Agrarian Struggles Since Independence

The years since independence have seen agrarian struggles of enormous variety, ranging from the legendary Telangana peasant movement and the PEPSU tenants' movement which continued from the pre-independence years to the Naxalite or Maoist movement in the late 1960s and the 'new' farmers' movements of the 1980s. Interspersed in between are many lesser-known struggles, such as the Kharwar tribals' movement in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar in 1957–58, the Bhils' movement in Dhulia in Maharashtra from 1967–75, or the Warlis' struggle led by the Kashtakari Sanghatna headed by the Marxist Jesuit Pradeep Prabhu since 1978. The SSP and PSP launched a land grab movement in 1970, as did the CPI. In Punjab and Andhra Pradesh, peasants protested against betterment levies imposed for covering costs of irrigation schemes, for better prices for crops, and other similar issues. The CPI set up the first nationwide agricultural labour organization, Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union, in Moga in 1968. In Tanjore and Kerala, movements of agricultural labour and tenants took place, as did numerous others all over the country.[1] The trajectory of these movements in many ways maps the process of agrarian and social change since independence. A shift is discerned from immediate post-independence concerns bequeathed by colonialism and feudalism to issues arising out of the Green Revolution and other processes of agrarian change including the aspirations aroused by the struggles for and policy of land reform. Constraints of space do not permit an exhaustive account of these struggles; the choice has inevitably fallen on the more dramatic ones, while many quieter stories must await their turn.

In anticipation of independence and the accompanying changes in agrarian relations, the period between 1945 and 1947 witnessed a sharp increase in agrarian struggles all over the country. Some of these, such as Tebhaga in Bengal and the Canal Colonies tenants' movements in Punjab were disrupted by the rising tide of communalism that preceded and accompanied Partition. But in two areas, both located in princely states undergoing the process of integration into India, the movements continued into the post-independence years. One was the Telangana area of Hyderabad state and the other the Patiala area of PEPSU. Both were led by Communists and provide important insights into their politics at the time.

Telangana Peasant Struggle

The Telangana or Telugu-speaking area of Hyderabad state ruled by the autocratic Nizam had been experiencing political opposition since the late 1930s under the influence of nationalist and democratic organizations such as the State Congress and the Andhra Mahasabha. From the early 1940s, the Communists emerged as a major force and when the ban on the CPI was lifted by the British in 1942 due to their pro-war line, they quickly expanded their influence and established their control on the Andhra Mahasabha. The peasants in Telangana suffered extreme feudal-type oppression at the hands of jagirdars and deshmukhs, some of whom owned thousands of acres of land. The Communists began to organize the peasants against the hated forced grain levy imposed

by the government, and veth begar or forced labour extracted by landlords and officials. From 1945, helped along by a few incidents in which the Communists heroically defended the poor peasants, the peasant movement began to spread rapidly.

The Nizam of Hyderabad was among the very few rulers who refused to join the Indian Union at independence in the vain hope, encouraged by Pakistan and some British officials, that he could hold out and stay apart The people of the state grew restless at his delaying tactics and started a movement for integration under the leadership of the State Congress. Camps were set up on the borders of Hyderabad with Maharashtra, coastal Andhra, etc., and arms were also sent in to help the resisters withstand the attacks of the Razakars, armed gangs of Muslim militia let loose on the predominantly Hindu population. The Communists participated actively in the anti-Nizam, pro-integration movement, and it is in this phase, August 1947 to September 1948, when they rode the anti-Nizam pro-India wave, that they registered their greatest successes, establishing a firm base in the Nalgonda, Warangal and Khammam districts. Landlords and officials mostly ran away to the towns, leaving the field free for the Communists in the villages. The Communists organized the peasants into gram sabhas and formed guerrilla bands or dalams, for attacking Razakar camps and protecting villages. Armed mostly with slings, sticks and stones and later crude country guns they established control over a large number of villages (the numbers mentioned by them are 3,000), and used the opportunity to reorder land relations. Lands that had been taken over by landlords in lieu of debt claims in large numbers during the Great Depression of the 1930s were returned to the original owners, government-owned uncultivated waste and forest land was distributed to the landless, wages of agricultural labour were sought to be increased, and women's issues such as wife-beating were also taken up. As confidence grew, 'ceilings' on landlords' land were declared, first at 500 acres and then at 100 acres, and the 'surplus' land distributed to landless and small peasants. It was found that the greatest enthusiasm was for recovering lands lost to landlords in living memory, followed by occupation of government waste and forest land. Occupation of the landlords' surplus land, even when it was offered in place of land lost to the landlord but which could not be restored because it had in the meantime been sold to some other small peasant, was not really popular with peasants. Clearly, they believed strongly in their claim to their own ancestral land and even to uncultivated land but felt little claim to the landlords' land even when it was surplus land. They also probably calculated quite wisely that they had a greater chance of retaining land to which they had some claim or to which nobody else had a claim (and there was also a customary traditional sanction for claim of ownership of the person who brought uncultivated wasteland under cultivation). In fact, this is what happened after the movement declined. Peasants were able to by and large hold on to these categories of lands, but not to the 'surplus' lands.[2]

On 13 September 1948, after having waited for more than a year for the Nizam to see the writing on the wall, and once the anti-Nizam resistance movement had shown clearly what the people desired, the Indian army moved into Hyderabad. The people greeted it as an army of liberation and within days the Nizam and his troops surrendered. The army then moved into the rural areas to clear out the Razakars and was greeted enthusiastically by peasants. However, the Communists in the meantime had decided that they were not going to give up their arms and

disband their guerrilla bands but were going to fight a liberation war with the pro-imperialist, bourgeois-landlord Nehru government. As a result, the dalam or guerrilla squad members were told to hide in the forests and attack the Indian army just as they had the Razakars. They seemed to have not noticed that this army was a modern, well-equipped force with high morale unlike the hated Razakars armed with medieval weapons. An unnecessary and tragic conflict ensued with the army successfully flushing out activists from villages in a few months, but in the process causing great suffering to thousands of peasants. Communist activists who had hidden in the forests continued to make efforts to re-establish links and build new bases among the tribes in the forests, but with diminishing success. Officially, the movement was withdrawn only in 1951, once the CPI changed its line after endless debates and a visit by its leaders to Moscow, but in effect only a few comrades remained in hiding in forests by then. Many, perhaps around 500, had died and about 10,000 were in jail.

The government was quick to respond to the issues raised by the movement. The Jagirdari Abolition Regulation was laid down in 1949 itself, and the Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act was passed in 1950. Over 600,000 tenants covering over one-quarter of the cultivated area were declared 'protected' tenants with a right to purchase the land on easy terms. Land ceilings were also introduced in the mid-1950s. It was also found that land reforms were much better implemented due to the high level of political consciousness of the peasants. Landlords who returned after the movement collapsed were not able to go back to the old ways. They often agreed to sell land at low rates, were subject to pressure for higher wages, did not try very hard to recover peasants' own lands or wastelands, but only the 'surplus' lands. The movement had broken the back of landlordism in Telangana, but this had already been done as part of the anti-Nizam, pro-integration liberation struggle, when their position as leaders of the popular upsurge provided Communists the opportunity to articulate radical peasant demands as well. The costly adventure thereafter was not dictated by the imperatives of the peasant movement but was entirely a consequence of misguided revolutionary romanticism, of which some Indian Communists appeared to be enamoured.

Patiala Muzara Movement

The muzara or tenants' movement that was going on in Patiala (the largest princely state in Punjab, that had become notorious for its repressive and rapacious maharaja) at independence had its origins in the late nineteenth century. Biswedars (the local term for landlords), who earlier had only some mafi claims or revenue-collecting rights, due to their growing influence in the administration, succeeded in claiming proprietary status (imitating the pattern in British India where zamindars or revenue collectors with customary rights only to retain a share of the revenue had been made into landowners) and relegated the entire body of cultivating proprietors of roughly 800 villages, comprising one-sixth the area of the state, to the position of occupancy tenants and tenants-at-will. The new tenants regarded the new landlords as parvenus, who had no *legitimate* right to the land which had belonged to the tenants for generations, and not in the manner in which a traditional tenantry might regard their old, established, feudal landowners, whose right to the land had acquired a certain social legitimacy by virtue of its very antiquity.

The grievance festered, but the opportunity for expression came only with the new wave of political awareness brought by the national movement and its associated movements such as the Akali and the Praja Mandal movements in the 1920s. But the repressive atmosphere in Patiala made any political activity extremely difficult, and it was only in the late 1930s with the change in the political atmosphere brought about by the formation of Congress ministries in many provinces that it became possible for a movement to emerge. By then, Communists were quite active in the peasant movement in the neighbouring British Punjab, and they soon emerged as the leading force in the muzara movement as well.

From 1939, a powerful movement emerged and from 1945 it escalated into an open confrontation between muzaras and biswedars, with the state intervening mainly to institute cases of non-payment of batai (rent in kind) and criminal assault. Numerous armed clashes took place at different places, some over forcible possession of land, others over forcible realization of batai. The Praja Mandal, which spearheaded the anti-Maharaja democratic movement, under the influence of Brish Bhan, who was sympathetic to the Communists and the tenants' cause, extended support. This gave strength to the tenants as the Praja Mandal had the weight of the Congress behind it.

With the coming of independence, Patiala joined the Indian Union, but made no moves to grant responsible government. The Maharaja, in fact, isolated by the opposition of all political groups, launched severe repression on the muzaras, leading to appeals to the Ministry of States in Delhi by the Praja Mandal on behalf of the tenants. The repression decreased after the formation of the PEPSU in July 1948, a new province comprising the erstwhile princely states of Punjab.

However, with the state unable to assert its authority, the situation was increasingly beginning to resemble that of a civil war in which the contending classes or political groups were left, by and large, to settle the issue between themselves as best as they could. Increasingly, as some landlords began to use armed gangs, the necessity arose for the movement to resist this armed onslaught by organizing its own armed wing. The decision to organize an armed volunteer corps was given a concrete form by the formation in 1948 of the Lal Communist Party, by Teja Singh Swatantar and a breakaway group of Punjab Communists, mostly belonging to the 'Kirti' group which originated in the Ghadr movement and had always had an uneasy relationship with the CPI.

Thus, by the end of 1948, this small band of armed men was in place, whose duty was to rush to the aid of muzaras who were threatened with physical, especially armed, assault by the biswedars and their organized gangs. The fear of the 'armed force' helped to keep biswedars in check. However, quite contrary to popular notions, and Communist mythology, the size of this 'armed force' was never more than 30 or 40 people, the largest estimate being 100. This armed force was also not meant to take on the forces of the state, as was clearly shown by the Kishangarh incident in January 1949, in which four members of the armed force lost their lives. Anticipating an assault by the government forces, since a policeman had died in an earlier clash, the Communist leaders had wisely decided to send away the main body of the force, maintaining only a token presence so that the people did not feel abandoned. Dharam Singh Fakkar and others who were arrested in this incident were acquitted after a defence was organized by the left-wing

Congressmen led by Brish Bhan.

The situation changed radically with the formation of a new, purely Congress ministry in 1951, in which Brish Bhan was deputy chief minister and his group had a strong presence. An Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee was set up to make recommendations and, till such time as the legislation could be enacted, the PEPSU Tenancy (Temporary Provision) Act was promulgated in January 1952 which protected tenants against eviction. In the meantime, the general elections intervened, and the Congress failed to secure a majority on its own in PEPSU. Now was the chance for the three Communist legislators to pay back some of the debts they owed to Brish Bhan and his group, but they chose instead to support Rarewala, the Maharaja's uncle, on the specious plea that they secured some minor reduction in compensation to be paid to biswedars. Other accounts suggest a deal by the CPI (with whom the Lal Communist Party had merged) with the Akalis in Punjab for seat-sharing in the elections.

Rarewala's ministry also collapsed without passing the agrarian legislation, and it was the introduction of President's Rule that brought about a qualitative change in the situation, as the President issued the PEPSU Occupancy Tenants (Vesting of Proprietary Rights) Act (1953). Under this act, occupancy tenants could become owners of their land by paying compensation amounting to twelve times the land revenue, an amount which (given the wartime and postwar inflation and the fact that land revenue continued to be assessed at the pre-war rates) was none too large. This legislation, though it did not meet fully the Communists' demand of transfer of proprietary rights without compensation, was obviously found acceptable by the tenants, and no further resistance was reported.

The Communists continued, however, to condemn the new agrarian legislation as inadequate because the biswedars' lands were not being confiscated without compensation. This resulted in their growing isolation from the peasants, a process that was also furthered by their desertion of their erstwhile comrades-in-arms in the muzara movement and the Praja Mandal, the left-wing Congress group led by Brish Bhan. In the long run, the Communists were also the losers in this game, because they were too weak to struggle effectively on their own against the gradual ascendancy of the Akalis and other communal and semi-communal and right-wing groups. This was most poignantly expressed by an 85-year-old grassroots Communist worker to the authors in 1981: 'These people for whom we fought so hard do not even offer us a drink of water these days.'[3]

Naxalite Peasant Movement

Naxalbari, West Bengal

On 2 March 1967, the first non-Congress United Front (UF) government was sworn in West Bengal, comprising the CPI, CPM, and Bangla Congress, a breakaway group from Congress. It decided to expedite the implementation of land reforms. Harekrishna Konar, veteran CPM peasant leader, as land revenue minister announced a programme of quick distribution of surplus land among the landless and an end to eviction of sharecroppers. He also called for peasants'

initiative and organized force to assist the process of implementation. This raised expectations among the poor but also frightened many middle and small owners that their land would be given to sharecroppers. There were many problems with distribution of land, however, as much of it was under litigation, and, once in office, the CPM could not ignore the legal constraints. Besides, verification of claims, adjusting of rival claims, grant of pattas, was a time-consuming process, which the party was only now about to learn. Some comrades, however, had other ideas, and had no desire to learn. Among these was the group in Naxalbari.

The Naxalbari area of Darjeeling district in north Bengal had been organizing sharecroppers and tea estate labour, mostly to the Santhal, Oraon and Rajbansi tribal communities, since the 1950s. The sharecroppers worked for jotedars or landlords under the 'adhiar' system, in which the jotedars provided the ploughs, bullocks and seeds and got a share of the crop. Disputes over shares followed by evictions were commonplace and increased with the coming of the UF government because of the fear that sharecroppers would be given the land. Tea garden labour also often worked as sharecroppers on tea garden owners' paddy lands, which were shown as tea gardens to escape the ceiling laws on paddy lands. Charu Mazumdar was a major leader of this area and it had been clear for some time, at least since 1965, that his ideas about agrarian revolution and .armed struggle, apparently based on Mao Zedong's thoughts, were different from the official CPM position. He not only did not believe that land reform was possible through legal methods, but argued this path only deadened the revolutionary urges of the peasants. To be politically meaningful, land had to be seized and defended through violent means. To concretize their ideas, he and his associates, Kanu Sanyal and the tribal leader Jangal Santhal, organized a peasants' conference under the auspices of the Siliguri subdivision of the CPM in Darjeeling district only sixteen days after the UF government had come to power. They gave a call for ending of landlords' monopoly on land, land distribution through peasant committees and armed resistance to landlords, the UF government and the central government. According to some claims, all the villages were organized between April and May 1967. Around 15,000 to 20,000 peasants became full-time activists, it is said, and peasants' committees formed in villages became the nuclei of armed guards, who occupied land, burnt land records, declared debts cancelled, delivered death sentences on hated landowners, and set up a parallel administration. Bows, arrows and spears were supplemented by whatever guns could be seized from landlords. Hatigisha, Buraganj, and Chowpukhuria under Naxalbari, Kharibari and Phansidewa police stations respectively were the reported rebel strongholds.

CPM leaders could easily see that the Naxalbari peasants were being led into a suicidal confrontation with the state, of which Communists were now a part. The CPM could not remain in the government and sanction the action of the Naxalbari comrades. Persuasion was tried first, and Harekrishna Konar went to Siliguri and, according to his version, got the leaders to agree to surrender all persons wanted by the police and to stop all unlawful activities and to cooperate in the legal distribution of land in consultation with local peasant organizations. The local leaders denied any agreement and, anticipating repression, began to incite the peasants against the police. After this, things took their predictable and inexorable course, with a vicious circle of attacks on police, police reprisals, further clashes, and so on. The CPM was in an unenviable position, trying for some time to steer a middle course between support for rebels and police repression, and

making further attempts at conciliation by sending a cabinet mission of the UF government. It appears from some sources that the peasants did want to negotiate, but were brushed aside by Charu Mazumdar. The CPM had to ultimately condemn and expel the dissident leaders or resign from the government. It chose the former and this triggered the process of the coming together of the extreme left forces, first into a committee to help the Naxalbari peasants, and later in the CP(ML).

Meanwhile, repression had its effect, and by July the peasant movement was over and most of its activists and leaders including Jangal Santhal in jail. The Naxalite movement then remained only in the towns with students as its main force, and it came increasingly to be characterized by street warfare between armed gangs of Naxalite and CPM or Congress youth supporters. A far cry from the romantic visions of peasant revolution!

Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh

But in faraway Srikakulam, another group of romantic revolutionaries claiming to be inspired by Mao Zedong were about to lead another group of tribals into a suicidal confrontation with the Indian state. Strangely, it never occurred to them to ask the Naxalbari tribal peasants what they thought of a leadership that used them as guinea pigs for experiments with revolution and pushed them, armed with only bows and arrows and spears, to face a modern police force. The Srikakulam tribals, mostly illiterate, living deep in forests, with little exposure to the outside world, had no way of knowing about the tragedy of Naxalbari when they began to enact their own.

Srikakulam, the northernmost district in Andhra Pradesh, bordering on Orissa, was among the least developed. The local tribal population, comprising the Jatapu and Savara tribes, had been organized by Communists working in the Parvatipuram, Palakonda, Patapatnam and Kottur areas since the early 1950s. From 1957–58 to 1967, a movement that organized tribals into Girijan Sanghams and Mahila Sanghams had secured many gains, including restoration of land illegally taken over by non-tribal moneylenders and landlords, wage increases, better prices for forest produce, reduction of debts, and free access to forests for timber for construction of houses and other daily needs. Tribals had gained in self-confidence and participated in rallies in nearby towns with enthusiasm. There is no evidence that there was any push from within the tribals or Girijan (forest people) towards greater militancy or use of violence.

As in Naxalbari, extremist dissident CPM leaders, who were unhappy with the party line, decided to shift over to a line of armed struggle, guerrilla warfare, and later, much more than in Naxalbari, annihilation of individual ‘class enemies’. Inspired by Naxalbari, but ignoring its experience, the movement began well after Naxalbari had been suppressed. Beginning in November 1967, it reached an intense mass phase between November 1968 and February 1969. Girijans armed with bows and arrows and stones and sometimes crude country guns chased away police parties that came to arrest activists. Communist revolutionaries roamed the villages asking the people to form village defence squads (dalams) and get whatever arms they could. In April 1969, with the decision at the national level to form the CP(ML), a new party of extreme left activists, a fresh turn was taken with emphasis shifting from mass line to guerrilla action and

individual annihilation. According to government sources, about forty-eight people were annihilated by the extremists; the rebels claimed about double that figure. These included landlords, moneylenders, police and forest officials. Inevitably, repression too intensified from November 1969 and by January thirteen leaders were killed and several arrested. By mid-June 1970, a massive police operation was launched in which 1,400 were arrested. On 10 July 1970, V. Satyanarayana and Adibhatla Kailasam, the-two major leaders were killed, and that brought the movement to an end. Feeble attempts were made by some Maoist factions to revive the movement from 1971 onwards but, by 1975, these seem to have died out. Groups of Maoist youth continue even today in remote, backward pockets, often inhabited by tribals or very poor low-caste cultivators and agricultural labourers, in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, trying to build their model of revolution. But now this effort appears to have violence as its sole motif.

'New' Farmers' Movements

The farmers' movements burst onto the national political stage in 1980 with the road and rail roko agitation in Nasik in Maharashtra led by the Shetkari Sangathana of Sharad Joshi. Nearly 200,000 farmers blockaded road and rail traffic on the Bombay–Calcutta and Bombay–Delhi route on November 10 demanding higher prices for onions and sugarcane. Thousands were arrested, two killed in police firing, and prices of onions and cane enhanced. The leader was an ex-UN official, Sharad Joshi, who articulated the ideology of the movement in terms of India versus Bharat or urban, industrial India versus rural, agricultural Bharat. In 1986, in Sisauli village in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, Mahinder Singh Tikait, a middle-school-educated, medium-size peasant, Jat by caste, and head of the Jat caste panchayat or khap, presided over a gathering of lakhs of villagers before which the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh had been forced to appear in person to announce his acceptance of their demand for reduction of electricity charges to the old level. These were only the more dramatic moments in what had emerged in the 1980s as a widespread grassroots mobilization of rural dwellers. Led by the Vivasayigal Sangam in Tamil Nadu, the Rajya Ryothu Sangha in Karnataka, Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, Khedut Samaj and Kisan Sangh in Gujarat and the Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra, farmers in thousands and lakhs, at different times for different demands, stopped traffic on highways and train routes, withheld supplies from cities, sat on indefinite dharnas at government offices in local and regional centres, gheraoed officials, prevented political leaders and officials from entering villages, especially at election time, till they agreed to support their demands, refused to pay enhanced electricity charges, and interest on loans, and cost of irrigation schemes, resisted confiscation proceedings in lieu of debt, and even de-grabbed confiscated goods and land.

The basic understanding on which the movements rested is that the government maintains agricultural prices at an artificially low level in order to provide cheap food and raw materials to urban areas, and the consequent disparity in prices results in farmers paying high prices for industrial goods needed as inputs into agriculture and receiving low returns for their produce. As a result, farmers are exploited by urban interests, and are victims of internal colonialism. They

need not pay back loans or charges for infrastructure costs as they have already paid too much and are in fact net creditors. This basic philosophy is articulated in different forms by all the leaders and organizations; it provides the legitimacy for the movement in the farmers' consciousness, along with the traditional propensity of the Indian peasants to resist what they perceive as 'unjust' government demands. (The most common issue on which resistance surfaced among the landowning peasants in the colonial period was payment of one or another government demand. This is also true of peasants in other parts of the world.[4])

These 'new' farmers' movements that have attracted much media and political attention, especially in the 1980s, have focussed mainly on demanding remunerative prices for agricultural produce, and lowering or elimination of government dues such as canal water charges, electricity charges, interest rates and principal of loans, etc. This has brought on them the charge that they are mainly vehicles for demands of rich or well-to-do agriculturists most of whom are beneficiaries of post-independence agrarian development, including the Green Revolution, and have little or no room for the concerns of the rural poor. This is hotly denied by the leaders and ideologues of the movement, who point as proof to the diverse social base of the movement among medium and small peasants, as well as some other features such as inclusion of demands for higher minimum wages for agricultural labour and the insertion of women's and dalits' issues, for example, by the Shetkari Sangathana of Maharashtra. The fact, however, remains that, apart from the Shetkari Sangathana, no other organization has really gone beyond what can be described as landowning peasants' issues. These organizations have shown scant concern for the landless rural poor or rural women. It is, however, true that they are broad based among the peasantry and not confined to the upper sections, as alleged by some critics, for smaller-holding peasants are as much interested in higher prices and lower rates of government dues since they too produce for the market and pay government dues.

While there is often justice in the demands for higher prices and better facilities, the basic rural versus urban or Bharat versus India ideology is essentially flawed, and can only lead the farmers into a blind alley of mindless resistance and state repression of which inevitably the smaller peasants are likely to be the chief victims. In fact, this is what happened in Tamil Nadu in 1981 where a very strong movement was killed by state repression brought on by refusal to repay loans and consequent forcible confiscation by government. All efforts by Naidu to revive the movement he had nursed for almost two decades, including the founding of the Toilers and Peasants Party in 1982, came to nought and he died a disappointed man in 1984. It appears that the lessons of the Tamil Nadu movement were not learnt by others, else one would not have come across suicidal decisions such as the one taken in 1984 to ask the Punjab peasants to reduce foodgrain production, in order to hold the country to ransom, a decision mercifully never implemented for other reasons. Leading movements is as much about knowing when and where to stop as it is about knowing when and how to begin, as Gandhiji knew so well. But despite many claims by the leaders to be following in Gandhi's footsteps, there is little evidence of lessons learnt from him, especially about the awesome responsibility of leadership.

These movements are often referred to as 'new', the suggestion being that they are part of the worldwide trend of 'new' non-class or supra-class social movements which have emerged outside

the formal political party structures, examples being the women's and environmental movements.[5] Let us examine the claim. As stated above, apart from the Shetkari Sangathana, no other organization has shown signs of really trying hard to become a social movement. The Karnataka movement has been concerned with the environment, and Tikait to some extent with social reform, but little else. This does not bring them into the category of 'new' social movements defined as non-class movements, concerned with women's issues or child labour or environmental issues that are outside the framework of the traditional party structure. The 'new' farmers' movements are not all that new as similar demands were made by peasant organizations earlier as well, but without the regressive rural versus urban ideology. In Punjab, for example, a big movement was launched by the Kisan Sabha under the CPI's direction against the imposition of a betterment levy or irrigation tax in 1958. Demands for remunerative prices were made by all peasant organizations and most political parties or peasant lobbies within parties. The emergence of Charan Singh and the BLD in Uttar Pradesh in 1967 was widely regarded as the coming of age of a landowning peasantry that had benefited from post-independence agrarian change. Movements of Backward Castes were also seen as part of the same process.

The other ground on which 'newness' is asserted is that these movements are not linked to political parties, whereas earlier organizations were wings of parties. This is only partially correct. While it is true that none of the organizations were started by political parties, it is also true that over time they have inexorably got linked to politics. The Tamil Nadu organization was the first to openly become a party and this led to the disarray in the All-India BKU which Naidu, the Tamil Nadu leader, had helped found, as distance from political parties had been enunciated as a basic principle of the organization. The Karnataka Ryothu Sangha (KRS) put up candidates in elections. The Punjab BKU has retained the character of a farmers' lobby more than any other, but did link up with Akalis when it suited them. The Shetkari Sangathana was involved in politics from the 1984 Lok Sabha elections when it put out a list of forty-eight candidates, one for each constituency in Maharashtra, who were most likely to defeat the Congress candidates. It asked its followers to vote for them. From 1987, Sharad Joshi openly allied with V.P. Singh in his anti-Congress mobilization and in 1989 was rewarded with a cabinet-level post to formulate a new agricultural policy. Joshi's links with V.P. Singh led to his estrangement with Tikait, and hopes of an all-India unity of farmers were dashed on 2 October 1989 when Tikait and his men almost dragged Joshi and other leaders off the stage at the Boat Club lawns after making them wait for two hours in front of a crowd of lakhs that had collected for what was to be a joint rally. But Tikait's loud protestations about staying off politics began to sound hollow once his not-so-clandestine support to the BJP in the wake of the hotting up of the Ayodhya issue in 1990 became apparent. The Gujarat Kisan Sangh's links to the BJP are well known.

Ideologically as well, the movement is deeply divided. Sharad Joshi now favours liberalization, with the farmer being linked to the world market. The KRS is dead against multinationals and has been carrying on protests against their entry. Organizational and ideological unity have thus eluded the movement. Also, there has been a distinct loss of momentum in the 1990s and, by the index of longevity, the movement may be ranked quite low. The movement no doubt touched a

vital chord among peasants by drawing attention to the neglect and backwardness of rural areas, its problem remained that instead of focusing on redressal, it began to pit peasants and villagers against town dwellers in a fratricidal war.