

ASHOK DHAWALE

Agrarian Challenges in Maharashtra Today

Apart from the chronic scourge of severe drought, by far the most serious agrarian problem facing Maharashtra today is that of peasant suicides. According to figures released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of the Union Home Ministry, out of the 2,84,694 farmer suicides that occurred in India during the years from 1995 to 2012, the largest number of 57,253 farmer suicides were from Maharashtra. The irony is that for 10 of these 18 years, the Union Agriculture Minister was from Maharashtra.

PEASANT SUICIDES IN NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

It has been established that most of these farmer suicides are a direct result of indebtedness and are a symptom of the deep agrarian crisis in the country. Peasant suicides in large numbers have also taken place in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh etc. In Maharashtra, the largest number of peasant suicides is in the Vidarbha region, followed by the Marathwada region. Both are traditionally known as backward regions.

Several expert committees were set up by the government and by academic bodies to go into the reasons for the alarming phenomenon of farmer suicides. The most comprehensive attempt during the last decade to study the situation of agriculture and farmers in India as a whole was made by the National Commission on Farmers that was headed by Dr M S Swaminathan. Its detailed and seminal report came out with several vital recommendations, not a single one of which was ever implemented by the Congress-led UPA regime.

After the Prime Minister's visit to Vidarbha in July 2006, the central government and later the state government, announced relief packages for the Vidarbha peasantry worth Rs 3750 crore and Rs 1075 crore respectively. Then came the countrywide loan waiver scheme of the central government in 2008-09. But in spite of all these measures, it is an undeniable fact that suicides of debt-ridden peasants in Maharashtra, and in the country, have not abated.

Peasant indebtedness is a result of several factors – both general as well as local. These are:

1. Massive rise in the cost of agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, water, electricity and diesel, leading to a great increase in the cost of production;
2. No corresponding rise, or at times even a fall and sharp fluctuations, in the price paid to farmers for their agricultural produce, 1 and 2 together directly leading to indebtedness;
3. The dismantling of the monopoly cotton procurement scheme, which to a great extent protected cotton farmers in Maharashtra for nearly three decades from the mid 1970s;
4. Crunch in bank and other institutional credit, especially to the small and middle farmers, forcing them to borrow from rapacious private money-lenders at exorbitant rates of interest;
5. Natural calamities like drought and floods leading to crop failure, and the almost complete absence of an effective umbrella of crop insurance to compensate the peasantry;
6. Lack of irrigation facilities, especially in the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions, making farmers even more vulnerable to the ravages of these natural calamities;
7. Spiralling price rise of all essential commodities, steep hikes in the cost of education and health care, escalating marriage expenses – all of which together increase indebtedness.

But what is the reason for the sudden spurt in farmer suicides in Maharashtra and in India from the mid-1990s up to date? There is a large and growing body of evidence that suggests that the neo-liberal economic policies begun in 1991 and carried forward by all successive Congress-led and BJP-led central governments, is one of the root causes of farmer suicides in India. That is the reason why the incidence of peasant suicides in India has spiked from the mid-1990s onwards and continues today at a high level even after two decades. Some salient aspects of these neo-liberal policy changes in the agrarian sector are enumerated below. It is these policies that have greatly aggravated the agrarian crisis and peasant indebtedness.

1. Reversal of land reforms in order to give large tracts of land to corporates.
2. Slashing of subsidies on all agricultural inputs like fertilizers and diesel.
3. Removal of quantitative restrictions on foreign agricultural imports.
4. Decline in public expenditure on agriculture, irrigation and rural development.
5. Invasion of MNCs in agriculture, leading to big rise in costs of all inputs.
6. Privatization of irrigation and power projects, leading to much higher costs.
7. Crunch in institutional credit to farmers, thus boosting rapacious money-lenders.
8. Encouragement to export-oriented agriculture, threatening food self-sufficiency.
9. Collapse of the public distribution system, and threat to MSP procurement of grains.
10. Retrograde Special Economic Zones policy - displacing farmers, enriching corporates.
11. Boost to corporate/contract farming, FDI in retail trade and amending the APMC Act.
12. Attack on agricultural workers by mechanisation and consequent loss of work.
13. Cut in outlay on social welfare schemes, education, employment and health.
14. Serious weakening of agricultural research & development and extension systems.
15. Submission to the WTO regime and consequent changes in the Indian Patents Act.

RESULTS OF NEO-LIBERAL POLICIES

It is generally accepted that Indian agriculture has gone through two distinct phases – the state-sponsored stage from 1947 to 1990, and the liberalization stage from 1991 up to date. Both these phases have been an integral part of capitalist development and have created different sets of problems for the peasantry. The liberalization stage has led to a deep crisis. What have been the results of these policies on Indian agriculture over the last two decades?

1. The NSS 59th round Survey on Indebtedness of Farmer Households in 2003 reported that 48.6 per cent of farmer households were indebted, as against only 26 per cent farmer households that were indebted in 1991. The Survey further showed that as a result of the institutional credit crunch policy, private moneylenders charging usurious rates of interest had emerged as the most significant source of credit for indebted farmers. 40 per cent of the farmers surveyed wanted to quit farming if given an option. A decade has passed since this NSS Survey was conducted. All indicators point to a further rise in peasant indebtedness.
2. The Arjun Sengupta Report of the National Commission for Enquiry into the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) said on its very first page that 77 per cent of Indians could spend less than Rs 20 per day. And yet the central government insists on a completely unrealistic and fraudulent Poverty Line, leaving millions of the poor out of its orbit.
3. The NSS 59th round Survey on Land and Livestock in 2003 estimated that the proportion of landless households in the country was 32 per cent, as against only 22 per cent in 1992. This shows that lakhs of peasants have been forced to sell their land and join the ranks of agricultural labour. Again, a decade has passed since this survey was conducted.
4. The real wages and days of work of agricultural workers in the country have both declined sharply in the last two decades. The implementation of the MGNREGA has been very unsatisfactory in large parts of the country and the new BJP-led central government has given ample indication that it wants to gradually wind up the

scheme. The number of registered unemployed in the country, mainly in urban areas, is nearly 4 crore; while the number of unregistered unemployed, mainly in rural areas, is three times higher, i.e. nearly 12 crore.

5. Another NSS Survey of Income, Expenditure and Productive Assets of Farmer Households in 2003 showed that as many as 96.2 per cent of the farmer households surveyed, owning less than 4 hectares (10 acres) of land, had incurred monthly consumption expenditure in excess of their average monthly income from all sources. One of the major reasons for this is the constantly rising prices of agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilisers, insecticides, water, power and diesel and the refusal by successive central governments to ensure remunerative prices to agricultural outputs based on the cost of production plus 50 per cent profit, as per the seminal recommendation of the National Commission on Farmers headed by Dr M S Swaminathan.

6. While there were millions of tonnes of food grains rotting in central government godowns, the Congress-led UPA government refused to release it to the poor at low prices, let alone free as directed by the Supreme Court. Exactly the same thing had happened during the tenure of the earlier BJP-led NDA government. The PDS is in a shambles across large parts of the country, endangering the food security of millions of people. The new BJP-led central government has given indications of watering down even the insufficient Food Security Act.

7. Finally, on top of astronomically rising prices and massive corruption scandals, the Congress-led UPA government's budgets made massive cuts of thousands of crores in subsidies on fuel, fertiliser and food. On the other hand, the same government gave whopping tax concessions to corporates and to the rich.

The BJP-led NDA government has shown in its very first budget that it is faithfully following the Congress government's path. It has slashed the outlay on agriculture, rural development, NREGA and social welfare. It has gone back on its election promise of giving remunerative prices to the peasantry. It has continued and even increased the bonanza to the corporates.

As renowned journalist P. Sainath pointed out in a recent article on the 2014 Union Budget, during the eight years from 2005-06 to 2013-14, the total revenue of the Government of India foregone under the three heads of Corporate Income Tax, Customs Duty and Excise Duty came to a whopping Rs 36.5 lakh crore (trillion)! This amount, wrote Sainath, would have funded the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for 105 years, or the entire Public Distribution System in the country for 31 years!

THE SCOURGE OF CHRONIC DROUGHT

The second major agrarian problem in Maharashtra is that of chronic drought. This is integrally related to the utter bankruptcy of the irrigation policies of the state government.

In Maharashtra, the annual rainfall varies from 400 mm to 6000 mm. The average annual rainfall is about 1300 mm. Of this total rainfall, about 85% is received during the southwest monsoon, which is limited to the months between June and September. In the scarcity zones, the number of rainy days is about 40 in a year. In the heavy rainfall zones, the number of rainy days can rise up to 100 in a year.

The Deccan plateau constitutes about half of the drought-prone area of Maharashtra. About 12% of Maharashtra's population lives in drought-prone areas. Historically, Maharashtra has experienced deficient rainfall once every five years. Further, severe drought conditions are experienced once in every 8-9 years. After the great drought of 1972, there have been major droughts in 1982, 1992, 2004 and 2012, in addition to more frequent rainfall shortages. This year in 2014, there was practically no rain in the month of June and the first half of July, and this has already created untold miseries for lakhs of peasants and agricultural workers.

The response of successive governments to the scourge of drought has been one of inaction. The government has been merely reacting to the drought, and not proactively addressing the drought, leave alone its root causes. It has been reacting mostly by deploying water tankers, opening cattle and fodder camps and moderately expanding the MGNREGA. However, on all three grounds the reaction has been largely inadequate.

What is required in Maharashtra today to address drought? Clearly, there are steps required in the short-term, medium-term and long-term. In the short-term, the government urgently needs to ensure that three forms of security are ensured in the drought-affected regions: food security, water security and employment security.

First, the government should immediately declare that all ration cards in the drought-affected talukas would be considered as Antyodaya cards and provided with 35 kg of rice and wheat at Rs 2 per kg. At a time when the food godowns of India are over-stored and food grains are rotting, this should not be a problem at all. Secondly, the supply of water tankers to the villages should be directly handled by the government and the number of tankers significantly increased. The diversion of tankers from villages to industries and to the elite of the region should be cracked down upon. All beer and liquor manufacturing factories in the drought-hit areas should be closed down. Thirdly, the coverage of MGNREGA should be immediately stepped up. Employment should be provided to people in the drought-affected regions on a war-footing, and the possibility of providing wages in kind should also be explored. Thus, if the availability of food, water and employment are improved in the drought-affected regions, there will be relief, at least to some extent.

However, focussing only on the short-term is not enough. In the medium-term and long-term, the government should aim to totally drought-proof the State. Drought-proofing implies that the government aims to weaken the conditions that create a drought and also reduce its impact on the people.

Firstly, there has to be renewed focus on the development of drought-resistant crop varieties and hybrids that are grown in the dry regions. The focus has to be specifically on crops like jowar, bajra, pulses and oilseeds.

Secondly, all the ongoing irrigation projects in the state have to be completed in a time-bound manner, and a social audit of these projects undertaken to correct design errors. There has to be a stern crackdown on the massive and chronic corruption in the Irrigation Department. Further, it has to be ensured that during all the droughts, all irrigation projects in a river basin get access to the same amount of water.

Thirdly, a land and water use plan needs to be put in place, whereby the cultivation of water-intensive crops is strongly discouraged in regions prone to droughts. Such a water-use pattern should be an integral part of the drought proofing plan.

Fourthly, the vital question of the equitable distribution of water in all its aspects must be taken up in right earnest, along with the issue of the balanced distribution of water for drinking, for agriculture and for industry.

Finally, a permanent social security programme has to be instituted in the drought-prone regions, covering the spheres of food, water and employment in a comprehensive manner.

None of these plans would become a reality in the absence of political will. However, the situation in Maharashtra is that none of the leading political formations – the Congress-NCP and the Shiv Sena-BJP - have either the will or the vision to implement such a programme. Without radical political change, plans to drought-proof the state would remain only a dream.

BANKRUPT IRRIGATION POLICIES

Renowned experts in the field of agriculture and irrigation like Dr Dhananjayrao Gadgil and S.G. Barve had estimated in the 1960s that over 40 per cent of the cultivable area of Maharashtra could be brought under irrigation. But in spite of literally thousands of crores of rupees being spent on irrigation in the last five decades since the formation of Maharashtra state in 1960, the irrigated area in the state has increased from 6.5 per cent in 1960-61 to only 17.9 per cent in 2010-11. As against this, the proportion of the irrigated area in the country as a whole is today 44.9 per cent. Nearly 125 of the 355 tehsils in the state are considered to be permanently drought-prone and the plight of the peasantry there is unenviable.

The centralisation of irrigation resources – both regionwise and classwise - is constantly increasing. The rulers have now stopped even mentioning the goal of equitable water distribution, just as the word ‘socialism’ has become taboo. Most of the irrigation is limited to the sugar belt of Western Maharashtra. Over 60 per cent of the irrigation water in the state goes to a single crop - sugarcane. Classwise, it was estimated in 2002 that those cultivators owning less than 1 hectare had only 8.3 per cent irrigated land; those owning between 1 and 2 hectares had 16.5 per cent irrigated land; those owning between 2 and 4 hectares had 27.5 per cent irrigated land; and those owning over 4 hectares had 47.8 per cent irrigated land.

No serious attention has been paid by any state government – whether of the Congress-NCP or of the Shiv Sena-BJP – to the crucial aspect of water conservation schemes. The main thrust has been on dams and other irrigation projects – for that is where corruption can and does thrive. A major recent controversy in Maharashtra concerns the massive irrigation scam that was unearthed. The Chief Minister himself went on record as saying that in spite of Rs 70,000 crore being spent on irrigation during the decade from 2001 to 2011, the proportion of land that came under irrigation during this period was only 0.1 per cent – it increased from 17.8 per cent to just 17.9 per cent in 10 years! These were the official figures given by the *Economic Survey of Maharashtra*. As a result of the uproar caused by these figures, later editions of the *Economic Survey* have stopped giving this figure altogether!

The main responsibility for this scam obviously lay with successive NCP irrigation ministers and their favoured officials, engineers and contractors. The state government appointed the Madhavrao Chitale Committee to go into the issue. It submitted its report in March 2014. While the Report pointed out some serious irregularities, the general criticism against it was that it did not go far enough or deep enough and it did not fix any responsibility for such a huge scam on the political leadership. In May 2014, the CAG submitted its own report on the management of irrigation projects in Maharashtra. This report was more forthright in its indictment of the irrigation department.

The most serious aspect of irrigation and power in Maharashtra is that, as per World Bank dictates, the state government has embarked on a spree of privatisation of both these sectors. To facilitate this, several new and reactionary irrigation laws have been made during the last one decade. Although the Maharashtra Irrigation Act was passed in 1976, it is scandalous that its Rules have not been made for the last 38 years. This is obviously meant to protect the vested interests. In spite of the extremely poor state of irrigation, the state government a few years ago hastily pushed through a bill after midnight in the state assembly, to divert water from agriculture to industry. Due to the public uproar that followed, the bill had later to be amended, but it gave enough indication of the intentions of the ruling Congress-NCP alliance. The BJP-Shiv Sena regime of 1995-99 was equally corrupt, and even more urban-centric.

SKEWED NATURE OF DEVELOPMENT

While studying the nature of agricultural development in Maharashtra, let us first see some basic parameters. With a total area of 3.08 lakh square kilometers, the state has 6 revenue divisions, 35 districts, 355 tehsils, 534 towns and cities, 40,959 inhabited villages and another 2,706 uninhabited villages. As per the 2011 census, the population is 11 crore 24 lakh. The urban population has shot up from 28.2 per cent in 1960-61 to 45.2 per cent in 2010-11.

Women form 48.2 per cent of the population. The sex ratio is 929 (national average 943) but the child sex ratio is only 894 (national average 919). Compared to ten years ago in 2001, the sex ratio shows a small rise from 922 but the child sex ratio shows a sharp fall from 913. The proportion of SCs has increased from 10.2 per cent in 2001 to 11.8 per cent in 2011, and the proportion of STs has increased from 8.9 per cent to 9.4 per cent in the same period. The literacy rate in 2011 is 82.3 per cent – 88.4 per cent for males and 75.9 per cent for females.

The share of agriculture in the state income has constantly declined from 34.4 per cent in 1960-61, to 21.2 per cent in 1993-94, to 13.2 per cent in 2005-06, and to 11 per cent in 2013-14. But the rural

population that is mainly dependent on agriculture is still 55 per cent. The share of industry in the state income in the same years was 26, 31.2, 27.2 and 30 per cent, and that of the service sector in the same years was 39.6, 47.6, 59.6 and 59 per cent respectively.

The land area under cultivation in the state has reduced from 211.79 lakh hectares in 1970-71 to 197.67 lakh hectares in 2012-13 due to growing urbanization. But it also points to the failure of successive governments to bring the large amount of fallow land under cultivation.

Like many other states, Maharashtra has also been a victim of uneven development, which is a direct result of the capitalist path. This is most clearly seen in industrial development, which is restricted to the urban areas in the Mumbai-Thane-Raigad-Pune-Nashik triangle and to Nagpur and Aurangabad cities in the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions respectively. The rest of Maharashtra is extremely backward, industrially and otherwise. We shall see this later.

So far as irrigation, capitalist relations and agricultural development are concerned, the sugar belts of Western Maharashtra and parts of Northern Maharashtra are far ahead of the rest of the state. Some of the areas here that engage in horticulture and floriculture, apart from sugarcane production, are among the most developed agricultural areas in the country.

The number of tractors in Maharashtra increased by leaps and bounds, from 1,427 in 1960-61, to 34,529 in 1990-91, to 79,893 in 2000-01, to 1,05,611 in 2010-11. Similarly the use of electricity for agriculture shot up from 1.5 crore KWH in 1960-61, to 660 crore KWH in 1990-91, to 994 crore KWH in 2000-01, to 1,626 crore KWH in 2010-11. The number of agricultural motor-pumps shot up from 8,445 in 1961 to 22 lakh in 2000. All studies indicate that by far the largest number of tractors and the largest agricultural consumption of power is in Western Maharashtra. This indicates the growing penetration of capitalism in agriculture.

Other regions like Vidarbha, Marathwada and Konkan are far more backward in these respects. The social influence of feudalism is comparatively greater in these regions. The developmental backlog of all these backward regions runs into thousands of crores of rupees and it is constantly growing. Parts of the eastern belt of Western Maharashtra have also remained chronically drought-prone and backward.

But the most backward areas in Maharashtra are undoubtedly the large tribal belts that are situated along the northern and eastern borders of the state. No state government has ever done anything substantial to remedy their situation.

WORRISOME CROP PATTERN AND YIELD

During the last two decades from 1990-91 to 2012-13 the area under food grain cultivation has sharply reduced from 144 lakh hectares to 108 lakh hectares. Consequently the total food grain production in the same period has dropped from 122 lakh tonnes to 112 lakh tonnes. This is an extremely worrisome situation, which has serious implications for food security.

Among the cash crops, both the area and production of groundnut has sharply declined in these two decades from 1990-91 to 2010-11 – the area from 8.64 lakh hectares to 3.95 lakh hectares, and the production from 9.79 lakh tonnes to 4.70 lakh tonnes.

The area and production of cotton has also increased in the same two decades from 1990-91 to 2010-11 – the area from 27.21 lakh hectares to 39.42 lakh hectares, and the production from 18.75 lakh tonnes to 74.73 lakh tonnes.

But the biggest increase has undoubtedly been in sugarcane. From 1990-91 to 2010-11, the area under sugarcane nearly doubled from 5.36 lakh hectares to 10.41 lakh hectares, and the production increased from 381.54 lakh tonnes to 856.91 lakh tonnes.

There has also been some increase in the area and production of crops like soyabean. The production of fruits and vegetables is limited mostly to irrigated areas. Milk production, animal husbandry, poultry and fishing are important supplements in many areas of the state.

It is in the yield per hectare in most crops that Maharashtra lags behind the country and also behind many major states. That truly indicates the backwardness of agriculture in the state. Taking the triennial average of Kg yield per hectare from 2008-09 to 2010-11, the situation is as follows : Food grains – Maharashtra – 1075 Kg, India – 1879 Kg; Oilseeds – Maharashtra – 992 Kg, India – 1052 Kg; Cotton – Maharashtra – 303 Kg, India – 435 Kg.

Again, it is only in sugarcane that Maharashtra (83 tonnes per hectare) exceeds the national average (68 tonnes per hectare). But even here, there was a time when Maharashtra led all the other states. Today Tamilnadu and Kerala (both 105 tonnes) and Karnataka (89 tonnes) are ahead of Maharashtra in the yield of sugarcane.

There are three other indicators of the agricultural backwardness of Maharashtra. First, the per capita production of food grains for 2010-11 is 1,376 Kg for Maharashtra, while it is 2,061 Kg for the country. Second, the share of credit to the agricultural sector as a proportion of the total credit given by scheduled commercial banks in the year 2012-13 was 18.8 per cent in Maharashtra, while it was 31.6 per cent in the country. And finally, as we have seen earlier, while the proportion of land under irrigation in Maharashtra was 17.9 per cent, in India it was 44.9 per cent. And that brings us to another crisis area – that of power.

THE CRISIS IN POWER: ENRON AND AREVA

The situation of power in the state is critical, with rural and semi-urban Maharashtra having to face load-shedding for 8 to 16 hours daily for the last few years. Power tariffs are also constantly rising. This has adversely affected the peasantry and all sections of the people.

Until the early 1990s, Maharashtra was a surplus state so far as power was concerned, as a result of the sustained efforts over four decades put in by the large public sector concern called the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB).

From 1961 to 2000, the MSEB had increased installed capacity from 724 MW to 8,212 MW; electricity production from 345 crore units to 4,196 crore units; the number of electrified cities, towns and villages from 1,191 to 39,413; the number of agricultural motor-pumps from 8,445 to 22 lakh; and the number of power consumers from 1.41 lakh to 124 lakh.

In spite of levying reasonable power charges on domestic consumers and giving cross-subsidy to agriculture in the interests of the peasantry, the MSEB was in profit up to 2000.

Now, for the last several years, Maharashtra has become a deficit state for power, and the load-shedding of power has become a chronic feature, especially in the rural areas. The main reason for this is that, while successive Congress and Shiv Sena-BJP state governments pursued the Dabhol power project with the American company Enron through scandalous means, they refused permission to the MSEB for over a decade to build even a single power plant which would have provided power at much less cost.

The notorious Enron Corporation became bankrupt in December 2001 and its corrupt top officials were sent to jail in the USA. But it is Enron and its Indian and American collaborators that are responsible for the massive load-shedding and also for the constant hikes in power tariffs in Maharashtra for the last one and a half decade. This was privatization of power with a vengeance - with massive corruption thrown in.

A few words about the Enron deal will be enough to expose its shocking venality. In 1992, the Congress state government signed the first deal with Enron to set up the 740 MW Dabhol power plant in the Ratnagiri district of the Konkan region, flying in the face of all expert opinion and also the resistance of the local population.

Riding on the controversy surrounding the Enron deal, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance, during the 1995 state assembly election campaign, promised to drown the Enron plant into the Arabian Sea. After coming to power, this new government first made a drama of cancelling the Enron deal. Then, after acceptance of ample 'educational gifts' from Enron, the Dabhol project was not only revived but was increased to thrice its original size - 2100 MW!

In May 1999, the Dabhol plant started producing power. Both the Congress and the BJP-Shiv Sena regimes had promised that the Dabhol power tariff would be Rs 2.30 per unit, but it actually came to Rs 7.80 per unit. The Rs 1,800 crore bill of Enron put the MSEB in a loss for the first time in 1999-2000. By 2001, the pending bill of Enron came to Rs 3,361 crore.

At this time the Left parties led a large statewide struggle demanding the scrapping of the Enron deal. Eventually, in May 2001, the Congress-NCP state government was forced to stop the purchase of Enron power and the MSEB cancelled its power purchase agreement with Enron. It was this that saved the MSEB from bankruptcy, although great damage was done.

But the story does not end there. After Enron declared bankruptcy, it was possible for the government to buy up Enron's stake in the Dabhol power plant for a pittance of about 90 crore rupees. But the government squandered this golden chance and Enron's stake in Dabhol was bought up by its powerful partners in the Dabhol plant like General Electric and Bechtel, which had only 10 per cent stake each.

Eventually, the central government was forced to buy up the Dabhol power plant by shelling out the massive sum of around Rs 13,500 crore to these two rapacious MNCs. A new company called the Ratnagiri Gas and Power Company was set up to run the Dabhol plant. The anti-climax to all this is that, due to the non-availability of gas, the Dabhol plant has completely stopped the production of power for the last one year!

In spite of being fully aware of this entire tragedy, the amazing thing is that the government is now bent on pursuing the disastrous Jaitapur nuclear power plant in the same Ratnagiri district to be built by the French company Areva, despite the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan. The Jaitapur nuclear power plant is five times bigger and at least fifteen times costlier than the Dabhol power plant! So its ruinous effects across the board can well be imagined! But here, again, the BJP government is faithfully treading on the Congress regime's path.

ANARCHY AND LOOT IN THE CO-OPERATIVE SECTOR

The co-operative sector began in Maharashtra after Independence with a lot of hope, with the setting up of some co-operative sugar factories after taking the peasants into confidence. Then co-operative credit societies and co-operative banks were set up. But after a few years the degeneration began, with leaders of the Congress, NCP and even BJP using these institutions as their personal fiefdoms and as highways to their economic and political power.

Corruption, nepotism and mismanagement became the order of the day. After taking massive loans from co-operative banks for setting up sugar factories, these factories were turned sick and many were closed down altogether by the sugar barons. The sufferers were the three toiling sections that were connected with these sugar factories – sugarcane peasants, sugarcane cutters and sugar factory workers. In spite of this, massive subsidies were wrested from the government and the bad loans of banks were written off through political pressure, since the state government was jointly controlled by Big Business and the sugar lobby.

The huge amount of money amassed by such dubious methods was used for increasing political clout, and also for jettisoning the co-operative sector and setting up private sugar factories instead. With the policy of commercialization of education, the sugar barons also became education barons. Neo-liberal policies, with their stress on privatization, led a frontal attack on the co-operative sector. The ruling classes were only too happy to lead this attack.

The most salient recent example of the anarchy in the co-operative sector is that of the Maharashtra State Co-operative Bank (MSCB), the apex institution itself. This bank has always been under the control of the Congress, and for the last 15 years, the NCP.

Today this apex co-operative bank and many of its affiliated district banks, which are supposed to be one of the main sources of credit to the peasantry, are in deep crisis. In an unprecedented step, two years ago the RBI dissolved the 44-member Board of Directors of the MSCB and appointed two senior

administrators. The powerful Board of Directors comprised several state Cabinet ministers, current and former MPs and MLAs – most of them of the NCP, but also some from the Congress, BJP and Shiv Sena. This step had then led to tremendous tension between the Congress and the NCP, with the latter accusing the former of having used the RBI to serve its own political interests. But a few instances will show the depths to which this apex bank had sunk.

Firstly, the MSCB gave loans of Rs 2,810 crore, mainly to co-operative sugar factories, most of which are again controlled by NCP stalwarts. The state government gave a counter guarantee for these loans. Of this amount, the sugar factories never paid back Rs 1,831 crore. Now the MSCB was insisting that the state government shell out this amount. Recently, the government agreed to pay Rs 270 crore but dithered over the remaining amount.

Secondly, in spite of the MSCB making a loss last year of 1,043 crore, it falsely declared a profit of Rs 2.87 crore. Thirdly, the non-performing assets (NPA) of the MSCB are in excess of 30 per cent. Fourthly, as many as 10 district co-operative banks – almost all of them in the backward Vidarbha, Marathwada and Khandesh regions – are in crisis.

And lastly, this state of affairs is riddled with corruption, nepotism and mismanagement on a monumental scale. All this was stressed by the inquiry committee that probed the scam.

Many urban and rural district co-operative banks have ended up in bankruptcy over the last few years as a result of the corruption and mismanagement of their own directors. This has resulted in the vanishing of the lifetime savings of lakhs of common people.

CONCENTRATION OF LAND OWNERSHIP

The land area under cultivation in the state has reduced from 211.79 lakh hectares in 1970-71 to 197.67 lakh hectares in 2012-13 due to growing urbanization. But the number of cultivators has spiralled from 49.51 lakh to 136.99 lakh in the same period. Thus, the average area under cultivation per cultivator has sharply reduced from 4.28 hectares to 1.44 hectares in this period. It is necessary to go deeper and study the impact of land reforms in the state.

Dr R Ramakumar of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), has analyzed the issue of land reforms in Maharashtra in detail. We shall quote here extensively from his conclusions:

Before the unified State of Maharashtra was formed in 1960, land reforms in the State were guided primarily by The Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Land Act 1948 (in the Bombay region), and similar Acts in the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions. These Acts were tenancy reform legislations, where the tenant was conferred the status of a “protected tenant” and given either the right to permanent tenancy or the right to first purchase or full ownership rights itself. Studies and data show that while a section of tenants did receive ownership rights through these tenancy reforms, a large number of tenants were also evicted by the landlords, who took back their land for ‘personal cultivation’, either by the force of law or through physical force. A 1966 report of the Planning Commission noted that:

“In the former Bombay area, about 16.5 lakh tenants became entitled to ownership in respect of 35.1 lakh acres. Cases of 14 lakh tenants have been finalised, but only 5.7 lakh tenants actually became owner in respect of 12 lakh acres. In more than 8 lakh cases, the purchases became ineffective due to surrenders, evictions or non-payment of purchase prior, and the tenants were dispossessed of their holdings. The picture becomes discouraging if ejectments and surrenders which had taken place on a larger scale prior to tillers’ day are also taken into account...In Marathwada and Vidarbha regions [also], where the provisions for converting tenants into owners were enforced a couple of years back, much progress has not been made.”

According to more recent data released by the Ministry of Rural Development, till September 2006, only about 14.9 lakh tenants were conferred ownership rights (or rights protected) across the State of Maharashtra. The area that accrued to these tenants accounted for only 42.9 lakh acres, or 9.9 per cent of the total net sown area in the State.

After 1960, land reforms in the unified State of Maharashtra are guided by the Maharashtra Agricultural Lands (Ceiling on Holdings) Act of 1961. This Act primarily set ceilings on the ownership of land. The following ceilings on ownership of land were set: Land with an assured supply of water: 18 acres; Land with assured water for one crop: 27 acres; Land irrigated seasonally: 36 acres; Dry crop land (specified regions-paddy land): 36 acres; Dry crop land: 54 acres.

According to data released by the Ministry of Rural Development, as on September 2006, the area declared surplus in Maharashtra as per land ceiling laws was 711,727 acres (7 lakh acres). The total net sown area of the State in 2006-07 was 43,170,660 acres (4 crore acres). That is, only 1.7 per cent of the net sown area has been declared surplus. For anyone with a basic knowledge of agrarian situation in the State, this is a huge underestimate and a huge extent of surplus land lies hidden in *benami* ownerships.

There is more. Out of the 711,727 acres of land declared surplus, only 634,813 acres was taken over by the government, as on 2006. In other words, 76,914 acres is yet to be taken over. This could be either because of a lack of political will or because of court cases.

Out of the 634,813 acres taken over, the government has distributed 614,913 acres to individual beneficiaries till 2006. The total number of beneficiaries was 135,599 (1.4 lakh households), which makes it 4.5 acres per beneficiary household, on an average. Of the 135,599 beneficiaries, 40,825 were Dalits (30.1 per cent) and 29,296 were Adivasis (21.6 per cent). In terms of shares of area, Dalits received 25.7 per cent of the total land distributed and Adivasis received 15.9 per cent of the total land distributed.

About 35,000 acres was given to the Maharashtra State Farming Corporation (MSFC) in order to organise state farms. However, this land was never cultivated. . . If we take Bhoodan land, about 1.04 lakh acres of land were donated in Maharashtra till 2006. However, only 27,000 acres has been redistributed. The remaining 77,000 acres of land is yet to be redistributed. As for wastelands, till 2006, only about 10 lakh acres of waste land has been distributed in the State.

In sum, the extent of land conferred to tenants and ceiling surplus land taken over by the government has been small, and its redistribution has not benefited landless sections in any significant way. Latest data, for 2003, from the NSSO show that land in Maharashtra is very unequally distributed. On the one hand, 38.3 per cent of households are landless. On the other hand, just 3 per cent of the households own 28 per cent of all land. Looked at in another way, about 9 per cent of the households own 51 per cent of all land. It is thus clear that land reforms have been a major failure in the State in reducing concentration of land ownership.

Distribution of ownership holdings of land in Maharashtra (2003-04, in %)

Land size class	% of holdings	% of area owned
Landless	38.3	0.0
< 1 acre	14.1	1.4
1 to 2.5 acres	16.7	10.7
2.5 to 5 acres	13.1	17.7
5 to 7.5 acres	8.5	19.6
7.5 to 12.5 acres	6.1	22.8
12.5 to 25 acres	2.5	16.2
> 25 acres	0.8	11.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Rawal, 2008.

SEZs: A NEW SOURCE OF LOOT

On top of this land concentration achieved by the policies of the ruling classes in Maharashtra, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are a new source of unlimited loot of peasants and workers given by the central government in the hands of the capitalists. In Maharashtra up to December 2013, there have been 236 SEZ proposals, of which 124 have been cleared by the Centre. Of these 65 have been notified and 18 have

been activated. The total area of the 124 SEZs cleared is 29,689 hectares, the area of the 65 SEZs notified is 10,188 hectares and the area of the 18 SEZs that have been activated is 2,528 hectares. Most of this land is under agriculture and efforts are being made to evict peasants from their land.

But some intense peasant struggles against the SEZs have also been waged. The most successful of these has been in Raigad district. Here there was a proposal by Mukesh Ambani to set up a 10,000 hectare MahaMumbai SEZ and the government was hand in glove with him. But over 50,000 peasants led by the PWP, the CPI(M) and others conducted a massive five year struggle to save their lands. Eventually, the government was forced to denotify the MahaMumbai SEZ. This was a major victory.

FOREST RIGHTS ACT AND OTHER LAND ISSUES

The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), which was enacted mainly for Adivasis and also for other traditional forest-dwellers in 2006, as a result of the large tribal mass struggles all over the country and the pressure exerted in Parliament by the Left parties, is nothing short of scandalous in large parts of the country. Maharashtra is no exception.

According to figures released by the state government in February 2013, out of 3,39,100 individual claims made under the FRA only 1,43,577 claims were accepted and the remaining 1,95,523 claims were either rejected or are pending in appeal. What is equally bad, the forest land that was given in respect of the accepted claims was in most cases only a small fraction of the land that the Adivasis were actually cultivating for generations and had thus claimed. Even the partial implementation of the FRA that was carried out in Maharashtra was due to the massive struggles of lakhs of Adivasi peasants led by the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS).

There is also the question of pasture lands or grazing lands which are generally cultivated by Dalit peasants in many parts of the state. As a result of several struggles, the state government had to enact laws vesting these lands in the names of the Dalit cultivators. But here again the implementation of these laws is faulty and leaves much to be desired.

Then there is the vexed question of temple lands. There are 17,168 temple trusts in Maharashtra that own 5.58 lakh acres of land. These are the registered temple trusts. Thousands of unregistered temple trusts also own huge amounts of land. Lakhs of peasants have been actually cultivating this land for generations, but it is not vested in their names. Hence they cannot get any crop loans, they cannot take advantage of irrigation schemes, they cannot get any relief in case of natural calamities. The main demand is that all these temple lands must be vested in the names of the cultivating peasants.

MALNUTRITION-RELATED ADIVASI CHILD DEATHS

Various figures show that thousands of children in the Adivasi belts of the country die due to malnutrition every year. Here also Maharashtra is no exception. In the 15 districts in Maharashtra with a substantial Adivasi population, in 2010 there were 1,585 child deaths due to malnutrition; 36,117 children were severely malnourished; and 46,586 children were moderately malnourished. Districts like Amravati (the Melghat-Dharni region), Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Nandurbar, Dhule, Thane and Nashik are the worst-affected in this regard.

The noted social activist Dr Abhay Bung headed a government-appointed enquiry committee into the serious phenomenon of child deaths. The committee came out with a perceptive report that was poignantly titled "The Shedding of Tender Leaves." (*Kovali Panagal* in Marathi). It concluded that there occur every year around 2,27,000 child deaths due to various causes in the state. The committee made several important recommendations which, as usual, were never implemented. Hence there is no let-up in this tragic phenomenon.

Some of the main reasons for malnutrition-related Adivasi child deaths are the alienation of the tribals from their land, the failure of employment guarantee schemes, the complete anarchy and corruption in the

public distribution system, lack of public health facilities in the mountainous areas that are difficult to access, the neglect of education and the brake on overall development of tribal areas due to faulty implementation of the tribal sub-plans.

THE SITUATION OF RURAL DALITS, MUSLIMS AND WOMEN

Dalits in Maharashtra are constantly under discrimination from upper caste, and landed, groups in the villages. In villages, due to their landlessness, Dalits are ghettoised and marginalised into the most unhygienic and unapproachable regions. They are denied regular access to basic amenities in the village, such as common wells. Any effort by Dalits at upward mobility is dealt with severely. Unspeakable atrocities on Dalits like those at Khairlanji, Sategaon, Sonai, Kharda and Nanegaon have occurred in Maharashtra in recent years and they have dealt a blow to the progressive Phule-Ambedkar social reform tradition.

The Khairlanji massacre of the Bhotmange family on September 29, 2006 is a classic example, which represented a convergence of atrocities based on caste, gender and class. A piece of land, used as common passage by the villagers when it was left fallow, was purchased by the Bhotmange household. They began cultivation in the purchased plot. For this, the family was socially and economically harassed by the upper caste landed interests in the village for a number of years. Whatever little land they had was also sought to be taken away from them. That was the immediate cause of the massacre. The mother and daughter, before being mercilessly lynched, were paraded naked and then gang-raped. The two sons were mutilated and killed.

Such cases should be dealt firmly under the SC/ST Atrocities Act. However, the connivance of the government officials, police and local upper caste elite regularly ensure that conviction rates are pathetic under the Act. For Maharashtra as a whole, there were 304 cases registered under the Atrocities Act in 2011 (NCRB, 2012). According to a news report in 2010, "Maharashtra's conviction rate in caste atrocity cases is one of the lowest in India". For the year 2007, the share of convictions in offenses against the SCs was 2.9 per cent only. This share had declined between 2005 and 2007, from 6.3 per cent to 2.9 per cent.

The Mehmoodur Rehman committee appointed by the state government to study the situation of Muslims in the state had noted that 60 percent of the rural Muslim population lives below the poverty line and another 25 percent is just a little above the poverty line. The same report titled 'The Socio-economic and Educational Status of Muslims in Maharashtra' states that, in the 11 years from 1998 to 2008, there were 1,192 communal clashes in Maharashtra and this was the highest number among all states in the country. The Sachar Committee report has also highlighted the grim situation of the Muslim community in Maharashtra.

As per NCRB figures, of the 2.28 lakh crimes committed against women in India, 15,728 were in Maharashtra (6.87%). The state ranks sixth in terms of percentage share. Of the 24,206 rapes registered across the country in 2011, Maharashtra accounted for 1,701 cases or 7%. Maharashtra accounted for 3.93% of the 8,618 dowry deaths in 2011. As per the figures of the 2011 census, although the number of women per 1000 men has slightly risen from 922 to 929 over the last ten years, there has been a sharp fall in the proportion of girls of the age group 0-6 per 1000 boys from 913 to 894 in the same period. This is a very serious matter.

There are two other serious issues concerning women in agriculture. First, that although peasant women physically put in tremendous labour in their fields, often more than even the menfolk, the land pattas are generally not in their names or even in the joint names of husband and wife. Hence peasant women do not enjoy the status and the benefits of being cultivators. Second, in the case of women agricultural workers who often outnumber their male counterparts, the wages paid to women are much less than what are paid to men.

It is in the dubious field of liquor – a major social issue taken up by the women's movement - that Maharashtra leads the country! It is reported that 36 of the 38 wineries of the country are in Maharashtra,

and the state produces 87 per cent of India's wine! In the novel business of manufacturing liquor from food grain also, Maharashtra is perhaps the pioneer!

RISING UNEMPLOYMENT: MONUMENTAL FAILURE OF MGNREGA

The condition of landless agricultural workers is grave. Their number in Maharashtra has crossed the one crore mark long ago. The growing mechanization of agricultural operations has adversely affected the number of days that they can get work.

So far as the implementation of the MGNREGA is concerned, the state ranks amongst the worst in the country. In most places agricultural workers have no work, and the few who have work do not get the stipulated wage. Crores of rupees that have come from the Centre for the scheme have had to be returned simply because they were not spent. The *Economic Survey of Maharashtra* gives the MGNREGA figures for the last three years as follows:

Year	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14 (up to Dec)
Number of families provided work (Lakhs)	13.76	16.24	8.73
Total expenditure (Rs Crores)	1588.14	2188.83	896.76
Days of work (Crores)	6.51	8.72	3.39
Average days of work per family (Days)	47	54	39

The MGNREGA has been a monumental failure in the State. Consider the following data:

- Only 13% of the households in Maharashtra have a NREGA job card, while the share is 35% in India.
- Among Dalit households, if 45% in India had job cards, the share for Maharashtra was 12%.
- Among Adivasi households, if 54% in India had job cards, the share for Maharashtra was 21%.
- Only 4% of the households in Maharashtra have received employment under NREGA, while the share is 25% in India.
- Among Dalit households, if 34% in India had received employment under NREGA, the share for Maharashtra was 2%.
- Among Adivasi households, if 42% in India had received employment under NREGA, the share for Maharashtra was 6%.
- The average number of days of employment for a household under NREGA was 34 days in Maharashtra.
- The share of households who received more than 10 days of work under NREGA was 3% in Maharashtra.

Homelessness amongst agricultural workers is also a major problem. Since dalits, adivasis and women form a preponderant part of agricultural workers, they have to constantly face social and economic discrimination, sexual harassment and atrocities.

The number of registered unemployed in the state in December 2013 was 30.35 lakh and of these the number of women was 7.37 lakh. These are unacceptably high figures.

The number of closed factories as on March 31, 2011 was 31,190 and the number of workers rendered unemployed in these was 1.61 lakh. The number of closed medium and big factories was 418 and the number of unemployed workers in these was 0.58 lakh. There is no social security whatsoever for these 2.20 lakh unemployed workers.

ONSLAUGHT ON THE WORKING CLASS

For the lakhs of unorganised, contract and temporary workers in both rural and urban areas, minimum wage and social security are a far cry and all efforts are made by the employers and the government to prevent them from exercising their right to form their own unions.

The condition of large sections of unorganized workers in the beedi, powerloom, construction and sugar industries, as also domestic workers, midday meal scheme workers, gram rojgar sevaks and anganwadi and asha workers is very serious and in urgent need of redressal.

The question of housing has also assumed grave proportions. According to a recent NSS report, the largest number of slum dwellers in the country stay in Maharashtra. Most of them are from among the peasantry and agricultural workers who have migrated to the cities due to rural distress and now have to eke out a living as part of the unorganized working class.

The number of slum dwellers has increased from 1.43 crore in 2001 to 1.81 crore in 2011 in Maharashtra, and from 58 lakh to 70 lakh in Mumbai. In large cities like Mumbai, Thane, Pune, Nashik, Nagpur and Aurangabad, it is the land mafia and the builder lobby that rules the roost and government policies are designed precisely for their benefit. Owning a decent house in the city is an unattainable dream for the common man, who is consigned to slums.

The sectors of education and health are in the doldrums, with privatization and commercialization adversely affecting lakhs of poor and even middle class families in both rural and urban areas. As mentioned above, this is an important cause of rural indebtedness.

INCREASED POVERTY, PRICE RISE AND BREAKDOWN OF THE PDS

As a result of the anti-people, insensitive and corruption-ridden policies of successive state governments, and particularly the neo-liberal policies of the last two decades, Maharashtra has seen a steady decline in the socio-economic condition of its people.

The *Economic Survey* has stated that agricultural sector growth in the state in 2013-14 was expected to touch 4 per cent; industrial sector growth was expected to touch 8.8 per cent; and service sector growth 9.3 per cent. However, the main beneficiaries of this growth have always been the urban and rural rich. It is their profits, wealth – and corruption – that have been constantly rising.

On the other hand, the condition of the basic classes like the working class, the peasantry, agricultural labourers and artisans and the socially backward sections like dalits, adivasis, minorities, nomadic tribes, large sections among OBCs, and also considerable sections among the forward castes like Marathas, has shown a definite decline.

The most shocking figures in the earlier *Economic Survey* relate to the incidence of poverty. 38.1 per cent of the people in the state, which amounts to a population of four and a half crore, is mired in poverty. The national average is 37.2 per cent; which means that in spite of being a comparatively rich state, the incidence of poverty in the state is 1 per cent more than the national average. In fact, among major states, Maharashtra ranks fourth in the incidence of poverty after Bihar, MP and UP.

Poverty in Maharashtra has not declined, but grown, over the years, as per the figures given by the *Economic Survey* itself. The poverty in rural Maharashtra increased from 34.6 per cent in 1997, to 35.7 per cent in 2002, to 47.9 per cent in 2004-05, as per the revised estimates of the Suresh Tendulkar Committee. This means that nearly half of rural Maharashtra is poor. Poverty in urban Maharashtra increased from 8.8 per cent in 1997, to 18.2 per cent in 2002, to 25.6 per cent in 2004-05.

The Arjun Sengupta committee, on the basis of the 2004-05 survey, had concluded that 77 per cent of Indians cannot spend even Rs 20 per day. If this is taken as the basis, then it is clear that even the above official poverty estimates do not correspond to reality.

Lakhs of poor families are not included in the BPL lists, they have no BPL ration cards, and in a public distribution system that is mired in corruption, they do not get cheap and regular food grains. Like the MGNREGA and the Forest Rights Act, the implementation of the Food Security Act in Maharashtra is another spectacular failure.

The massive price rise of the last one year has played havoc with the lives of the poor. In December 2013 the price rise in food grains was 9.1 per cent in both rural and urban areas of the state. The price rise of other essential items in December 2013 was even sharper at 15.1 per cent in rural areas and 16.3 per

cent in urban areas. During the last one year, the price index in rural areas rose by 10.4 per cent and in urban areas by 10.1 per cent. It must be underlined that none of the benefits of this price rise accrued to the peasantry in the form of increased prices for any of their agricultural produce.

During the last five years, while price rise was attacking the lives of the common people, the Congress-led UPA central government and the Congress-NCP state government were pouring oil in the fire by their policies like the recurrent fuel price hikes, deregulation of petrol prices, encouragement to futures trading in food grains and other essential commodities and protection to hoarding and speculation.

The BJP-led NDA government that has taken power has taken the same route by a steep hike in railway passenger and freight fares less than a month after taking over; and by its proposals for increase in prices of gas, petrol and diesel. Its budget also takes the same discredited path.

WIDENING REGIONAL IMBALANCES

Regional imbalance has been a chronic and burning issue in Maharashtra. It has its impact on agriculture as well. Due to capitalist development, this imbalance has constantly aggravated.

Look at this picture for 2012-13. The per capita income (PCI) of India is Rs 67,839; for Maharashtra it is Rs 1,03,991. But if we exclude the five relatively industrialized districts of Mumbai, Thane, Pune, Raigad and Nagpur, the PCI for the rest of Maharashtra plunges sharply. The PCI of as many as 29 of the 35 districts is below the state average, while that of 11 of these districts is even below the national average.

Now see the districtwise disparity. The five districts with the highest PCI are Mumbai (Rs 1.68 lakh), Thane (Rs 1.57 lakh), Pune (Rs 1.51 lakh), Raigad (Rs 1.33 lakh) and Nagpur (Rs 1.12 lakh), while the five districts with the lowest PCI are Nandurbar (Rs 50,124), Hingoli (Rs 53,205), Beed (Rs 55,009), Usmanabad (Rs 56,553) and Buldana (Rs 57,383). This shows that there is an almost 300 per cent gap between these two groups of districts. Four of these five districts are in the backward regions of Marathwada and Vidarbha.

The same unequal regional picture of PCI is seen revenue divisionwise as follows: Konkan division (Rs 1,54,080) – but here too the two districts of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg are poor cousins when compared to Mumbai, Thane and Raigad districts in the same division, and even in Thane district the Adivasi belt still remains very backward; Pune division (Rs 1,10,742); Nagpur division (Rs 88,253); Nashik division (Rs 80,341); Amravati division (Rs 66,836) and Aurangabad division (Rs 66,561).

It is the Amravati division that has had the maximum number of peasant suicides. No serious efforts have ever been made by any state government to clear the developmental backlog of the backward regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada or of the large tribal belts and to address their developmental concerns.

MASSIVE DEBT BURDEN

The debt burden on Maharashtra has sharply risen over the last two decades of liberalisation and this has endangered the entire economy of the state. In 1990-91, the state debt was Rs 12,878 crore. In 1994-95, when the Shiv Sena-BJP regime came to power, it was Rs 16,000 crore. In 1999-2000, when the SS-BJP regime was dislodged and when the Congress-NCP regime came to power, it was Rs 44,000 crore. And in 2013-14 it has risen massively to Rs 2.7 lakh crore. The Reserve Bank of India, in its annual report, submitted that Maharashtra's debt burden as on March 31, 2013, stood at Rs 2.8 lakh crore while Uttar Pradesh's was Rs 2.7 lakh crore, West Bengal Rs 2.3 lakh crore and Gujarat Rs 1.8 lakh crore.

Most of the state revenue comes from indirect taxes like sales tax and excise duties. Thus the main burden of this debt falls on the working people. This massive debt severely limits the scope of social welfare schemes and developmental programmes.

STINKING CORRUPTION SCANDALS

Lastly, it must be underlined that Maharashtra is among the leading states in the country so far as stinking corruption scandals are concerned. In all the major corruption scams that were recently unearthed – 2-G Spectrum, Coal Blocks, Commonwealth Games, IPL cricket, Adarsh Society, Lavasa City, assorted land deals of the builder mafia, and the scams in the irrigation and co-operative sectors – bourgeois politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats from Maharashtra find a prominent place. However, space does not permit an elaboration of this murky aspect.

CONCLUSION

Although all these agrarian problems are a result of ruling class policies since Independence, they have been further aggravated by the pro-imperialist neo-liberal policies followed by successive central and state governments during the last two decades.

What is the way out of the present dismal agrarian situation in Maharashtra?

It is clear that it is the ruling classes, their political parties and their elitist policies that are at the root of the situation in which Maharashtra and its people find themselves after 67 years of Independence and 54 years of statehood.

With the imperialist-oriented neo-liberal policies of the last two decades, the mass of working people are being marginalized, economic and social disparity has widened and corruption has reached unprecedented levels.

Communal, casteist and chauvinist forces have raised their heads and the RSS-BJP, with the unstinted help of corporates, have again come into central power, with all the grave dangers that this entails.

But the fighting people of Maharashtra have the strength and the capacity to roll back these challenges. They will have to build their unity through massive struggles, lead sustained campaigns for alternative policies, create political awareness among the people against the ruling classes and build a widespread and powerful organization.

It is only a Left, democratic and secular alternative emerging from this struggle that will be able to save – and change – Maharashtra and our country for the better and lead the people on the road to true progress.

The popular worker-peasant slogan coined by the Left in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement of building a 'Socialist Maharashtra in a Socialist India' must be revived and renewed with vigour in the new changed situation.