

Address by Purushottam Sharma, National Secretary, All India Kisan Mahasabha, to the International Conference of Farmers, Kathmandu, 11-12 March 2019

Respected Chairperson of this International Conference and comrades, struggling for the toiling masses around the world,

I extend revolutionary greetings to all of you on behalf of my organization- All India Kisan Mahasabha. I compliment the present Government of Nepal which has constituted a "National Peasants Commission" to understand and solve the problems of agriculture and peasants in the country. I am very thankful to the National Peasants Commission of Nepal, which has given us the opportunity to share our experiences and problems and develop a collective discourse which will lead us to the solution of these problems.

Friends, Nepal and India have not only been most reliable neighboring friends but we have many things in common like our geographical conditions, problems and culture. Both of us are agriculture-based countries. A large number of our population depends on agriculture for its livelihood. That's why this initiative of Nepal will help us in building a better understanding.

Agrarian Scenario of India

Share of Agriculture in GDP

When India became independent in 1947, the share of agriculture in our GDP was 52 percent and 70 percent of our population was directly associated with agriculture. Today 55 percent of the population is directly associated with agriculture but the share of agriculture in the GDP is merely 14 percent.

Lack of Public investment in Agriculture

12.16 percent of the total planning expenditure in 1960-65 was allocated for agriculture whereas in the eleventh plan of 2007 the amount of public expenditure on agriculture was reduced to 3.7 percent.

According to the statistics of the Food and Agriculture Organization, the total sown area in Indian agriculture is 140.8 million hectares. Even after 72 years of independence 78 million hectares i.e. around 64 percent of this sown area depends on rains for irrigation. The condition of hilly areas is worse. There is only 10 percent irrigated area in the hills of Uttarakhand. After 1990 onwards, there has been a rapid reduction in the budget allocation for irrigation. In the latest budget presented by the Modi Government, there has been a drastic cut of 65 percent in the irrigation budget.

Size of Land Holdings in India

In India, the size of 67 percent of the land holdings of the peasants is less than 1 hectare, whereas 18 percent owns 1-2 hectares of land. Only 2 percent people own more than 10 hectares of land. 0.7 percent people own 10.5 percent of the total agricultural land.

The number of marginal and small holdings is increasing with the land being divided amongst the heirs in the family. On the other hand, the policy of concentration of land in the hands of a few people is increasing the area of large land holdings.

45% of India's rural population is landless. The number of landless is increasing day by day. From 2001-2011, around 90 lakh peasants have left agriculture, and the number of agricultural labourers has increased by 35%.

The Development rate of Agriculture in India

The agriculture development rate in the regime of UPA 1 was 3.1% and in UPA2 it was 4.3%. During the last year of the reign of Narendra Modi, who boasts of doubling the income of peasants by 2022, the agriculture development rate has dipped to a low of 2.7 percent. If the promise of Prime Minister Modi is to be fulfilled, then the agriculture development rate needs to be 15 percent in next three years, which seems next to impossible, given the earlier record of the Modi Government.

Present Agrarian Crisis in India

Comrades, as we meet here, India is passing through one of the biggest agrarian crises it has ever faced. This agrarian crisis has engulfed our entire rural society, resulting in a huge change in the rural structure of India.

Increasing number of farmer suicides

In last 13 years, more than 3 lakh debt ridden farmers have committed suicide. Since the last two years, the Government of India has forbidden the National Crime Records Bureau from releasing the data of farmer suicides.

According to the data of the National Crime Records Bureau, 250000 farmers committed suicide during 1997-2012. Even before NCRB was stopped from releasing the data, 48000 farmers had committed suicide under the Modi regime. The state of Punjab, which became a model of capitalist agricultural development after the Green revolution, has witnessed 1600 farmer suicides.

Farmer suicides are becoming a regular phenomenon and this crisis is now knocking at the doors of the states which were untouched by it till now.

Deficit Farming

Neo-liberalization in the agrarian sector has made agriculture in India a loss-making business which is leading the farmer into a never-ending debt trap. The new generation is deserting agriculture because of this and building a cheap urban work force for capitalists. According to the 70th round report of the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), the monthly income of a farmer with a land holding of less than 1 acre is Rs 1308 whereas his expenditure is Rs 5401. Similarly, there is a deficit of 28.5 % in the income and expenditure of the farmer with a land holding of 5 acres.

After studying 23 crops grown in India, NSSO concluded that the huge increase in the total cost price is responsible for the declining income of farmers.

Debt ridden peasantry in India

According to an estimate, farmers in India today owe a total debt of Rs 1100000. 52% farmers are debt ridden in India, which means that the average debt per farmer is Rs 47000. Punjab is the most debt ridden State where the average debt is Rs 300000, followed by Andhra Pradesh where the average debt is Rs 123400. In Telangana the average debt of a farmer is Rs 93000.

Sharecroppers do not have the status of farmers.

Due to loss in farming, small and medium farmers are giving their lands to sharecroppers or to contractors, and going in search of work elsewhere. A large section of landless and agricultural labourers has now resorted to contractual or share crop farming. Around 60% of farming in India today is being done either on contract or by share croppers. But these share croppers do not have the status of farmers. So they are not entitled to bank loans, compensation for crop loss, MSP for their crops, and all other government facilities available to farmers. Thus 60% population which is practicing agriculture in a real sense is deprived of the facilities provided by the government to farmers.

Dominance of MNCs in the seed and pesticide market has increased the cost price

One of the main reasons for deficit in agriculture in India is the rapid increase in cost price. American giants like Monsanto and Cargill are dominating the seed market of India. India is the 8th largest seed market of the world. The trade of MNCs in the Indian market is around 1 billion dollars. The corporate intervention in the Indian seed industry is increasing at a rate of 15 %. They dominate over 75% of the Indian seed market. In 1967 the price of wheat in India was Rs 76 per quintal and the price of iron used for making agricultural machines was Rs 65 per quintal. Today after 53 years, the price of wheat is Rs 1700 per quintal and the price of iron is Rs 5500 per quintal. The price of seeds produced by these companies is as much as Rs 40,000 per kilo for tomato seeds, Rs 25,000-40,000 per kilo for cauliflower seeds and Rs 1, 00,000 per kilo of capsicum seeds.

Toxicity in Food items and the danger of land changing in to desert

After the Indo American Agrarian Knowledge Treaty, our agriculture research organizations and agriculture universities are coming under the dominance of these American multinational companies. In the name of high production, too much use of GM seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides has not only poisoned our food but it has also hampered the natural production capacity of our farming. Punjab which is one of the main spots of this experiment has now become a state with large number of cancer patients. Scientists have raised the apprehension that in a few decades the fertile land of Punjab will change into a desert.

Green Revolution in India: Basis for Destruction and Enslavement of Agriculture and Farmers

The distress story of Indian agriculture starts from 1967 when our low-cost agricultural production was pushed towards dependence on American Multi-national companies in the name of the Green Revolution. In the name of increasing production, our agriculture was made heavily dependent on foreign seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. Gradually most of the traditional disease-resistant seeds suited to our Indian environment vanished and Indian agriculture became fully dependent on and enslaved to multinational companies.

Failure to conserve traditional seeds

Indian agricultural scientists at that time engaged in serious research to make the Green Revolution in India a success through traditional low cost agriculture were sidelined by our government. One of these was the famous agricultural scientist Dr Richharia who had developed and preserved about three thousand varieties of Indian paddy seeds nurtured over thousands of years by farmers in India under various environmental conditions.

Joining WTO was an open invitation to the present agrarian crisis

The foundation for the second big attack on agriculture was laid in 1995 when the Government of India decided to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) despite widespread opposition from farmers and the democratic will of the Indian people. Later, after the 1999 electoral victory, the Government of India led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee started implementing the terms and conditions of the WTO in full force.

Lifting the quantitative ban from Forward Trading and Imports is deadly for Indian agriculture

Under pressure from WTO, doors of forward trading have been opened to agricultural producers and the ban on import on agricultural products has been lifted in the name of free trade. Indian farmers, who bear a huge production cost, have been put in competition with foreign farmers in America and Europe who get a heavy subsidy on agriculture. The result is for all to see. It was after this that Indian agriculture was gripped by a back-breaking grave crisis. Since 2004, Indian farmers have not been getting adequate price for their crops and are forced to throw their tomato, onion and potato crops on the roads and burn their sugar cane crops in the fields.

Neglect of Agriculture in Hill areas; Fertile Lands becoming Waste Lands due to Fear of Wild and Stray Animals

Agriculture in the hill areas has been woefully neglected due to lack of public investment in infrastructural development for agriculture, legal obstacles to development of the agrarian sector, no consolidation of holdings, no guarantee of Minimum Support Price and purchase of hill-products. Purchase of hill farmers' products like mangoes, pears, and *reetha* has come to a halt due to high transportation costs. Lack of security from wild animals has led to large scale abandonment of farming by farmers. Farmers are finding it difficult to protect their crops from wild animals even in the plains. In Bundelkhand (Uttar Pradesh) and Punjab alone, there are 2, 75, 000 and 3, 00, 000 stray cattle.

Cow Protection Laws: A Fresh Attack on Agrarian Economy

27% of our total agrarian income comes from cattle-farming. 70% of the total milk produce of India is done by middle farmers, poor farmers, landless and agrarian workers. The ban on sale and purchase of cows by the cow protection law is an attack on the milk produce which is an additional means of livelihood for the rural poor and small and middle farmers. This has caused the already debt-ridden farmer to sink further in debt, making farmer-suicide a common phenomenon in India. These laws are also a pretext for lynching of Muslim minorities, including Muslim dairy farmers, by Hindutva fascist mobs in the name of 'protecting' cows from slaughter by Muslims.

Allotment of Housing Land for the Landless

Provision for housing land for landless and agrarian workers, who form 45% of rural society, is an important demand. But in today's India, they are being evicted even from the places where they are settled, in order to make land available for feudal forces and corporate houses. The Bihar government's latest directive to evict lakhs of landless and agrarian workers from their lands is a living example of this.

United Struggle of farmers against this agrarian Crisis

For the first time, farmers' organizations across India have achieved a countrywide coordination and united in a joint struggle in these times of farmers' suicides due to agrarian crisis and repression of farmers' agitations. 208 farmers' organizations have come together under the banner of Akhil Bharatiya Kisan Sangharsh Samanvay Samiti. These include Left farmers' organizations as well as reformist, kulak and capitalist farmers' organizations. The two main points on the agenda are freedom from debt and a Minimum Support Price which gives 50% profit above the production cost of crops.

Farmers' Unity Against Divisive Communal Politics

In the past few years, Muslim dairy farmers have been lynched by organised Hindutva (Hindutva refers to Hindu-majoritarian politics not the Hindu religion) fascist mobs encouraged and protected by the Government of India, in the name of cow protection. Before the last parliamentary elections, Muzaffarnagar in Western Uttar Pradesh was riven by anti-Muslim communal violence, and the resulting Hindu-Muslim polarisation helped Narendra Modi and the BJP come to power in the 2014 Parliamentary elections. The riots broke the unity of farmers and farm labourers, and in the bargain dealt a bad blow to the farmers' movement in Western UP, which till then had been considerably strong. But now the farmers have begun uniting again to resist the communal fascist politics. Last year, in the by-elections to Kairana Lok Sabha seat in the same regio, the farmers countered the BJP's slogan of 'Jinnah' (identifying Muslims with Pakistan and its founder Jinnah) with the slogan of 'ganna' (sugarcane, which is the main crop in the region), and a Muslim woman Opposition candidate trounced the BJP candidate! Towards the end of last year, there were riots in Bulandshahr (also in Western UP) on the pretext of rumours of 'cow slaughter' by Muslims, and a police officer who tried to control the mob was killed. But the peasants and workers united to prevent the riots from spreading as the BJP wanted them to.

Two streams of farmers' movement in India

The two streams of farmers' movement in India—the modern capitalist farmers and the small and medium farmers—have come together on one platform today to save Indian agriculture. There was a time when the kulaks and modern capitalist farmers' representative leaders like Sharad Joshi, Bhupendra Singh Mann and Balbir Singh Rajowal hailed liberal economy and India's joining WTO as beneficial to farmers' interests. At that time itself, we had said that this was the road to destruction and slavery of Indian agriculture. Even today, capitalist farmers' organizations present freedom from debt and 1 ½ times crop price as the solution to the problem. But merely freedom from debt and 1 ½ times crop price are not the solution to the current agrarian crisis in India. These are only immediate relief measures. It is also necessary to study these ideological issues associated with Indian agriculture because even today we struggle at every level to include the problems faced by the majority of rural society—marginal farmers, adivasis, sharecroppers, fishermen, landless workers, agrarian workers, and rural craftsmen—in the agenda of the joint farmers' agitation.

Solution to the present agrarian crisis in India

Along with agriculture, the issue of democratization of rural society is important for us, because there is a nexus between corporate capital and the feudal fetters that still grip rural society. We need to take agriculture away from the road to corporatization and make it profitable for small and middle farmers. Farmers must be freed from all kinds of debt (banks, cooperative societies, moneylenders) and 1 ½ times production price must be paid for crops as per the Swaminathan Commission recommendations. The Public Distribution System must be strengthened and expanded to guarantee governmental purchase of every agricultural product at this price and to increase the bargaining power of farmers. An Agrarian Land Conservation Act must be passed in order to guarantee the right to food security. A law must be passed to give sharecropping farmers the status of farmers. Corporate loot of farmers through exorbitant prices of seeds, pesticides, fertilizers and agricultural machines must be controlled. India must come out of the conditions imposed by WTO responsible for the destruction of agriculture in this country in order to come out of the current agrarian crisis. Our scientists and research institutes must be engaged in finding, nurturing, and developing our traditional seeds and rejuvenating and refining our traditional organic farming, so that we can extricate our farmers and our farming from the suffocating web of imperialistic multinational companies. Our farmers must be protected by putting a quantitative ban on the import of agricultural commodities, and we must come out of forward trading in agricultural products.

Challenges facing Indian Agriculture –Part-II

Independent India and the beginning of land reform

During the final phase of the independence struggle, the Communists presented the challenge of comprehensive land reform in the country through the Telengana peasants' revolt. After Independence, the States of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Madras, Assam and Bombay first brought a Bill for the abolition of Zamindari in 1949. All these States made the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition Committee (led by Govind Vallabh Pant) report the basis for their Bill. In 1950 the Government of India also brought the Bill for Abolition of Zamindari, but the Zamindars went to court against it because in those days the right to property Articles 19 and 31 of the Constitution gave the right to property the status of a fundamental right. In 1951 the Central Government amended the Constitution and changed the provisions which gave the status of fundamental right to the right to property. After this, the road to abolition of zamindari in the country was cleared.

Compensation and Bonds to Zamindars in lieu of lands

After this, State governments acquired 17,00 lakh hectares of land. In return, zamindars were paid Rs 670 crores at that time as compensation. Many State governments took funds from the Zamindars and gave them bonds of 10 to 30 years so that they could retain control over their lands.

India's First Radical land Reforms in Kashmir

National Conference leader Sheikh Abdullah who was influenced by Left ideology was the first to implement radical land reforms in Kashmir. The Big Landed Estates Abolition Act he passed in 1950 brought about the following reforms:

1. The maximum land ceiling was set at 182 canals (22.75 hectares). This would not include orchards, pasture lands, fired lands, fallow lands and waste lands.
2. Sharecroppers were given ownership rights to the lands on which they worked.
3. Farmers who were allotted land were set a limit of 160 canals of land which included prior-owned lands.
4. It was determined that issue of compensation would be decided later by the State Assembly. The State Assembly later decided that no compensation of any sort would be given. Thus Jammu and Kashmir became the only State in India where big landlords and zamindars were paid no compensation for their lands.

5. All gair-maurusi (non-occupancy/non-ancestral) tenant-farmers in the PUNCHH region were given ownership rights to their land.
6. Reservation was lifted from lands reserved for hunting in the Udhampur region and farmers were given permission to farm these lands.
7. The rules for hunting were changed and farmers near forests were given permission to shoot animals which damaged or destroyed their crops.
8. All orders and decrees after 13 April 1947 pertaining to transfer of land were declared invalid in order to avoid tampering with the spirit of the Act. But after some years the Central government sacked the Sheikh Abdullah government and put him in jail.

Second Big Land Reform in Kerala

In 1957 the world's first elected Communist government led by Comrade Namboodiripad came to power in Kerala through the State Assembly elections. Immediately on coming to power, this government carried out land reform and education reform in the State. The landless were allotted cultivable lands. Loans were waived for farmers and agrarian workers and the power of zamindars was weakened. Extensive reforms were started in the education sector. Teaching time in schools was fixed; it was made mandatory for private schools to teach the government syllabus, and schools violating this were acquired by the government. Troubled by these two measures, the rich and elite class in the State started agitating against the government on a large scale. Later in 1959 the Nehru government at the Centre sacked the Namboodiripad government in Kerala.

Loot of Bhoodan Lands

Even after the Telangana movement, struggles led by Communists to end the Zamindari system and for land distribution continued across the country. To douse this fire of farmers' agitation, Sarvodaya leader Vinoba Bhave started the Bhoodan movement in 1951. Under this movement he took as 'daan' (donation) 47, 63,617 acres of land from zamindars, rajas, and princely states across the country. The maximum of more than 21 lakh acres of land were obtained from the integrated State of Bihar. The Bihar zamindars gave 6, 48, 593 acres and the zamindars of Jharkhand gave 14, 69, 280 acres to Vinobaji. Most of these lands have not yet been distributed among the landless as of today. Only 2, 78, 320 acres in Bihar and 4, 88, 735 acres in Jharkhand have reached the landless. Even here, most have not been given the pattas to ownership rights. Most of the lands have been declared unfit and waste lands by brokers, corrupt bureaucrats, and Bhoodan Committee members and these lands are being looted in the name of river-land, hill-land, etc.

Zamindari System Continues even after Abolition of Zamindari Act

Even after the abolition of Zamindari and land ceiling acts, feudal forces and big zamindars under the protection of the ruling powers retained their monopoly on lands on a large scale; they even retained control over rural society and State politics. The Terai region in Uttarakhand, Pilibhit in Uttar Pradesh, and Champaran in Bihar which adjoin the boundaries of Nepal contain huge farms and estates of hundreds of thousands of acres even today.

The process of reversing land reforms to favour corporate houses has begun

Currently there is an intense drive in India to reverse land reform laws and hand over agricultural lands, adivasi forests and rivers to big corporate houses. Land ceiling laws are being changed through the State governments. Bans on using agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes are being removed. Legal obstacles to the transfer of lands belonging to Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes to people from other castes are being removed. Adivasis and forest-dwellers are being evicted on a large scale from their lands in violation of the Forest Rights Act which gives them ownership rights over their ancestral forest lands. The Land Acquisition Act won by farmers in 2013 after long and hard struggles against land acquisition is being nullified. Instead of giving ownership rights to the landless and poor farmers settled for years after the sacrifice of hard struggles on government lands, gram samaj (village society) lands and ceiling lands, they are being evicted and rendered landless once again.

Land Acquisition of Agricultural Lands on a Large Scale in the Name of Development

On the one hand our population is ever increasing, and on the other agricultural land is being acquired on a large scale in the name of development. Lakhs of acres of agricultural land has been handed over to corporate companies in the name of SEZs. 21 six to eight lane Expressways 1, 455.4 km long have been built in the country and 27 Expressways 7, 491.1 km long are under construction. Similarly, four regional rail corridors (6, 672 km) and two rail freight corridors (3, 360 km) are under construction. Lakhs of agricultural land on both sides of these constructions have been notified for industrial corridors and business activities. Similarly, lakhs of acres of agricultural land on both sides of National and State Highways have been declared as land for businesses. Thousands of kms of gas pipe lines are being laid. All State governments are forming land banks with lakhs of acres of land to make them easily available to corporate houses. Apart from agricultural land, these land

banks also contain village society, ceiling, and government lands which were supposed to have been distributed among the landless poor.

Eviction of Hill and Forest Dwellers

Lakhs of acres of mineral-rich and forest resources-rich land in adivasi and forest dwelling areas are being handed over to corporate companies. In hill areas, fertile river valley lands are being given to corporate companies in the name of hydel power projects. Traditional hill dwellers, forest dwellers, and adivasis are being forcibly evicted from their villages and lands in the name of national parks, forest reserves, and eco-sensitive zones. These are the traditional dwellers that have for centuries been the protective pillars of these eco-systems. The corporate arm under the patronage of the ruling powers has started causing terrible damage to our environment and our eco-systems.

Food security of the country is in danger

Our government is treading the pro-corporate path. Farmers, adivasis, and forest dwellers are being deprived of their lands, and this will put the food security of our growing population in great danger. Due to increasing mechanisation, as well as the blows dealt by hostile government policies to dairy farming and rural handicrafts, rural employment has declined sharply. After depriving such a large population of their agriculture and their traditional means of livelihood, our governments have no alternative means of livelihood to offer them.

The Growing Stranglehold of Corporate Capital in Nexus With Feudal Remnants

In the Indian economy, including in rural India and Indian agriculture, we can see the growing penetration of big and corporate capital, in league with feudal remnants. This influence of corporate capital can be seen not only over the economy but over the state machinery and the institutions of parliamentary democracy. This penetration of capital in rural society is happening without eradicating feudal remnants and its relations of production. This situation helps provide cheap labour power and raw materials for Indian big capital and imperialism. It also provides the structural basis for the persistence of systematic casteist and feudal-patriarchal oppression. This situation retards and distorts the development of productive forces and is a major hurdle for the thorough democratisation of Indian society and polity.

People's Democracy and Socialism is the Only Alternative

The present agrarian crisis in India has become so grave that the current ruling classes are left with no solution to it. The road to corporatization on which India is treading in order to resolve this agrarian crisis is the road to destruction of our agriculture and farming. More than half our population is dependent on agriculture. It is essential to reverse these pro-imperialist pro-corporate policies to fulfill the food and livelihood needs of our growing population and to utilize our country's natural and human resource wealth for the benefit of the people. The ruling class in India no longer has the power to reverse its steps from the road to pro-imperialist corporatization of agriculture on which it has already gone too far. We believe that it is not possible to come out of this grave agrarian crisis without revolutionary change. This will be possible only with the building of a truly people's democratic India on the road towards socialism.

Comrades! I believe that agricultural sectors across the world are facing a more or less similar crisis. We need to unite and fight together against imperialist and corporate attacks on our agriculture due to neo-liberal policies. Progressive farmers' movements in all countries must develop a common understanding. I once again thank our Comrades in Nepal and Nepal's National Farmers' Commission for bringing all of us together on this platform in an initiative to build this common understanding.

Red Salute!