

-HannanMollah

On behalf of the All India Kisan Sabha I extend my greetings to all delegates attending the International Conference on Food Sovereignty and Peasant Rights and to the National Farmers' Commission, Nepal who have taken up this important initiative. We have assembled here to discuss important issues that affect a vast majority of the people of our countries.

### **Agriculture and Food Sovereignty in the Neoliberal Era**

We live in a world where agriculture is the largest employer and provider of livelihoods to over 40 per cent of the population globally. In South Asian countries this dependence on agriculture as a provider of employment and livelihoods is much higher. In India it is estimated that agriculture engages 47 per cent of the work force. The actual dependence on agriculture given the fluid nature of the rural work force as well as the peasantry under the neoliberal phase of capitalist development could be beyond what could be captured by statistical surveys. The condition of the peasantry in a country like ours is extremely precarious and since 1995 we have witnessed an unprecedented number of over 3,50,000 of them committing suicide due to extreme agrarian distress. The figures could be much higher as these figures are often fudged and also does not include the landless, the tenants as well as women. Such a phenomenon wherein such large number of the peasantry committed suicide is unheard of in the entire history of humankind. Even as the peasantry are reeling under an acute agrarian crisis being caught in a web of increasing production costs, falling farm incomes and indebtedness, the ruling classes are carrying on with policies that promote corporate profiteering on the one hand accompanied by pauperisation and dispossession of the peasantry on the other hand.

This International Conference is also being held in the context of over 795 million people remaining undernourished globally and Asia is home to 67 per cent of the world's hungry. India fares dismally on tackling hunger with the Food and Agriculture Organisation in its Report "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2018" estimating that 195.9 million people or 14.8 per cent of its population are undernourished in India. Such a dismal scenario coexists with a situation wherein agribusinesses are profiteering in a situation of plenty. Agricultural policies are being dictated by agribusinesses and even the direction of agricultural research and extension is being decided in a scenario where these forces have significant say in the whole process.

As opposed to such a paradigm the concept of food sovereignty or the right of peoples and sovereign states to democratically determine their own agricultural and food policies is an important contribution by the peasantry, landless workers, fishers and indigenous peoples who face the maximum brunt of hunger and poverty to the lexicon of the peasant movement. It was a concept put forward way back in 1996 at the World Food Summit by the international peasants' movement La Via Campesina. It draws its inspiration from the global struggles to protect land, water, livelihoods and food, seeds, agriculture and rights of the peasantry from being sacrificed at the altar of corporate profiteering. The right to produce food through ecologically sound and sustainable methods as well as an autonomy to determine their own food and agriculture systems by putting the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. All India Kisan Sabha in its Alternative Agricultural Policy adopted in 1993 has put forward concrete proposals which are broadly in this framework drawing from its own experiences since its inception in 1936. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas adopted in 2018 by the United Nations Human Rights Council keeps in mind the precarious livelihoods of the peasantry who are at a constant risk of forced evictions, pauperisation and dispossession and especially the women who are the worst affected. It aims to protect the peasants and rural workers from the systematic discrimination they undergo and create an international human rights instrument for the protection of their rights. It also focuses attention to the threats and discrimination suffered by peasants and people involved in small-scale food production across the world. Importantly in the neoliberal era when the buzzword is withdrawal of the State, the UN has re-emphasised the obligation of the State. This process initiated by the peasants' movement nearly two decades ago has reached a stage where the UN General Assembly and States have to endorse it and express commitment to protect the livelihoods of peasants and petty producers who are undertaking the most important task of ensuring no one goes hungry.

The neoliberal phase of capitalism is antithetical to the very concept of food sovereignty, to peasant agriculture and hits at the rights of the peasantry. The sole motive is profit maximisation and the entire peasantry are through a web of legislations, free trade agreements and trade liberalisation put at the mercy of the market and volatility associated with the world market prices. The intention is to get cheap raw materials for the developed world and also to ensure a continuous flow of agricultural produce to the capitalist centres of the first world which are unable to produce the diverse varieties of crops that our countries can produce. In the process the burden of price crashes are thrust on to the shoulders of the peasantry and in the event of higher prices

that is not transferred to them. After processing and value addition of cheaply sourced produce the big agribusinesses are raking in huge profits while farmers are reeling under income deflationary policies.

Corporatisation of agriculture, a gamut of Free Trade Agreements and FTA compliant legislations, consolidation and mergers of agribusinesses, strengthening of monopolies are all compromising the interests of the peasantry and the concept of seed and food sovereignty are being challenged.

### **The Agrarian Scenario in India**

A quarter century of Neoliberal economic policies have rendered Indian agriculture and the peasantry into an acute crisis wherein peasants' rights as well as food sovereignty have been severely constrained. The All India Kisan Sabha had pointed way back in 1992 immediately after the adoption of the New Agricultural Policy by the ruling Congress Party Government that these policies will be perilous for India agriculture and the peasantry. The ruling classes have pursued policies of trade liberalisation and income deflationary policies wherein costs of production are rising while output prices are low making agriculture an unviable proposition. Deliberate policy of pauperisation and dispossession of the peasantry is being adopted. The cultivating peasantry in India is facing a crisis of subsistence and is engaged in an intense struggle for its survival. The All India Kisan Sabha came up with its Alternative Agricultural Policy and gave the slogans "Save Peasants; Save Nation" "No to Suicides; Unite and Fight", "Issue-Based United Struggles to Overcome the Agrarian Struggles" and "Kisan Sabha in Every Village; Every Kisan in Kisan Sabha" emphasising on the unity of landless, rural workers, poor and middle peasants.

Attacks on the rights of the peasantry and repression on peasant movement is increasing. There is also an overall attack on Constitution and democratic rights but struggles are going on undeterred. No government in independent India would have faced the kind of incessant mass movements and protests like the Narendra Modi led BJP Government has faced in the last five years. Narendra Modi and BJP had managed to channelise the anger against the anti-people policies of the Congress-led UPA Government and the rampant corruption under its rule to a certain extent and reaped electoral benefits in 2014. They had raised hopes of different sections with attractive promises and a high pitched advertisement campaign funded by the corporate monopolies. The Prime Minister himself led the charge effectively weaving an illusion of impending *achhe din* for all, fifteen lakh into everyone's account, *sab ka saath sab ka vikas* (a government with everyone that would usher in development for everyone) where 2 crore jobs would be created every year,

farmers would get *har khet ko paani* (water to every field) and one and a half times the cost of production as the price for their crops, an end to price rise and atrocities on women and a wonderland where farmers would no longer be forced to commit suicide. The effort was to sell a dream to every person and many actually bought it. BJP's Election Manifesto of 2014 had emphatically declared that "*BJP commits highest priority to agricultural growth, increase in farmer's income and rural development*". Specifically, BJP had promised 50% profits over cost of production, increased public investment, crop insurance, cheaper inputs, expansion of irrigation, more rural credit, expanding MGNREGS, poverty alleviation, etc.

Indiscriminate acquisition of land to promote corporate interests throwing to winds food security concerns and farmer's interests has become the norm. Lakhs of acres of fertile multi-cropped land are under the threat of acquisition for real estate purposes and in the name of development activities. A network of industrial corridors, expressways, SEZs, National Investment and Manufacturing Zones and proposed Smart Cities are all literally a license to loot for the corporate sector. The drive to grab farm land has been accompanied by an attack on the cattle wealth of the peasantry. The cattle economy is being hit like never before through restrictions on cattle trade in the name of protection of the cow and barbaric attacks and killing of Muslim and Dalit dairy farmers and cattle rearers as well as dependents on cattle for their livelihood by armed vigilante groups calling themselves Gaurakshaks or protectors of the cow. The peasantry who used to sell cattle in times of crisis or to buy new ones are constrained by the atmosphere of fear generated by these groups. The menace of stray cattle has become another cause of income losses to the peasantry as they are destroying crops. Free Trade Agreements being negotiated at a feverish pace by the Government also will adversely affect the cattle economy.

No welfare measures or pension schemes have been implemented for agricultural labour, small and marginal farmers. In the wake of the collapse of the Doha Round of the World Trade Organisation, Free Trade Agreements are being negotiated with European Union, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership a mega FTA with ASEAN, China, Australia, New Zealand is in the pipeline. Right of India to provide food and agricultural subsidies are being challenged by imperialist USA and other developed capitalist countries. Ever since the Indo-US Knowledge Initiative in Agriculture with Monsanto, Cargill, Walmart and ITC as its Board of Directors, the direction of agricultural policy and research is being determined by these agribusinesses. Foreign Direct Investment in Agriculture, agro-processing, plantation and retail trade is being given 100 per cent access. Contract farming, e-commerce and leasing of farm land by corporates are also in the pipeline. While big corporates are

given huge concessions the peasantry are not even given adequate compensation in the event of crop losses.

Over 36,000 farmers committed suicide in the first three years and the Government has not released data for the last two years. Income inequality has become worse; India's top 1% bag 73% of the country's wealth up from 58% last year. According to FAO's 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2018 Report', 195.9 million people are undernourished in India. The Global Hunger Index 2018 ranks India at 103 out of 119 countries. Unemployment has hit a 45 year high with the National Sample Survey showing unemployment rate as 6.1 percent which is the highest since 1972-73. There is all-round distress. The demonetisation hit farmers and all toiling masses badly and prices of all crops crashed after this disastrous decision. Thousands were rendered unemployed. Prices of agricultural inputs, essential goods, petrol and diesel have also risen incessantly. The GST has also hit the workers, the peasantry and rural poor badly. All measures of the Narendra Modi-led BJP are aimed at aiding corporate profiteering at the expense of the people. Five years of BJP rule under Narendra Modi has effectively derailed this "*engine of India's economic growth*" as the BJP Manifesto called it. Amidst incessant struggles the Central Statistics Office has added credence to the allegations of the peasantry that the last 5 years have seen continuously low incomes. CSO figures show that farm income growth crashed to the lowest in 14 years in the last quarter of 2018 (October-December). Growth in nominal agricultural Gross Value Added (the value of output minus the cost of all inputs and raw materials involved in production) is also in single digits. This covers incomes of both farmers and agricultural labourers meaning the kitty is divided among a still bigger population. It clearly indicates that the farmers' "take-home" incomes are very low even as the Government claims surplus production.

Each one of the promises made has been broken. Modi led BJP Government has only followed a policy of pauperising and dispossessing the peasantry by deliberately pushing them into distress by withdrawing State support, aggressively pursuing trade liberalisation and the gamut of Neo-Liberal Economic Policies. Public investment in agriculture and rural development has been drastically curtailed, agricultural credit is inaccessible and usurious money lenders are looting the farmers unchecked, input costs are skyrocketing, crop prices and Minimum Support Prices do not even cover the costs of production, procurement mechanism is being fast dismantled and private players allowed to exploit distressed farmers. Pauperisation and dispossession of the peasantry is also leading to footloose migration and swelling army of unemployed in urban slums in extremely insecure conditions. The interests of farmers and agricultural workers have been

betrayed to usher in achhe din for Adani, Ambani and their ilk. The demonetisation hit farmers badly and prices of all crops crashed after this disastrous decision. All measures of the Narendra Modi-led BJP are aimed at aiding corporate profiteering at the expense of the peasantry. The high hopes generated by their promises have been belied and there is a strong imprint in the minds of the peasantry *BJP-Modi Kisan Virodhi* which the BJP are unable to wipe away.

### **Independent As Well As Issue-Based United Struggles**

Consistent struggles of a massive nature have taken place against the betrayal by the Prime Minister and the BJP Government. An unprecedented issue-based unity has been built to launch intensified struggles. The United Trade Union Movement of all Central Trade Unions has launched massive struggles and 3 successful General Strikes participated by millions of workers and in 2017 a massive Mahapadav on 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> November at Delhi in which lakhs of workers took part. CITU, AIKS, AIAWU, AIDWA, SFI and DYFI had independent struggles on burning issues of classes and sections they represent and consolidating on their gains built issue-based united struggles with like-minded organisations. The distressed peasantry that have hit the roads seeking land rights, pensions, food security, remunerative prices, loan waivers and other demands. The massive struggles in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and elsewhere as well as national level protests have brought the agrarian crisis on the centre stage. Probably, the revolt by the peasantry is its biggest test since it came to power and may well prove to be its Waterloo. Undoubtedly, the Kisan Long March from Nasik to Mumbai inspired the peasantry and all democratic sections and the struggles that it shall spur will only ensure that the defeat for the anti-peasant, anti-people BJP is more decisive.

The peasantry built issue-based unity within a year of the formation of the Government for protection of land rights and against unjust land acquisition and formed the Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan (Movement for Land Rights) involving over three hundred organisations of the peasantry, agricultural workers, Adivasis, Dalits, forest workers, fishing community and people's movements. Consistent struggles as well as political exigencies forced the BJP government to withhold the draconian Land Acquisition Ordinance. This was followed up with the formation of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee after the Mandsaur firing incident involving more than 200 farmers' organisations demanding remunerative prices and liberation from indebtedness.

While Left Unity has been strengthened the Jan Ekta Jan Adhikar Andolan was formed involving Left Mass and Class Organisations as well as People's Movements mobilising people against Neo-Liberal Economic Policies and Communal forces. Massive protests under these different banners have taken place in addition to the unprecedented protests by peasantry in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, and elsewhere which have emerged victorious overcoming extreme repression. The 9<sup>th</sup> August Jail Bharo on the anniversary of the Quit India Movement saw over 5 lakh peasants and workers taking part. The 5<sup>th</sup> September Mazdoor-Kisan Sangharsh Rally had lakhs of peasants, agricultural workers and workers marching on the streets of Delhi. In the series of the consistent organised protests is the Kisan Mukti March inspired by the Kisan Long March that had taken place from Nashik to Mumbai. On 29<sup>th</sup> November from four points in Delhi, thousands of peasants from across the country marched to the Ramlila Maidan. On 30<sup>th</sup> November, over a lakh farmers from across the country under the banner of the AIKSCC marched to the Parliament with the slogan Dilli Chalo demanding a special session of the Parliament to discuss the agrarian crisis. It also calls for passing the two Bills prepared by a Kisan Parliament earlier to ensure liberation from debt and assured remunerative prices in this special session. They have now been introduced as private bills in the Parliament.

For the first time ever, taking a cue from the Kisan Long March with the renowned journalist and Magsaysay Award winner P.Sainath taking initiative different sections of the society have come out in solidarity with the farmers. A solidarity group called Nation for Farmers was formed with chapters in different States. Meetings in different Universities under banners like JNU for Farmers, Jamia for Farmers, AUD for Farmers, Delhi University for Farmers etc with students, teachers and staff coming together were held across the country. Scientists for Farmers, Journalists for Farmers, Students for Farmers, Techies for Farmers, Lawyers for Farmers, Youth for Farmers, Artists for Farmers, Photographers for Farmers, Doctors for Farmers, Engineers for Farmers are some of the solidarity groups. The working class actively joined the Kisan Mukti March. Many people cutting across all walks of life signed up as volunteers. To top it all the retired soldiers have also come out in support of the Kisans with the slogan Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan and Kisans and expressed active solidarity with their demands. Literally, a cross-section of India walked hand in hand with the peasantry. The two day Strike call by the Central Trade Unions saw unprecedented support from the toiling masses and the peasantry as well as the agricultural workers fronts and other mass organisations extended active support to it through Rail and Road Roko. This unprecedented show of solidarity is undoubtedly a prelude to a magnificent struggle which will play a big role in deciding the future course of politics in

our country. The sharpness and intensity of the protests will only increase in coming days and these struggles will make a significant contribution in defeating the Narendra Modi led BJP Government at the Centre and anti-people BJP Governments in the States. No political party will be able to ignore the genuine demands of the farmers and hope to still win elections. Thousands of Kisans marched from Nashik in yet another Kisan Long March against the betrayal of promises by the BJP Government in Maharashtra. Undeterred by repression they forced the Government to agree on all demands and form a bi-monthly review committee including AIKS representatives. Rajasthan Kisans are on an indefinite protest against low prices of onion and betrayal of promises by the Congress government in the State. Struggles are on in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka against betrayal of promises by the respective Governments. Thousands of students and youth marched to Parliament and so did women on their demands. Anganwadi, ASHA and Scheme workers have been relentlessly on the struggle path. Unprecedented solidarity and interlinking between various mass and class organisations as well as civil society groups is a new phenomenon. People refuse to get cheated anymore and they will claim their due share. They are marching to create new history.

The intensified onslaught of neoliberal policies under the exploitative capitalist system requires building of broader solidarities in the true spirit of internationalism by sharing of experiences and coming to each other's help to overcome crisis in their respective nations. The enemy is formidable and all forces need to be pooled to defeat it. Let this Conference pave way for greater interaction and solidarity between movements of the peasantry to protect food sovereignty and resist neoliberal policies. It is a struggle for survival; a struggle for our right to our land, seeds, water, forests and mineral resources. It is a struggle against corporate greed and loot. Solidarities built today will determine the course of these struggles. We are up against heavy odds, but we are confident that the people united shall always be victorious. Globalise the solidarity and globalise the struggle needs to be our slogan for protection peasant agriculture, peasants' rights and food sovereignty.

Revolutionary Greetings Comrades!