transition is still occurring, from two quarters. The first challenge, formulated by academics such as Philip McMichael, is found in the positions taken by organizations such as *Via Campesina*. Their argument is that today, the main contradiction is between a new, global 'corporate food regime', centred around multinational agribusiness monopolies and supermarkets on the one hand and 'the peasantry' on the other (McMichael 2008). This position breaks with a class-based, political economy perspective, since it is being argued that the subordination of small-scale agrarian production to international capital overrides issues of peasant differentiation and the existence of different classes within the peasantry. The other challenge is put forward by Henry Bernstein and formulated in the tradition of agrarian political economy. Bernstein suggests that the classical agrarian question has lost its relevance for capital. He argues that national development as we knew it is no longer possible or desirable for ruling classes in contemporary poor countries. In the era of globalization, circuits of capital and commodities are no longer national, but international. Industrial development now depends more on relations to international finance and global product markets, including commodity chains, than it does on interlinkages between national agriculture and national industry. Industrialization in the South no longer requires capital accumulation in, and capital transfers from, domestic agriculture (Bernstein 1996, 42–3; Bernstein 2006).

For India, Lerche finds little evidence on the ground of the *main* contradiction being between 'the peasantry' and the international corporate food regime. Instead, strong class divisions based on exploitative relations stratify rural populations and the class interests of capitalist farmers are more strongly aligned with agribusiness capital than with rural workers. Bernstein's position is closer to Indian agrarian relations than is McMichael's. Lerche concludes that at present, developments in India do not fit into a classical pattern of agrarian transition. His main argument is that agriculture does not appear to significantly support growth in Indian non-agricultural sectors in the crucial area of capital transfers. Instead, liberalization and globalization have enabled wider non-agrarian sourcing of capital; and new urban and international markets have developed for industrial outputs. Input–output interlinkages between agriculture and industry have declined, and the high levels of overall economic growth of recent decades have taken place in spite of weaker agricultural growth: Indian capital does not need a booming capitalist agrarian sector to enable growth in the rest of the economy. Lerche is led to conclude that in India the classical agrarian transition – that is, the agrarian question in its third meaning – has been bypassed. However, he emphasizes that this does not mean that the agrarian question in all its meanings has been bypassed. Even if the classical link to industrialization has lost its importance, capitalism in agriculture is still deepening and processes of capitalist agrarian accumulation and peasant differentiation are ongoing, but in a manner unanticipated by the classical model.

In the hilly forested areas of central and eastern India, where the Maoists now have their guerrilla zones, Shah finds that a deepening of capitalist class relations is bypassing capitalist development in agriculture. Here, agriculture is small scale, household based, and subsistence orientated, investments in modern technology are absent, and productivity is low. While non-capitalist relations in farming persist, a slow class differentiation is ongoing through processes unrelated to the development of capitalism in agriculture; processes that are, rather, linked to the extended reach of the state itself. State-supported development and forestry programmes, which have marked out jobs for local people in the state sector, as well as state-supported petty commodity production, trade and non-agrarian wage work, are significant in generating class differentiation.

For labour, the absence of a strong development of the industrial sector based on a classical agrarian transition leaves it at the mercy of the growth in employment in the informal

service, trade and petty manufacturing sectors, and work on construction sites associated with neoliberal globalization. In the current era, 'self-employment' – petty production and trade – is the commonest form throughout India, with varying degrees of dependence together with a wide range of internal logics and external exchange relations. These contrive to make accumulation in and out of agriculture the exception to prove the rule. Petty commodity production expands not so much by accumulation as by multiplication (Harriss-White 2012). As pointed out by Basu and Das here, not only are informalized labour and petty commodity producers forced to cling on to any agricultural plots and micro-assets they may have, but this also explains the intensity of struggles against their dispossession of land for industrial, mining or other uses. For marginal farmers, their small plots may now only provide a subsidiary income, but this is an income that they cannot make do without. Neither the Indian state nor parliamentary politics has anything other than incoherent policies for petty production.¹¹

LEFT POLITICS

The significant transformations in the agrarian economy in most parts of India as well as the challenges to the expected development trajectories related to the agrarian question, as this special issue shows, are not well reflected in the strategies of the country's major Left parties.

The CPI(Maoist), which formed from the merger of the two major Naxal factions – the Maoist Communist Centre and the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) People's War (CPI(ML)PW) – in 2004, reaffirmed that Indian society is characterized by two basic contradictions to be resolved by its New Democratic Revolution. One was the contradiction between imperialism and the Indian people. The other was that between feudalism and the broad masses. The latter, identified as the principal contradiction, was the basis of the argument for armed agrarian revolution, a protracted people's war, following the path laid out by Mao for China. Whereas in the West, capitalism overthrew feudalism, in India, British colonialism protected it. Capitalist relations, according to the Maoists, were introduced by the British rulers without changing the feudal control of the peasantry, resulting in semi-feudal relations in agriculture. Moreover, these relations continued after the end of colonial rule in an alliance between the imperialists, the *comprador* bureaucrat capitalists and feudal rulers. The colonial and semi-feudal system of British imperialism was replaced by a semi-colonial and semi-feudal system, operating through neo-colonial forms of indirect imperialist rule, exploitation and control. Agrarian class relations were unaltered and land remained concentrated in the hands of a few, who dominated a large peasantry (including a mass of middle peasants) leading a wretched life. This peasantry was subject to usurious exploitation by moneylenders and merchants, who extracted enormous streams of interest from them (CPI(Maoist) 2004a).

While in the 1970s and 1980s, these perspectives were supported to differing extents by scholars adhering to the semi-feudalism thesis, today the CPI(Maoist) is their main proponent. The party has undertaken its own village studies. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, the first published analysis of agrarian conditions by the CPI(ML)COC¹² was released in 1976 and contained studies of two villages, which were later expanded in number in 1978 and in 1982. Other agrarian analyses were published in the 1990s (Venugopal 2012). Even after the party was banned and its mass organizations could no longer function openly, the party's village

¹¹ At a given time, policies seek to eradicate or destroy, to protect, actively to promote and/or to tolerate petty production and trade. Petty production also persists as an unintended by-product of interventions with other objectives (for details, see Harriss-White 2012).

¹² Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) Central Organising Committee.

studies continued. Although changes in the feudal system are noted by these studies – such as the decline of the power of old landlords – and largely attributed to class struggle, semi-feudalism is argued by the Maoists to persist in these villages. Rich and middle peasantry are now presented as the new landlords. The establishment of these continuities enables the Maoists to advocate ‘land to the tiller’ as the main party slogan, and protracted people’s war as the main military strategy.

In contrast to the Maoist analysis, it should by now be clear that the papers of this special issue provide strong evidence that semi-feudalism, if it ever dominated agrarian relations, has been substantially transformed to capitalism in large parts of India. Lerche argues that this changes the political conditions for a land reform agenda. If semi-feudalism dominates, then land reforms – as the Maoists suggest – would be directed solely against a semi-feudal landlord class, with big capitalist farmers persuaded to stay neutral. If capitalist production relations already dominate, then land reforms would pit all big capitalist farmers against exploited rural labour and small farmers; in short, it would be a part of the overall class struggle under capitalism and would significantly alter the configuration of class alliances. This does not make land reforms less pertinent for the labouring classes, but it does make them harder to achieve. Moreover, if agricultural and non-agricultural labour and petty commodity producers are all part of capitalist class relations, then there is a need to consider their struggle as part of a whole, against their exploitation by the dominant capitalist classes, as opposed to viewing them as sector specific.

Both Lerche and Harriss use the calculation by Vikas Rawal (2008) of the amount of land belonging to landholdings above 20 acres to argue that a land reform redistributing this land to Indian landless workers would only provide marginal plots (approximately 0.35 acres) to them. Harriss suggests that it is not land reforms that will solve the issue of ‘agrarian power’. Instead, he argues that wider social, economic and political development is of more importance, including the development of the non-agricultural economy, productive employment opportunities outside agriculture and the deepening of substantive democracy. Basu and Das argue that neoliberal globalization is fusing local and global markets, domestic and multinational capital, and has involved a growing dispossession of the peasantry, usurpation of natural resources and great agrarian distress. Hence the struggle for the emancipation of Indian people must entail a struggle against global capital. What these three analyses have in common is their attempt to think through the implications of the development of capitalist agriculture in India for a Left political strategy, something that the maintenance of the semi-feudal thesis makes it difficult for the CPI(Maoist) to do.

However, as Shah shows in her detailed study of a Maoist heartland, in practice the Maoist movement is more flexible than their ‘Party Programme’ (CPI(Maoist) 2004a) or ‘Strategy and Tactics’ (CPI(Maoist) 2004b) prescribe. In the Maoist guerrilla zone in Jharkhand, where Shah argues that it is the Indian state that has generated the seeds of a slow class differentiation, in the absence of an anti-feudal struggle, the Maoists have in fact often mobilized against the Indian state – whether the issue was programmes to get rid of exploitative forest officers or, more recently, the brutality of the security forces. Basu and Das, and Harriss, also note that the political practice of the Maoists seems to have gone ahead of their theory. They note that in recent years it is the movements against land grabs for development and mining projects that seem to have provided the most visible political platform for the Maoists, rather than the longer-standing movements for land redistribution.

The question arises as to why the Maoists still maintain their theoretical position that India is a ‘semi-feudal and semi-colonial’ society, despite the changes in the agrarian economy and despite the fact that in practice they themselves no longer appear to mobilize on the basis of

an anti-feudal struggle in their key zones of operation. One proposition is that the Maoists perceive it as too dangerous to sway from their original theoretical premise, as this would pave the way for having to take seriously those who argue for a fundamental rethinking of their protracted people's war strategy. Indeed, one possible fear is that the result would be the need to consider participation in parliamentary politics, bringing them too close to the other communist parties, and what they perceive as the ground of 'reactionaries' and of 'opportunism', of corruption and deviation from the revolutionary path, that the Indian democratic process of elections generates. While in a long underground struggle that is sustained in the most adverse of conditions it is understandable that the threat of factions and betrayers may generate such a position, the evidence and analyses of this special issue suggest that a rethinking of the Indian Maoist strategy and tactics might be useful to this struggle.

Of the major Left parties not pursuing an armed struggle strategy, the CPI(M)'s (2000) agrarian analysis and programme are significant in their reach. The CPI(M)'s analysis of capitalist development in agriculture differs in a number of respects from that of CPI(Maoist). Both Lerche and Harriss show that according to the CPI(M), capitalist development in India is progressing, but it is dominated by an alliance of the big bourgeoisie and landlords. Significant agrarian capitalist development has taken place, leading to the 'proletarianization of large sections of the rural working masses', to the 'accelerated differentiation of the peasantry' and to the 'reproduction of [agrarian] capital on a scale that did not hitherto exist' (CPI(M) 2000, 14). This is driven by the rural rich – capitalist landlords in particular, but also rich capitalist peasants. New rural class divisions have developed, dominated by a powerful nexus of landlords–rich peasants–contractors–big traders, exploiting the masses of the peasantry. However, at the same time – and, possibly, somewhat at odds with the capitalist development in agriculture – exploitation by usurious moneylenders and merchants' capital continues across the country. Moreover, in some parts of the country, old forms of landlordism (i.e. semi-feudalism) are still prevalent.

This means that for the CPI(M), the main enemy is the big bourgeoisie–landlord alliance and the main objective is to unite all other classes in a struggle for 'people's democracy' as a first step towards socialism. Their struggle is also anti-imperialist, something that has become more pertinent since the neoliberal reforms from the 1990s onwards, as a result of the liberalization of agriculture, the entry of multinational corporations into agricultural commodity trading and 'excessive land acquisitions' for 'sometimes unproductive special economic zones and for mining concessions' and so on, which have led to massive displacements of Adivasi communities (CPI(M) 2008, 15–18).

The party sees land reforms as a main plank of its agrarian policies. It maintains that even big capitalist farmers can be roped into an alliance against capitalist landlords and agribusiness, for land reforms. Lerche suggests that while land is indeed of much importance for the rural masses, the CPI(M)'s analysis of class alliances is problematic, both in the role that it still allocates to capitalist landlords as the main agrarian enemy and in its expectations that rich capitalist farmers will take action against capitalist landlords with whom they share their class position. For the existing land reform campaigns to become successful, there is a need to re-analyse the possible class alliances. The CPI(M)'s policy in this area is also at odds with its own analysis of capitalism in agriculture.

In a number of other areas, the CPI(M) analysis is more directly reflected in its policies. Following on from the processes of peasant differentiation and rural proletarianization identified by the CPI(M) and the related increased importance of non-agrarian issues for the rural labouring classes, the party's short-term achievable livelihood goals for the rural masses do not relate to agriculture but to wage income, the availability of paid work, food price levels and

against 'unproductive' displacement.¹³ There are thus significant differences in both the analysis and its policy implications between the CPI(Maoist) and the CPI(M).

The CPI(M)'s agrarian analysis is inspired by the classical theory of agrarian transition, where capitalist development in agriculture and industrial development are interrelated. In the long term, their vision of a people's democracy involves a break with the neoliberal world order to embark on a state-led national development strategy, in which a productive agriculture will play an important role. However, in the debate in and around the party, there are dissenting voices. Lerche highlights the position of Utsa Patnaik, who argues that the main enemy now is imperialist globalization, including MNCs that dominate Indian peasant production through the corporatization of agriculture, contract farming and land grabs. The fight against landlords and imperialism is a fight for all peasant classes, including the rich peasants, as now, the pauperization of all peasants has taken over from peasant differentiation as the dominant process in the countryside. The overall goal, then, is to break with neoliberal globalization, avoid internationally standard forms of large-scale capital intensive industrialization that in any case are argued to be uncompetitive in a globalized world and, instead, to preserve and encourage 'labour-intensive petty production' (Patnaik 2010).

In its radical break with the classical political economy positions regarding the agrarian question, this argument shows important similarities to the position of McMichael and *Via Campesina* outlined above. Its focus on petty production concedes its prevalence and would integrate it into Left politics. Here, it suffices to conclude that the different positions of the Indian communist parties, and alternative views such as that of Patnaik, show the pressing need for further in-depth analysis and discussion of India's regionally specific agrarian questions, based on high-quality empirical investigations of ongoing processes in the countryside.¹⁴ This is important not only as part of the quest for knowledge, but also for a solid grounding of agrarian-related Left politics in India. It is our hope that in adding to existing studies, the present special issue will provide a base for further analyses and debates.

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¹³ The CPI(M)'s stand on displacements has, however, been dented by its pro-SEZ policies while in power in West Bengal, as it sought to implement displacements against stiff local resistance in order to make way for the Tata Nano car plant. The CPI(M) is careful to point out that it is against *unproductive* SEZs, not SEZs *per se* (CPI(M) 2008). It follows that displacement for industrial development is acceptable, provided that proper compensation is forthcoming.

¹⁴ The Foundation for Agrarian Studies takes the lead here, with all-India research mobilized through the Kisan Sabha by a team of organic intellectuals and political activists and published, along with the agrarian research of others, in the *Review of Agrarian Studies* (see www.ras.org.in/).

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