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Emerging forms of Agrarian Resistance under Globalisation: Insights from Maharashtra State, India

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1 Rural Society in India: From Feudalism to Neoliberalism

The recent history of development in countries, like India, is characterised by the persistence of mass poverty and aggravating inequality with a large part of the population virtually excluded from the 'growing' spheres of economy and society (NCEUS 2007). A majority of rural Indians still find an occupation in agriculture while the contribution of agriculture to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has reduced drastically. Agriculture in India has remained a low productivity, low-income economic activity. Intense contradictions inherent in this 'torturous transition'[1] have given rise to disparate manifestations of social unrest and conflict.

In the social science literature, the nature of agrarian change is understood to be an important determinant of the trajectories of social transformation. In the history of Indian development, the absence of a decisive agrarian transition has been held as the fundamental barrier to improving the conditions of life of people (see Byres 1986, 2002). In this argument, India's agrarian structure is characterised by the persistence of features of pre-capitalist relations of production vis-à-vis the land, labour and credit markets. These features manifest themselves in the form of landlordism, various forms of petty tenancy, servitude and bondage of labour, and usury (Patnaik 2007, p. 11). The basis for these relations was never completely transformed, and hence, deprivation by virtue of class status continues to be a reality in Indian villages.

Historical experience tells us that in today's developed world, such pre-capitalist relations were progressively transformed to overcome economic backwardness and expand different freedoms of people (see Hartwell 1974; Dobb 1951; Byres 2002, 1995, 1986). As Hartwell (1974) noted, "there are no examples of industrialization and growth in any of the major economies of the world, which were not preceded or accompanied by an agricultural transformation". However, similar analytical relations in agrarian structure can be manifested in qualitatively heterogeneous forms in different societies. Across developing economies, the process of transition from the pre-capitalist agrarian structure to capitalist agriculture has varied significantly. The "agrarian question" in backward societies has often been resolved in contrasting and uneven manners, which also provide a meaningful background for the analysis of agrarian transition in India in the post-independence period (see Bardhan 1983; Bhaduri 1973; Bhaduri et al 1986).

Typically, pre-capitalist relations of production constrain agricultural growth as well as growth of rural incomes by dis-incentivising investment and technology adoption, tying rural workers to a social system marked by the presence of extra-economic forms of coercion and compressing purchasing power in rural areas (Ramakumar 2010). All the above constraints slow down the growth of a home market for industrial growth. As Byres (1986) was to note:

> An understanding of economic backwardness requires a firm grasp of what constitutes the agrarian question. A coherent notion of what is involved in the eradication of economic backwardness must derive, in part, from some comprehension of what the resolution of the agrarian question entails (p. 7).

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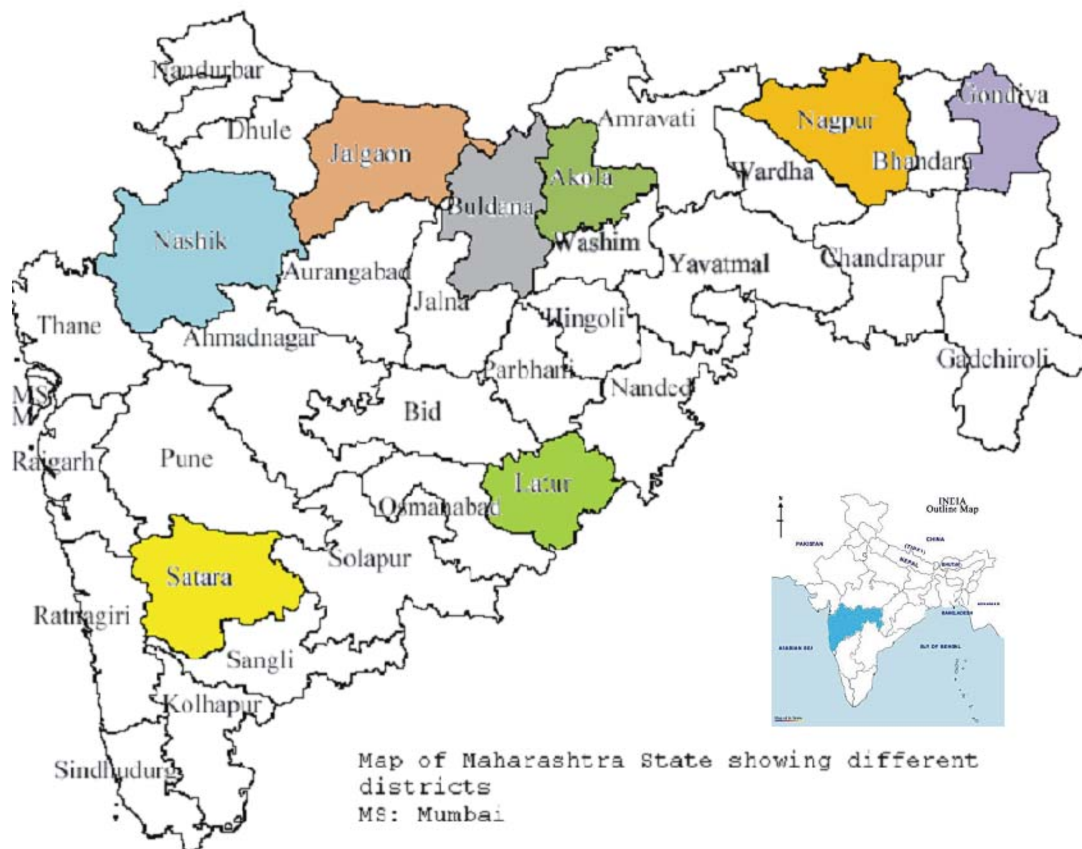
[1] The term comes from Bardhan (2009).

On the other hand, India’s development has also witnessed growing presence of caste and cultural differences as markers of social status and assertiveness. The institution of caste has interacted with the concept of class in myriad ways to produce social systems that are not only exploitative in economic terms but also in socio-cultural and political terms. Of course, caste-based exploitation in India has historical roots in the material prosperity, particularly landholding, of the dominant castes. Yet, independently too, growing aspirations of social mobility have given rise to strong assertions of culture and identity. The shared experiences of injustice among members of social groups have given rise to political agendas that project self-hood determining characteristics as reflecting empowerment.

Thus, in the Indian context, it is improper to pose the debate on social conflicts as between “class struggle” and “caste conflict” (Namboodiripad 1981). The “inter-penetration of class and caste” has rendered such a debate more complicated, and has necessitated finer analyses from complementary perspectives. *First*, in terms of studies on Indian development, particularly rural development, it remains of utmost importance that socio-economic backwardness is analysed from the overarching perspective of agrarian change. *Second*, given the concrete realities of caste and identity formation, the agrarian change framework needs to be supplemented with analyses of meanings of social differentiation.

The Study Region: Maharashtra

The state of Maharashtra, historically, has four separate socio-cultural regions, namely Western Maharashtra, Konkan, Marathwada and Vidarbha. The Marathwada region includes the districts of Aurangabad, Nanded, Parbhani, Latur, Beed, Hingoli, Jalna and Osmanabad. Whereas the region of Vidarbha includes the districts of Amravati, Akola, Bhandara, Buldana, Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Gondia, Nagpur, Wardha, Washim and Yavatmal (see Map 1). Western Maharashtra and Konkan have experienced rapid urbanization and migration to Mumbai after the formation of the state.



Map 1: Districts of Maharashtra

However, the backward regions of Maharashtra did not undergo similar developments. The Marathwada region was under the rule of Nizam of Hyderabad before independence. The region was characterized by ryotwari land tenures at least since the year 1853 but remained backward because of deeply unequal social structure and negligence of Nizam towards Marathwada (Mohanty 2009). The region is ecologically dry but has marginally improved in parameters of irrigation in recent years compared to another backward region, Vidarbha (Seeta Prabhu and Sarker 1992; Mohanty 2009). In their study of regional disparity in the state of Maharashtra, Seeta Prabhu and Sarker ranked all districts of Marathwada, except Aurangabad, in the underdeveloped category of their analysis (*ibid*).

In strong contrast to Vidarbha, however, the region of Marathwada never had a distinct separate political identity. The dominant groups in Marathwada, Marathas, were gradually co-opted by the political current located in the regions of western Maharashtra. In fact, Mohanty points out that the relatively better performance of Marathwada region than Vidarbha in areas such as irrigation resulted from "the socio-cultural proximity of its local elites with those of Western Maharashtra" (2009, p. 68). In recent times, the region, hence, shows simultaneous signs of limited agricultural prosperity and extreme backwardness in terms of social and economic structure.

In the state of Maharashtra, India, agrarian changes have been limited in scope and future potential. The agenda of land reforms has been a failure and the economy has not witnessed structural transformation of the kind expected in the process of capitalist development. The class and caste character of surplus generating farmers have remained exactly the same over the years, because of the vicious caste-feudal order that remains unchallenged. Older social and economic networks continue to span the village, the town and the export markets. Non-big farmers have felt the shock effects of globalising agricultural markets of commercial crops such as cotton and sugarcane. In this context, the process of differentiation has taken a peculiar turn where pauperisation of a large number of farmers has given rise to the phenomenon of farmers' suicides. At the same time, older structures of labour relations and even bondage have reappeared in newer forms and the whole category of agricultural workers is under question with extreme casualisation of work both in agriculture and non-agriculture.

Against this background, a number of social movements have sprung up at multiple levels. They are quite different in organisation and forms of struggle. Based on two case studies in different agro-ecological regions of Maharashtra, namely Marathwada and Vidarbha, the present paper describes the empirical changes in the field of agrarian societies in India with a special focus on emerging social movements and their visions for change. The first case study tries to reconsider the notion of a farmers' movement in India, linking it to other contexts such as South Africa or Latin America. The case study is situated in Vidarbha, which has been one of the most important sites of farmers' suicides in India. Talking about suicides come into the movements in particular to make the suffering of farmers visible that are pressured by the reality of neoliberal policies and the agrarian structures. The second case study looks at the demand for land redistribution led by formerly "untouchable" groups (now known as *Dalits*) who are still mostly landless or own marginal landholdings. It studies how the demand for land has changed in the context of newer opportunities, rise in education and negative profitability rates on small plots. In a rapidly changing interface between agrarian societies on the one hand and markets and state on the other, the paper tries to document how these social movements present new visions for agriculture and social progress.

The next section discusses a framework to understand the emerging civil society/social movement interventions in the historical context of India. The third section summarises the basic changes in the political economy of agriculture in India in the post-liberalisation phase. The fourth section delves into the suicide capital of India- the region of Vidarbha and looks at the responses from farmers, farmers' organizations and social movements to the agrarian crisis. The fifth section elaborates upon the movement of the ex-untouchable communities (Dalits) for land in Marathwada- which is another region of Maharashtra state in India. The sixth section tries to conceptualise the new agrarian movements based on the two case studies and presents a set of concluding notes for further discussion.

2 State, Class and Civil Society in Rural India: A Framework

The initial years of central planning in India witnessed an extraordinary emphasis on structural change as the prerequisite of development. The Nehru-Mahalonobis model focused on large scale, capital intensive and heavy industry sector. Since India was a backward economy, it was understood that it could only develop through creating capacities for the production of "production goods". There was relatively lesser stress on employment creation and equity because in the supposed tradeoff between growth and equity, the said model relied much more disproportionately on *growth* as against *equity* as the choice. Land and social reforms programmes did not succeed to the degree envisaged. In this regard, Ray (1997) argues that limits of India's initial rural development programmes can be explained primarily in terms of the absence of any structural change in the society accompanied by poor policy implementation. As the rural economic policy is summarized by Mellor,

> .....the opposition to neglect of the poor was disarmed in the short run by the argument that a relatively costless, rural community and cottage industry development program would lift the real incomes of the needy and produce the goods which they consumed. Dealing with the impoverished in this way was thought to be consistent with the Gandhian philosophy and was not expected to compete with resources for investment in heavy industry (1976, p. 5).

As Chandrashekhar and Ghosh (2001) point out, the planning experience of India can be understood through three contradictions operating at multiple levels of polity and society. *First*, the Indian State owing to its class basis had to perform two entirely contradictory tasks- investing in high and growing public expenditure as well as making huge transfers to domestic capitalists through fiscal and monetary policy. This was clearly unsustainable in long run, as it came out to be. *Second*, the State was unable to infuse national development goals into the domestic private capital objectives. The State, in other words, could not discipline the local capitalists towards an overarching national development. *Third*, in the social sphere, there existed extreme levels of class, caste and social inequality which resulted into a very narrowly based and limited market. This, in turn, produced a contradiction between heavy industrial production and domestic demand which was impossible to sustain, politically as well as in the economic realm.

In any case, owing to above cited contradictions, India was reeling under mass unemployment, regional disparities, extreme levels of food insecurity and social unrest by the time Mellor's observations about the Indian economy came to fore. Beginning with the crisis of 1965-66 and the fourth plan, the role of the State started reflecting a shift from "planning" to "management". The structural change goals were sidelined and emphasis was put on poverty alleviation and rural development programmes (during and after the sixth plan) which resulted in high public expenditure and high growth rates during the 1980s. Many Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) were introduced, when the State realized that the nature of policies was not keeping the social and economic inequality in check.

The logic of minimum state intervention in Indian planning exercise took shape at a time when neoliberalism appeared in the West, i.e. during the 1980s. Thus, while there was an implicit recognition of the fact that a large number of Indian people were systematically excluded from developmental processes, the State only had to do the minimum to prevent such tendencies. In terms of retrospective potentials, these efforts took the form of "programmes" and "schemes"- and not as policy as tool of structural reforms. Ironically, the gradual depolitisization of State policy occurred while, at times, revolutionary language from the past was retained.

The 1990s witnessed the complete downfall of the earlier state-planning regime. With the ever more conservative social policy stance of the ruling neoliberal regime, as mentioned earlier, we have seen a progressive increase in the arbitrary nature of social sector programmes and the whimsical 'fixing' of the number of BPL populations and shrinking fiscal space for the state governments. Major contemporary social policies of the Indian state reflect the overarching concerns of creating avenues

for rapid growth and enhancing 'efficiency' through various modes like privatisation, withdrawal of the state and 'opening up' of the economy.

The initial years of planning witnessed tremendous and continued socio-political consensus on the issue of development policy in India. The Nehru-Mahalanobis model of heavy industrialisation was never challenged for it signalled a forward march of India towards development. Paul Brass (2002) rightly characterises this period as the one in which political science was almost entirely implicated by the overarching developmentalist paradigm. Further, as Partha Chatterjee (1994) points out, while it is necessary to appreciate the anti-imperialist dimension of the planning principle in particular as well as the attitude of national bourgeois in many other third-world countries in general, the structural logic of planning as a process of facilitating and legitimising capital accumulation cannot be denied.

In this respect, Vanaik (1990) emphasises on the confusing paradox of Indian democracy i.e. the existence of a perpetual 'political instability' and the simultaneous evidence of 'durability of the larger framework of bourgeois democracy in India'. The post-1991 changed role of finance capital in the political economy of India has, as expected, compounded this problem (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh 2002). It has been argued that, in the political realm, right from the beginning there existed within the Indian polity two distinct and mutually exclusive political cultures, the elite and the mass political culture[2]. It was only a matter of few decades that the real mass political culture retaliated against this hegemony of weak bourgeois. What followed was a period of mediation and co-option (1967-80) with rise of Janata Party with other regional aspirations and finally before a complete downfall in 1991, a period of populism and patronage (1980-1990) with the initiation of large scale Centrally Sponsored Schemes and heavy public investment in anti-poverty programmes (see, Nayyar 1998).

The State policy in India now is constituted mainly by central government schemes with little fiscal/operational autonomy to state governments. The post-1991 political economy is characterised by a growing tendency of convergence at the central level and heightening discontent and conflict at the local, regional and ethnic level (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). A vast amount of literature is devoted to how civil society organizations and interventions by social movements can be effective. There seems to be an almost unqualified reliance on civil society associations and mobilizations as agents of resistance and progressive change (see Rudolf 2004). However, the exact nature of the relationship between civil society formations and democratic politics, particularly in the third world is unclear. There have been competing claims about civil society - ranging from its ineffectiveness to its complicity with neoliberal reforms. *First*, it has been claimed that the emergence of neo-liberalism in the third world has entailed a thoroughgoing change in the nature and functioning of the State. Contrary to "retreat of the state", it is claimed to have become a vital instrument in the consolidation of the neoliberal order (Patnaik 1992). This has brought in its wake, a distinct type of non-state civil society organizations which operate under the auspices of the neoliberal State and are, therefore, not geared towards progressive social transformation of any kind. While such kinds of mobilizations invoke themes reminiscent of post-war demand management states, their objectives and modes of operation are squarely in line with the requirements of neoliberal reforms. Concepts such as 'governance' and 'accountability' very often become rallying points for such organisations, and act as ideological checks on their political orientation. Further, there have been claims that international donor agencies, through their enormous influence on third world governments, have tried to shape welfare oriented mobilizations in these countries, in particularly self serving kinds of ways (see Jenkins 2001). This discussion must also critically look at the historical basis and nature of such civil society organizations, the class of people that are involved and the fractured/fragmented forms of struggles.

Second, it has been posited that politics itself has become a way of creating newer constituencies for deepening of neo-liberalism. This often takes the specific form of engendering certain kinds of

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[2] The terminology belongs to Myron Weiner. For a detailed discussion see, Brass (2002).

populism which fit very neatly with the agenda of neoliberal reforms. Particularly in the case of India, such politics has often attempted to combine popular resentment against the consequences of liberalism with the policy imperatives of neo-liberalism itself (see Reddy 2002). Further and as a result of the persistent feudal basis of Indian polity, civil society organizations tend to be revivalist and regressive in nature (Bagchi 1998, 1999; Kothari 1995). It must be understood here that the post-Washington Consensus era has produced conditions which enable the 'middle path' espoused by the various kinds of newer social/civil society organisations. On the other hand, competing perspectives on social policy, effectively, have made targeting as a new *test* to identify "really deserving households". However, until the debate on social policy recognises the perpetuation of an exploitative agrarian structure as the core determinant of large scale food and livelihood insecurity in India, it would continue to view even the instances of hunger deaths as mere aberrations away from perfect market equilibrium and hence necessarily adopt a *relief approach*. The dominance of the globalisation consensus also had led to strange development in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are, many a times, preferred over elected Panchayati Raj Institutions by international donors. The ideology that drives such initiatives of participation and social capital is to ensure development for all without loss of peace and order (Harris 1997).

We conclude this section by reiterating two major points elaborated above. *First*, the relationship between the State and social-political movements has evolved in a manner to benefit a few at the expense of large majority of people in India. In this context, various kinds of newer non-state formations have also taken shape mostly in the form of NGOs and fluid social movements. *Second*, it is, then, important to distinguish between organisations and movements for the purpose of this paper and study the non-state social movements in greater detail to gain an understanding of larger political processes and ideological motives. The sections below discuss some of the prominent peasant and Dalit social movements in detail with their promises of egalitarianism and modernity.

3 Globalisation and Neoliberalism: Indian Agriculture Redefined?

After the Indian financial crisis in 1991, the government introduced new policies of stabilization and structural adjustment supported by the Bretton–Woods institutions (called the New Economic Policies). *First*, in the field of domestic trade, the marketing system was considered to be discriminatory against farmers. State–managed buying agencies were seen as inhibiting contact between the big private buyers and farmers. Thus, monopoly procurement schemes, i.e. when the state acts as the only buyer, and similar policies were abolished. *Second*, the financial sector was liberalized and deregulated, reversing the above-mentioned nationalization of banks. This had severe consequences on the availability of credit in rural areas and the expansion of rural credit halted. This development paved the way for the return of the informal sector. *Third*, public expenditures on agricultural research and extension decreased. These tasks were taken over by private corporations, public-private partnerships, and NGOs. *Fourth*, land ceiling laws were seen as inhibiting modernisation of the agricultural sector. Thus, many states abolished or loosened them. Such measures were intended to achieve economies of scale and attract potential investors (Ramakumar 2010).

India still provides market support for farmers most importantly through granting a Minimum Support Price (MSP). Though currently this support is being dismantled. Additionally, a problem of the MSPs is that the yields per acre differ greatly among the different regions, crops and farmers. For many farmers, MSPs do not even compensate for the actual costs of production. Ramachandran (2011) found that as much as 21% of (mostly poor) farmers earn negative crop incomes. At the same time, the incomes of big landholders in most villages are high. In a village case, the agricultural income in the top decile of villagers was more than Rs 3.2 lakh per household per year (Ramachandran 2011; Ramakumar 2010).

Beyond the farm gate, prices are increasingly dependent on world market prices. Cotton serves as a good illustration: until the late 1990s, less than 2% of the domestic cotton production was imported,

whereas in the early 2000s it was already more than 10%. At the same time, India has become a net-exporter of cotton due to a rise in domestic production (Ramakumar 2014). Consequently, liberalization also imported the volatility of international prices.

These new prices and policies lead to a change in cropping patterns and modes of production towards cash- and resource-intensive cash crops. This development coincides with a dwindling resource base, particularly soil and water. Because of intensive cultivation practices or malpractices such as excess use of chemical fertilizer and the extension of cultivation to marginal areas, land degradation and soil erosion are a growing problem in India, with the proportion of degraded land increasing (Reddy and Mishra 2010b). In particular, through groundwater irrigation in the absence of a sustainable recharge of wells, surface irrigation, and water conservation structures, groundwater reserves undergo irreversible depletion. Consequently, there is an acute scarcity of water in the summer months (Ramakumar 2014).

In terms of land, the 2010–11 agricultural census shows that the number of small and marginal farms is increasing. The same trend can be seen as a percentage of the total area under cultivation, where the area cultivated by small and marginal farmers increased from 16% to 53%. Furthermore, the area per holding has been decreasing (Deshpande and Arora 2010). The consequences of these policies are typically labeled as an agrarian crisis. During an intense fieldwork with many interviews with farmers in a dry region in Central India, we found that while politicians and movement leaders often present an analysis in which the whole 'peasantry' is in crisis, the farmers themselves agree with that only superficially. Rather, the farmers and activists on the ground describe different inequalities and a whole range of risks that have led to the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha and which model its consequences. Based on these perceptions, the academic literature and additional statistical data, the 'agrarian crisis' can be conceptualized as a web of various layers of inequalities and increasingly dreadful risks.

Taking into consideration these risks, agriculture is increasingly a 'speculative activity' (term from Gupta 2016). It relies on an increasingly unpredictable climate and equally unpredictable markets. Farmers have to take up loans to start agriculture, invest in extension and more inputs and then hope for the rains and prices to make a profit. Otherwise they fail completely. The ability of farmers to cope with these risks, whether they are able to profit or fail, depends on the different layers of inequality.

4 Farmer's Suicides and Farmer's Movements in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, India

One of the most prominent 'symptoms' of the agrarian crisis are the so-called "farmer suicides". Arguably, a wave of farmer suicides has swept the Indian countryside since the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the 1990s. Many researchers, activists and politicians see a direct causal relationship between these policies and the farmer suicides. The farmers' grievances around the 'agrarian crisis' would arguably make it likely for a movement to emerge. Yet, in the region of Vidarbha where this research takes place, there is no big peasant or farmers 'movement' that can speak for large sections of the peasantry with one voice. On the ground, though, there are very energetic mobilizations around this 'agrarian crisis' that claimed to speak for the farmers and raised very similar demands.

There were 5 very heterogeneous groups and individual actors that claimed to speak for the farmers and mobilized around the agrarian crisis and farmer suicides. Despite their differences they perceived themselves and each other as parts of a broader movement. One quote reflects well how the many activists understand themselves: *The small, small activists throughout Vidarbha are there. I'm also one of them, a small, small, smallest of one, working in one remote place of Maharashtra.*

We used the definition of Anthony Bebbington (2009) and conceptualized these mobilisations as a broader 'social movement'. It consists of a set of actions and activists, leaders and supporters engaged in the mobilizations in Vidarbha who organize many different and sustained collective actions around

the ‘agrarian crisis’. The fieldwork showed that the main constituency of each of the active groups is indeed small and medium, male farmers that mostly produce cash crops, cotton and soybean. These activities include big rallies in the capital city of the region, small manifestations to hand over open letter to district officers or also lock them in the office as well as what they call "constructive" actions such as direct marketing organic stores.

4.1 Suicides in Movement

Movement actors and farmers had a very particular understanding of the agrarian crisis and the farmer suicides. The movement actors in Vidarbha nearly unanimously agree with the academic and public discourses that blame the neoliberal policies of the early 1990s – and therefore the government that issued them – for causing indebtedness, desperation and finally these deaths. Because of the explosiveness of the accusation that the government is directly responsible for these deaths, the ‘farmer suicides’ figure prominently in political rhetoric, particularly that of movement activists, but also that of other politicians. The actors of the movement in Vidarbha actively use the rhetoric of the suicides to emphasize the suffering of farmers and prove how the government neglects them.

It is crucial to understand these many ways in which movement actors engage with the ‘farmer suicides’. The argument that the government drives the farmers to their deaths as well as the understanding of farmer suicides as public deaths regardless of the suicides’ personal intentions can be criticised for neglecting the agency of farmers. By looking at how the farmer movement actors reclaim this discourse in their activism, their agency becomes clear again. We argue that the discourse around the farmer suicides can help movement actors to politicise neoliberalism and the mysterious forces of the market and render the suffering of those affected more tangible.

4.2 Blaming the Government

Most farmers blame the government for the low prices for their output. Consequently, most interviewees claimed outright, that farmers decide to commit suicide because agriculture is no longer profitable anymore, given the low prices. One mother, whose son had committed suicide recently, said that, "*he had committed suicide due to low income of agriculture. He jumped into a water well and drank poison. The reason was agriculture only."* Most often the interviewees directly blamed the government. Sometimes, they blamed the government in general, sometimes the Congress party in particular. Several supporters emphasized that "*the Congress is responsible for this whole situation.*" Countless times, interviewees made similar statements as this activist: "*Because of the bad government policies, there is no price, kisans cannot repay the loans. They face the moneylenders and agricultural problems. The kisans loose their wish to live. This means that the state government is fully responsible for the kisan suicides."*

Some activists argued directly that the suicides had started as a consequence of the New Economic Policies in the early 1990s. One activist claimed that the farmer suicides started in the 1990s, because the gap between urban and rural India had widened after the New Economic Policies in 1991. Free trade had failed Indian agriculture, he argued: "*this could be seen in the last twenty years with these kisan suicides.*" The argument went that the farmers were crushed by the markets without the help of the government. *"The market uses the kisans forcefully, that is why the kisans commit suicide",* a supporter of one of the groups said.

It is very clear for most of the supporters and particularly most of the activists that there are people directly responsible for driving farmers to suicide. Consequently, the suicides constituted an integral part of the groups’ activities. To name an example, one leader of a group, said that the high number of farmer suicides had been the direct reason for the group to expand its activities to Vidarbha. he said, the group would now fight for those farmers. A supporter of the same group also said that he would fight "*for that the kisans don’t kill themselves, for that they are working*."

4.3 Suicides and Movement Groups

Consequently the actors of the movement around the 'agrarian crisis' in Vidarbha engage with the farmer suicides on many levels, be it as a threat to the politicians, to mobilize new supporters, or to underline the urgency of their demands towards the governments. If not the suicides themselves, then the rhetoric about them and various levels of engagement with them have made them a part of the activism in Vidarbha.

At the most concrete level, the activists supported the bereaved in getting compensation payments from the government. A young farmer whose parents both committed suicide the same day told that an activist came to his house, gave him his condolences and helped him get the compensation by arranging the required documents. Furthermore and more importantly, activists of all groups try to support the farmers in the event of family problems, crop failure or debts to prevent them from committing suicide. Apart from direct material help, activists and fellow supporters provide "*mental support*" for the farmers who are isolated, lonely and desperate. Both supporters and activists described this as one of the groups' main tasks. One crucial aspect of this mental support was to assure the farmers that all their problems, the lack of resources and the indebtedness, were not their fault or failure, but instead the government's. This takes away the responsibility for their situation and relates the difficulties to structural aspects; in other words, it shifts the responsibility from the individuals to the structures, and especially to a state that acts against the farmers' interests. This implies that the farmers' failures should no longer be perceived as humiliation and therefore a reason to commit suicide, but rather as a reason to fight and join the group. Additionally, the activists try to convince farmers that committing suicide does not change anything, either in the short or the long run. Farmers instead need to organize to change government policies. A supporter reasoned that *"kisans should stay alive and protest. Because just by dying, the family problems are not going to be solved. We do this kind of discussions with them."* Another supporter of the same group said that "*we tell the kisans 'don't commit suicide, but enter the battlefield'. (…) The politics of these rich parties is that they don't allow the kisans to enter the battlefield. But if the kisans comes on the street, then the rich parties will be in trouble.*" A leader of another group claimed that the farmers often feel they have no other choice than to commit suicide, but that this is not be true, because they can always "*go to the street and fight there and die. Then at least something would change"*.

Last but not least, the most important level on which the movement actors engage with the farmer suicides is discursive. Very often, the interviewees mentioned the farmer suicides early in an interview to underline the despair and suffering of the farmers. As mentioned above, an overwhelming majority of interviewees directly blame the government for the suicides. This argument is used to mobilize supporters or potential supporters, but it is also used extensively in political demands and speeches. By blaming the government for killing farmers, their demands gain urgency and seriousness. Interviewees sometimes argued in the same line as one supporter, saying that "*terrorists [Maoists] are at least not giving troubles to the kisans, but to the politicians, government people. Because they [government] let the kisans die."*

The movement actors sometimes conceptualize the suicides themselves as a form of agitation. One activist told that once the Prime Minister had visited his village. The activist told him that the suicides were caused by the government's policies, and that those farmers who did not commit suicide were not living a good life, that they simply "*live because they are just not dying. Because to live doesn't require more than a hand full of rice and a pinch of salt.*" He further argued that "*kisans suicides is an agitation, it is the peak of the iceberg*". The question remains whether the movements emerged and developed in parallel with the suicides and then took them up in their framings and actions or whether the movements emerged as a consequence of the suicides. This is difficult to answer without data that would allow a comparison of movement groups in Vidarbha and in other parts of India. Shah (2012) argued that the suicides are caused by a lack of other forms of political imagination, e.g. farmer movements. Also Vasavi (2012, 154) saw an absence of agrarian movements and stated an "*inability and failure of agriculturalists to mobilise around issues pertinent to agrarian issues and to demand and gain policies*". When talking to the journalist P. Sainath, he claimed that the burning question was:

“what did fundamentally change in the farmers’ universe that they went from mass movement to mass suicide?” All these readings and comments imply that suicides are a consequence of a lack of movements rather than the movements emerging as a consequence of the suicides.

Movement actors increasingly view the widespread suicides as a successor of earlier forms of movements, as a phenomenon in line with earlier struggles by farmers – even as a ‘silent’ movement in itself. The suicides can therefore be understood as part of a movement, which is characterized by a certain powerlessness and inability to capture the new realities of farmers caught between neoliberal policies and old structures.

The suicides were important to emphasize the severity of the situation, to engage with people. When telling about suicides, a hope resonated in these arguments. A hope that external agents such as myself would understand how difficult the situation was for the farmers and that the suicides were even a reason to take action. For the farmers themselves, though, the suicides were not a trigger for becoming engaged in a movement, and if so only as a symptom, as proof of the desperate situation they faced. In sum, it is a reasonable assertion that suicides are an outcome of a long process of weakening of farmer movements that occurred in the context of neoliberal reorganisation of rural society. Interestingly, the same farmers who were able to organise themselves into strong farmer movements as late as the 1980s are now resorting to suicides, understood either as silent protest or desperate escape.

For farmers, activists and leaders on the ground, as well as for journalists, and researchers, the phenomenon of farmer suicides serves as a prominent and emotional issue that underscores the devastating effects on farmers of neoliberal economic policies, fading state support and mysterious prices. It opens up a space to talk about the implications of capitalist agriculture and especially neoliberal policies for farmers, to discuss the darker sides of the dominant development narrative. The radical act of farmers taking their own lives makes their suffering very tangible. Consequently, these suicides have become important for social movement struggles and discourses, in India as well as other countries.

5 Land for Dalits: A “Public Good” Reconsidered?

We now move to the second case study which is located in Marathwada. In this case study, we look at the transformation of a social movement demanding land for the landless belonging to the historically “untouchable” groups into NGOs in the recent period.

The village society in India stands on highly skewed landholding pattern that gains strength from extra-economic coercion enabled by the caste system. Historically, access to land and other productive assets has been severely restricted based on caste status of individuals. The caste system not only mandates rigid social and occupational hierarchy, but also physical and social control over backward castes. As Thorat and Negi (2007) observe,

> In the traditional and formal sense, the caste system is characterized by three interrelated and highly intertwined principles. These are the ascription of social, cultural, religious and economic rights of each caste; the unequal and hierarchical (graded) division of these rights between the castes; and the provision of strong social ostracism mechanisms with support from social and religious ideologies (p.1).

Across rural India, the households belonging to oppressed castes are not only extremely poor but also display low levels of literacy, housing, health and sanitation (see Thorat 2010; Thorat 2009). The general incidence of poverty among the Scheduled castes (Dalits) is significantly higher than the caste-Hindu population. The higher poverty ratio for rural Dalits is also a signifier of the associated unfreedoms of rural agrarian social structure. In rural areas, according to 2004-05 data, the poverty ratio for Dalits was 36.8 per cent as against only 16 per cent for other non-Dalit, non-tribal groups

(Thorat 2010). Owing to the peculiar agrarian social structure prevalent in rural India, a majority of Dalits are involved in agricultural labour with little access to good quality productive land and other resources. Dalits, in fact, constituted more than 60 per cent of total rural wage labour in India in 1999-2000 (Thorat 2009).

Control over land ascribes social and political status to rural households. With the majority of Dalits living in rural areas, land and agrarian relations influence social and political choices available to Dalit households. In this connection, one of the most important social movements in Marathwada has been about access to land for Dalits. The specific feature of this movement is its leadership that almost entirely comes from Dalit castes and its sheer persistence for over half a century.

The Dalit movement in India cannot be understood without focusing on the life and works of Ambedkar. There have been a lot of writings on Ambedkar but only a few focus on his positions on land and agrarian issues. His early struggles against *Khoti* landlordism in Konkan and for abolition of *Maharwatan* system have been well documented in Omvedt (1994) and Keer (2009). However, since the Dalit land movement in Marathwada properly began only after the death of Ambedkar, it receives just a passing reference. Omvedt observes that the Dalit land movement was one of the consequences of the joint struggle waged, in particular, by Republican Party of India (RPI) and Communist Party of India (CPI) under the banner of Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (United Maharashtra Committee) demanding statehood to Marathi-speaking regions of the Bombay province. Dadasaheb Gaikwad (RPI) and Nana Patil (CPI), two pioneers of the movement in Marathwada for establishing rights of Dalits and Adivasis over public land, came from SMS and a possible united left front envisaged by Ambedkar (Omvedt 1994, p. 257-58).

Between the transformation of Scheduled Castes Federation into Republican Party of India, two demands stand out. The first demand concerned separate scheduled caste villages, a demand that was voiced by Ambedkar as early as in the year 1926 (p. 186-187). The second and related demand was access to public land, initially in Nashik-Ahmadnagar area and later, and more forcefully, in Marathwada. A land *satyagraha* was organised as early as 1953, though Ambedkar himself was not directly invovled (p. 200). After his death, another land *satyagraha* was organised in Nashik-Ahmadnagar districts in 1959. A land *satyagraha* organised in Delhi around October 1964 witnessed three lakh participants (p. 200-201). The more sustained version of this *satyagraha* was seen in the region of Marathwada over the next five decades.

Another historical contingency was the second World War and the need to produce more foodgrains in British India. During the war, the government called people to cutlivate more land and the availability mainly constituted grazing land and forest land. The Nizam under whose rule Marathwada fell, followed the same policy and allowed, including Dalits without traditional rights, to cultivate grazing land. However, such cultivation was recorded in government gazettes. Later, such common lands belonging to Dalits were alienated in the name of social forestry (Guru 1997) or transferred to Panchayats in 1956. In this sense, the grazing lands had been cultivated by Dalits across villages in Marathwada. However, owing to multiple legal provisions and influence of dominant castes over state apparatus, most of these Dalit cultivators could never get their titles. The origins of the land movement may be sought from this dilemma of Dalits in Marathwada. On the one hand, they had been cultivating such grazing and waste land for years, on the other, their ownership was never clear, either socially or legally.

Ambedkar also called Dalits to take over natural resources, including land and forests. And for him, it was not simply about livelihood but dignity. His analysis rested upon the historical factors underlying untouchability and he wanted Dalits to discontiune their “unclean” occupations. In the words of a senior activist Shantaram Pandere, land and forests were sources of, “dignity, identity, humanity and status”. One of the reasons why other land movements had failed was that they viewed land only as a source of livelihood. Ambedkar inspired Dalits to move out of villages but also called upon to take over land and natural resources. Many of the arrested Dalits conceded during court proceedings their “crime” but they insisted that the movement was for “dignity” and not for “hunger” alone. After

Ambedkar's death, Dadasaheb Gaikwad and B.S. More began the movement in Nashik and Marathwada regions.

In Marathwada, the movement started under the leadership of Dadasaheb Gaikwad under the banner of Peasants and Workers Federation. From the federation's side, the mobilisation was centred around various tehsil headquarters but the movement was locally organised through sabhas, pamphlets and protests in the form of *satyagrahas* (Bansode 2004). Bansode divides the land *satyagraha* into three phases. The first phase (September 1953 to November 1953) was mainly concentrated in Marathwada districts of the Hyderabad state and parts of Ahmadnagar district. The second phase (August 1959 to October 1959) witnessed a spread of the movement to northern districts. The final phase culminated into a massive rally and *satyagraha* in Delhi around October 1964. By this time, the land *satyagraha* had spread int UP, Punjab, MP, Andhra, Mysore, Madras and Gujarat (*ibid.*). The land *satyagraha* movement raised a slogan that went beyond “land to the tiller” and challenged the dominant understanding by questioning “land to the tiller but what about those with no traditional rights over land” (*kasel tyachi jamin, nasel tyache kaay?*). The answer was taking over common and forest lands (also see Omvedt 1980).

The Marathwada region has not only been economically backward but also the site of numerous struggles of Dalits in Maharashtra. As a corollary, violence against Dalits in this region has also been most brutal and recurrent (see Guru 1994; S.L. and W.S. 1986; Abraham 1978). Marathwada has been one of the few regions in India where land movement has sustained for a long period. Since the *varna* system delineates control over resources to particular castes, Dalit assertion has led to more atrocities in this region. In villages, land grab represented a challenge to the hegemony of upper castes and landed groups. While the form of *varna* system remains more or less similar across the country, collective action of Dalits for land and productive resources distinguishes the brutal violence against them in Marathwada.

The earlier phases of Dalit land movement clashed directly with local power groups, by taking over what was referred to as “common” land and by seeking to establish a new Ambedkarite identity. The phase lasted till the late 1960s and afterwards grabbing land went unabated but legal recognition and social acceptance remained a far-fetched objective. The Maratha dominance over the state power has such deep roots that even today there are only “government resolutions” (GRs) that guide legal action for and against the “encroachers” of land, mostly Dalits. After more than half a century of persistent struggle, a law is not in place. The caste and class interests of Marathas in rural Maharashtra sustain an informal practice of GRs that are allowed to be manipulated by local landholders, bureaucracy and police. One of the obvious reasons for negligible implementation of such resolutions is the unofficial line of “go slow” and enormous legal requirements posed upon the “encroachers”.

According to various sources, the Marathwada region possesses over 2,31,300 hectares of grazing lands which is about 3.6 per cent of its total area. On an average, a village in Marathwada posseses about 230 hectares of grazing land. This statistics refers to grazing land only but there exists other types of land such as temple land, waste land, *vatani* land etc. The longstanding Dalit land movement in Marathwada achieved its first victory when the government of Maharashtra released a GR aiming to regularise occupied grazing and waste land on 28th November 1991. Several GRs before this date were released for regularisation of occupied such lands in 1960, 1961, 1972, 1978, 1979 and 1983. However, the GRs were never implemented in their true spirit and were mostly on paper. The 1991 GR was a cumulative result of the comprehensive struggle post-1978 that included the land grab and renaming movement. This movement incorporated various strands of social and political forces including factions of RPI, CPI and progressive social activists. The GR specifically added a cut-off date of 14th April 1990 (the birth annivesary of Ambedkar) before which all occupation was legalised and *pattas* were given. The 1991 GR, however, met the same fate as earlier ones and was followed by newer GRs with the recentmost released in the year 2005. As mentioned earlier, many activists said that keeping the land problem in Marathwada under the purview of GRs serves the ruling classes and dominant castes well in maintaining their hegemony. The GR does not imply a legislation and can be kept in a perpetually arbitrary mode.

A report from the year 2000 says that around 1,00,000 hectares of land was occupied by over 2,00,000 Dalit families across Marathwada but most of these families had no titles to land and hence were under constant pressure from local powers and bureaucracy. The problems were aplenty such as huge amount of documentation, cumbersome procedures and uncertaintly over final *pattas*. The names of "encroachers" were never declared publicly so the allotment remained hazy and controversial. Similarly, even while allotments occurred, the actual location and dimensions of land were left unassigned leading to conflicts. To prove actual cultivation, a family needed to produce at least 10-15 documents from various sources to the government. This legal tangle may have led to the emergence of NGOs who possessed the necessary expertise and resources to undertake such tasks.

It is the view of many activists that the failure of the 1991 GR gave way to larger disillusionment and a lull in the movement during the 1990s. It was the formation of an umbrella organisation, *Jamin Adhikar Andolan* (JAA) consisting of various NGOs and civil society organisations working on the land issue in Marathwada that gave a new lease of life to the movement in 2000s. Two of the most important NGOs that merged to form JAA were Manavi Hakk Abhiyan- Campaign for Human Rights (CHR) and Marathwada Lok Vikas Manch (MLVM). The JAA was inspired by land reforms laws of Kerala and West Bengal (Oxfam India n.d.). Legalisation of occupation over grazing land was accompanied with an emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices and microfinance.

The JAA began with a survey of grazing land "encroahcers" numbering 2000 households over all eight districts of Marathwada and prepared a roadmap for achieving its goal of legalising occupations over grazing land. In the last 10 years, a lot of progress has been made over allotment of *pattas* to Dalit families, mainly by three NGOs- *Paryay*, *Lok Paryay* and *Manavi Hakk Abhiyan*-Rural Development Centre. All the persons interviewed believed that the contemporary land movement in Marathwada is led by these three organisations. The JAA has been able to support 36,400 Dalit families from 1621 villages to receive *pattas* for over 62,000 hectares of land.

All these organisations started as civil society groups but later transformed into NGOs under JAA. Their mode of operation was different from other NGOs. The JAA created a cadre of "social animator" in villages across Marathwada. These social animators were selected from the same village and mostly belonged to Dalit castes. The major activity undertaken was collecting and processing various documents for each grazing landholder and ensuring that their legal entitlement is granted. Every village had a dedicated cadre and a Livelihood Promotion Committee (LPC) to mobilise and support Dalit families and such cadres were overseen by block and district level staff of the JAA. Many ground-level activists contended that they joined the JAA because of personal reasons since their families were also fighting for grazing land. Every volunteer/activist, on an average, reported on 10 villages. Between 2000 and 2009, more than 300 volunteers were associated with JAA across Marathwada. In order to demand a law for regularisation of grazing land, in the year 2008, major rallies were organised in Aurangabad, Latur and Beed in which more than 40,000 people participated. In these rallies, leaders of such stature as Sharad Pawar and Narayan Rane attended and promised to enact a law. However, the work on claiming ownership over grazing land has been on a standstill for last few years after the funds dried up. The activists claimed that *"while the work continues, new villages are covered only when sought...the enthusiasm has waned"*.

Most activists agreed that grazing land was a major issue at the local level, it has not been able to transform into a "political" issue. At the same time, an activist pointed out, *"while at the state level, politicians from across political parties can easily proclaim their support for the land movement, the real challenge to Dalits appear at local level where all dominant castes remain united and they conveniently belong to various political parties"*. One recurrent theme across interviews was that caste-based atrocities and the Dalit land movement were inter-related in nature and villages where Dalit land movement was strong witnessed sharp rise in caste-based atrocities.

Contemporary rural Marathwada remains a site of inequality. The historic struggles serve as important markers in the self-construction of Dalit identity. The role of the state and public processes has gradually given way to exploration of collective mobilization of Dalits. The occupation over grazing

land remains a symbol of hope and Dalit solidarity, at least at the local level. In the study of a village where one of the authors spent close to five years, similar transformations were taking shape. The village Karkatta (Murud block, Latur district) was the site of a radical land occupation by landless Dalits in early 1950s. However, the contemporary forms of resistance could not be understood through older ideological prisms. In interviews and group discussions with the members of a Dalit youth group (YBS), it was quite clear that there was a sense of solidarity against the dominant landed and caste interests in the village. The adoption of Ambedkarite ideology demanded assertion as Dalits who were gaining in terms of education and urban employment. The Dalit self in Karkatta was a historically located identity- with a continual reference to land *satyagraha* and Ambedkar's visit to the nearby village. This is how YBS acted as a bridge where intensive solidarity was created by Dalits and for Dalits through its coherent focus on land and agriculture. In one of the group discussions with the village leadership of YBS, they also pointed out that both Mahar and Matang elders (two different Dalit caste groups) had participated in the *gairan satyagraha* of 1950s, though most people only remember the contributions made by Mahars. The members often noted how their own experiences were rooted in land and labour based discrimination in the village.

The *gairan* (common grazing) land redistribution was one of the most important issues that YBS had taken up in recent times. At the macro level, YBS had organized rallies in Latur that were well attended by prospective and actual *gairandharaks*. However, at the village level, the movement for *gairan* land was employed more as a tool of solidarity. The role of land and labour relations in defining caste exploitation was clearly understood as was expressed by the president of YBS, Karkatta:

> I think those who are landless among Dalits they must get *gairan* land. Those who have land (mostly non-Dalits) employ our women for labour but don't allow our women to get their tools back home. That way our folks cannot work anywhere else. Where would they go? In this situation, if the *gairan* land is distributed it will hugely benefit the Dalit community…even if they are given 2 acres of land each… everyone can meet their subsistence requirements. In Osmanabad district, many Dalits have received *gairan* land and have started cultivating their land. Why not in Latur?

It was pointed out repeatedly that a number of caste-based discriminatory practices could be overcome with education and land distribution. Education was deemed important in developing self consciousness and becoming aware of the brave history of Dalits in the village. At the same time, a number of YBS members struggled to get educated and had left college mid-way because private education was too expensive. A number of casteist practices such as preventing Dalits from entering Hindu temples, disallowing them entry into agricultural fields, desecrating the blue flag, create a ruckus in from of Dalit neighbourhood, beating Dalit youth, not leasing out land to Dalits, not selling agricultural produce/by product to Dalits etc were noted by young Dalits in the village. However, with rising consciousness the number of police complaints was rising too. One of the senior leaders Samadhan Shitole noted that:

> When we go to report atrocities, they put false charges of IPC 395. They get bail in 30 days and we get bail in 3 months.

In the recent most period, hence, YBS has begun to focus on cadre building. They have developed a strong network of young educated Dalit men- many of them residing in Latur and Pune. With the older focus on gairan land continued, newer areas of intervention have appeared. The state and its agencies are mostly the targets of politicization of Dalit youth. As a member explained:

> YBS was first formed out of Murud. From there it moved into smaller villages. We approached the educated, relatively well-off Dalits and explained to them what this *sangathan* does, what is its nature which is completely non-partisan, only interested in social work. At the time of delivery, Dalits are not even entertained in the civil hospital. The aggrieved party calls the branch head of YBS, who in turn calls the *taluka* head who speaks

> to head of the hospital or health centre and if that person doesn't respond then speak to the dean himself…

Consequently, an attempt has been made to develop a network of self sustaining groups of volunteers who could help poorer Dalits engage with government agencies. The struggle for *gairan* land has been put behind because of the social pressures that exist on the organization, as the president of YBS, Karkatta said, "if Mahars and Matangs push for the demand of *gairan*, there will be complete ostracization in the village". A new and fledgling Dalit youth organization has also learnt that dealing with the government bureaucracy through documentation and mobilization was easier than simply political mobilization.

Almost all of the above elements resemble the larger transformation that is occurring at the macro level with the Dalit land movement in Marathwada as we have seen earlier. Despite being the site of early land satyagraha and higher consciousness leading to Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations as back as in 1970s, Karkatta has remained a village where caste based violence and backward agrarian relations continue to thrive. Some of the achievements of the Dalit movement at the levels of Marathwada and Karkatta itself have been compromised owing to the persistence of the older structures of land and labour. Bonded labour has made a comeback in the village and brick kilns do not offer decent employment. The intergenerational aspect of both bonded labour and brick kiln employment is unique to Dalits.

The structural nature of Dalit poverty outlined earlier has not remained incomprehensible or unchallenged in the village. The foregrounding of *gairan* struggle with a strong emphasis on common Dalit experience to build solidarities across caste groups has created an army of young Dalit men who stand united against external assault. This kind of political solidarity is deemed as a tentative answer to the new sources of Maratha power such as urban connections and non-agricultural occupations. Two theoretical suggestions follow. One, Dalit struggles must be understood in the local context where power is configured and challenged (Gorringe 2005). Two, the struggle for privatization of *gairan* land in Karkatta is in line with Bokil's (1996) critique of standard argument in support of village commons.

6 Agrarian Resistance and New Visions for Future?

While the 'agrarian crisis' is an Indian phenomenon, neoliberal policies affect rural areas and agricultural production in large regions of the globe. In this context local and transnational movements have emerged to add new ideas about the future of agriculture to those that have played an important role in past peasant and farmers' struggles.

When analysing the ideas and demands of farmers and movement leaders, we found they can be grouped into four different frames for understanding the present situation as well as envisioning alternatives. The first is the 'free market' frame that sees the free market as the solution and corresponds to a vision for the future of agriculture based on neoliberal capitalism. While this vision is dominant among policy-making bodies, it finds hardly any resonance among movement supporters – no single supporter interviewed argued for a free market. Only a few activists and leaders of one of the groups occasionally argue within this frame, but they do so inconsistently. In fact, the 'protection' frame is the most prevalent and most important frame for people from all groups, for activists, leaders as well as supporters. In this frame, the idea is that the farmers should receive support and care from the government. The 'self-help' frame instead concentrates on solutions for farmers to become more self-reliable, since neither the market nor the state is perceived to be able or willing to provide support in the short-term. This frame is especially important for some groups that focus on low input agriculture. They frame this kind of organic agriculture not as an alternative in the first place, rather as a solution for farmers not to depend on input markets. Finally, the 'alternatives' frame contains big ideas and new solutions that question the contemporary capitalist system of agriculture. This frame is

important mostly for some activists and leaders, the journalists and single activists, even if the alternatives proposed are at times very different, particularly when it comes to ideas about the alleged ‘traditional’ community.

This idea of a united peasantry is strong in all movement groups, at least on the surface of things. It represents one way of understanding the ‘agrarian crisis’ in Vidarbha, namely that the entire peasantry is equally threatened by the ‘agrarian crisis’. This understanding is misleading, if not dangerous. Nevertheless, there are developments like neoliberal policies that pose a threat to large sections of this ‘peasantry’ as many authors have argued, among them Patel (2006). Therefore, we would indeed argue that such multi-class struggles, which include these large sections of the ‘peasantry’, can be highly important for fighting the neoliberal policies that farmers face, as for example Petras and Veltmeyer (2011, p. 77) argue for Latin America. Certainly, the small and medium farmers of Vidarbha are not at all on the winning side of these developments and their mobilizations can be seen as part of a multitude of localized struggles and micro-movements across India. They all are different in their location and their demands, but their constituencies are all adversely affected by the capitalist system and they face the same macro reality.

This leads to the question of what the impact of those movement groups is on different levels. First and arguably foremost, the movement groups and activists directly support or encourage the farmers in difficult situations. The state’s response is in many instances to grant some temporary relief, if at all. The capitalist project in an electoral democracy cannot afford to marginalize the farmers further, and the government obviously tries to respond to the claim of each group separately to prevent a more radical resistance from developing among them. Indeed, the small concessions that activists and leaders together with their supporters are able to obtain from the state are meaningful for farmers and motivate them to struggle. The ways of engaging the state are typical of many social movements around issues of poverty, as Bebbington et al. (2010) suggest.

As far as the landless Dalits are concerned, the transformations from above have failed them as elaborated above. The contemporary mobilizations, hence, look forward to distinct Dalit identity and self-respect at the local level as the starting point for building Dalit politics. As a matter of conclusion, it must be said that the studies of social and political movements need to explore the meanings of power at local levels and gain insights about material and non-material relations of power to explain social change, or the lack of it, in a more far-reaching manner.

The transnational movements of farmers and/or landless workers are arguably a chance to change that. But they – similar to this heterogeneous movement around the agrarian crisis – struggle to find an ideology that can lead the struggle of the ‘peasantry’ while acknowledging the very different material interests that the different groups within this category have. Listening to the voices of those that are adversely affected by the capitalist system is indispensable when questioning this very system and means of development.

Agro-extractivism inside and outside BRICS: agrarian change and development trajectories

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