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W o r k I n P r o g r e s s

AGRARIAN ECONOMY OF ORISSA AND POVERTY: REFLEXIVE OBSERVATION

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I

Orissa is one of the most backward Eastern States of developing India. As a part of ‘divide and rule’ policy of the British, it was scattered into various provinces. Accordingly, it had three broad types of land tenure system: the Zamindari in five districts, the Ryotwari in one part of a district; and Subsidiary Alliance in a number of princely States covering as many as seven districts of the present day Orissa¹.

In the main land of Orissa the Zamindari system was enforced. Both the local and outside Zamindars² were very harsh in collecting rent to meet the British demand for revenue. The land revenue was so high and the evictions from land so frequent that the peasant uprisings occurred several times. The sporadic movements of 1817, 1833 and 1847 were some of the most powerful uprisings. Following the movements, the authority enacted different laws, such as the Rent Act of Bengal 1859, the Orissa Tenancy Act of 1913 and the like. But these acts remained ineffective due to the absence of any sustained peasant struggle³.

As Prof. Mukherji has remarked, all these reforms could not check “ the abuse of irresponsible and absentee landlordism which has received the sanction of British Government”⁴.

Several princely states remained under the control of British called as Subsidiary Alliance. According to this arrangement, the princes were given absolute freedom of internal administration as long as they continued to pay tribute to the colonial authority. The terms were rather liberal compared to what the smaller units had to pay. This was because the British wanted the bigger powers as allies to their domination. Thus the tributary landlordism were under pressure to collect higher rents from the peasantry under them as they had to keep

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the petty princelings above, going, supporting their henchmen as well as social obligations like the temple⁵. The feudatory states witnessed several cases of peasant and tribal discontent. The 'Prajamandal' movement ultimately led to their merger in the State of Orissa in 1948⁶.

The ryotwari settlement was in operation in the part of a district. In course of time a class of rentiers emerged among those, who were in charge of collection of revenue and to look after law and order. The condition of peasants in the ryotwari tract deteriorated terribly due to rising frequency of indebtedness, loss of land and vagaries of nature. Since 1934, a co-ordinated movement continued under the leadership of communists through the Kisan Sabha⁷.

The system of land revenue administration of the British rule demonstrates that it was directed towards protecting and encouraging the interest of the Zamindars and the princes. As the figures show, at the time of independence, 18 per cent of the privately owned land was under the Zamindari system⁸.

II

Following independence, the Orissa Government emphasized the land reform measures with the intention of abolishing the system of intermediary tenure that existed between the tiller and the State; the tenancy reforms; the fixation of ceiling in agricultural holding; and the Debt Bondage Act to free the bonded agricultural laborers from the clutches of money lenders and feudal lords⁹. Further, it was observed that, behind such an enactment, the intention of the government was to liberate the peasants from the feudal burn, to ameliorate agricultural growth and to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. However, such legislation did not really lead to any concrete achievements. As Prof. Joshi rightly remarked " Basically these were elite sponsored reforms, i.e., measures introduced the ruling elite that took over the rein of power from the British"¹⁰. The performance of the Orissa government on the distribution of surplus land recovered under Ceiling Act has been revealed in a research project. It estimates that a meagre 0.6 per cent of the State's total farm land—45,706 hectares out of the total 761 lakh hectares—has been made available so far for distribution among the 86,161 people under the Land Reforms Act¹¹. However, most of the land 'allotted' of doubtful quality is still with the erstwhile landowners and the 'allotments' have been hardly more than mere paper achievements for publicity purpose or for ministerial ceremony. Thus it is beyond doubt that, till to date many of the land lords and feudal lords continue to possess many acres of landed property with them either in their names or in their relative's name. Many studies covering this aspect in different states of India reinforces these findings¹². Ladejinsky, who toured the Punjab and Kosi area of Bihar had a conversation with a landlord of Bihar: " He first informed us that he owned 16 acres of land but corrected himself under the good humour prodding of a crowd of farmers that he had failed to mention another 484 acres. The lapse of memory might have had something to do with the ceiling on land holdings and its maximum permissible limits of 60 acres, but, on the other hand, no owner bows his head in shame on account of ceiling evasion".

In sum, the feudal and semi-feudal relations of production continue to dominate the agrarian structure of Orissa.

Orissa economy is predominantly agricultural. Nearly 85 per cent of her population lives in rural areas and 74 per cent of the working force directly or indirectly depend upon agriculture¹³. The concentration of working force has been constantly pumped up from 70 per cent in 1951 to 76 per cent in 1971.¹⁴ By the year 2001 the figure has come down to 61 per cent¹⁵. Agriculture alone which contributed 62 per cent of the total state income in the year 1971,¹⁶ now it forms only 48.35 per cent.¹⁷ It shows that other sectors like industry, trade and tourism have gained importance over the years.

Ironically only 38 per cent of the total land is available for cultivation. Out of this 30 per cent of the land is cultivated more than once¹⁸. Irrigation potential, which was only 16 per cent in the year 1980, has now increased to 23 per cent¹⁹ as against 75 per cent in Punjab and 25 per cent in the country as a whole. Paddy, the predominant crop covers only 50 per cent of the cropped area (no change in the figure during the last three decades) with an average yield of 10.14 quintals per hectare (Punjab 35.06 quintals and Andhra Pradesh 29.36 quintals) the lowest among the major rice growing states of India²⁰ (see Table – A). Although wheat, Jute and Sugarcane are considered as major cash crops, it has been observed over the years that these crops are not receiving appreciative response among the Orissa peasantry. Area under principal crops in Table – A clearly shows that around 1980s the peasantry of Orissa have shifted their keen interest in growing vegetables and pulses. This could be possibly as the result of demands coming from the emerging small and medium townships in the various parts of the state. Speaking absolutely there is no change in figure on productivity of food grains over the last three decades. The productivity figure of the state remains around 958 kgs per hectare against 4088 kgs per hectare for Punjab and 3088 kgs for hectare for Haryana state²¹. Altogether, it has seriously affected the gross per capita production. The per capita food grain production of the state stands at 156 kgs against 1067 kgs of the Punjab, 656 kgs for Haryana and 208 kgs of the country²². As a result the state only contribute only 2.54 per cent to the total food grain production of the country where as the contribution of Punjab stands at 12.92 per cent²³. In addition, the agricultural saving accounts for 50 per cent, the third lowest in the country.²⁴ As stated earlier, the area and production of cash crops like Jute, wheat, Sugarcane and Groundnut are still low (see Table – B). The low irrigation potentiality has restricted the growth of intensive cash crop production and use of chemical fertilizers. The per hectare consumption of fertilizer is as low as 40 kgs in Orissa as against 166 kgs in Punjab, 159 kgs. Andhra Pradesh; 147 kgs in Haryana and 95 kgs in the country as a whole²⁵.

According to 1971 census, there were only 2000 tractors and 600 pump sets energized in the agriculture. By 1977-79, the number of tractors and pump sets had increased to 2837 and 9266 respectively.²⁶ By 2000-2001, the figure of tractors with trolleys has increased to 44404. The figure of pump sets has gone upto 73000. The pump sets energized in the state constitutes only 0.59 per cent of the country.²⁷ Although the number of tractors and trolleys have increased during the last decade, it is because of Supper Cyclone in Orissa and a large chunk of these instruments are used in construction of concrete houses rather than in agriculture. In Orissa, the average size of land holding was 1.6 hectare which has now come down to 1.34 hectare (as per 1990-91 figure). The small size of landholding prevents the use of tractors and energisation of pump sets. As a result, it indirectly affects agricultural modernization. Even today the farmers of Orissa use largely plough of various types locally made and the number stands at 15180^{28*}. Thus it clearly discernible that Orissa agriculture is still backward and hardly there is any scope for its modernization.

Since major means of production is land, its unequal distribution maintains structural inequality and acts as a hindrance to rural poverty, adversely affecting the state economy. The distribution of means of production is highly skewed. Seventy six per cent of households (marginal and small) have possessed only 39 per cent of the total cultivated area, while another 11 per cent of households control 40 per cent (see Table – C). No wonder, after three decades the percentages have changed across marginally causing no effect on ownership pattern. The rich sections of peasantry have retained their lands without losing a portion of it.

Thus according to someone estimate 1.73 million cultivators of Orissa own less than 0.5 hectares and the number of landless agricultural labourers have hardly benefited either from land reforms or from different rural development schemes like Integrated Rural Development (IRD) and Economic Rehabilitation of Rural Poor (ERRP)²⁹.

In Orissa, agricultural tenancy is common and widespread. The percentage is very high in coastal region (50 %), where 43 per cent of the landowners owning between 15-19 acres and 59.9 owning between 20.24 acres lease out their land³⁰. Several other studies highlight on the continued magnitude of tenancy in various forms³¹. The threat of eviction is quite frequent and the share of tenant varies between 40 to 50 per cent of the produce depending upon the nature of agreement. As Appu rightly observed "... so long as class of land owners who are reluctant to engage in manual labour and a vast army of landless agricultural labourer co-exist, any legal ban on tenancy in the Indian rural society will remain a dead letter".³²

Likewise 7 per cent of the total population is composed of agricultural labourers whose wage appears to be relatively much better in the country. Thanks to Mr. Biju Pattanaik who at his last stint of chief ministership in Orissa increased the wage rates of agricultural labourers. The wage rate varies within the regions in Orissa. In the coastal belt of Orissa always it is found that the wage rate is always higher. The super cyclone also increased the wage rate of labourers as crores of rupees were pumped in and massive construction of cement houses started. The demand for labour increased so high that it was difficult to get labourer to do agricultural operations. Agriculture in the state provides employment around 120 days in a year.³³ Table – D speaks about the wage structure of agricultural labourers today. Lack of employment in agriculture throughout the year severely affects their living conditions. No doubt, the state of affairs has adversely affected the per-capita expenditure which figures at only Rs. 698/- . The staggering army of surplus labour commits themselves to the overlords and become victims of severe exploitation. By 1982-83, nearly 12,841 bonded labourers have been rehabilitated by the government of Orissa.³⁴ The real situation prevailing in the interior parts of Northern, Southern and Western Orissa is not known. The present government of Mr. Nabin Pattanaik claims that the state is free from bonded labourers. Authentication of this statement needs to be examined by conducting a study by a reputed professional research organization in the country and to know the prevailing real situation in the context of the state's backward economy.

Industrially, Orissa has remained backward in spite of its abundance of natural resources. Industry only accounts for 19 per cent of the state income.³⁵ The state is able to add only 4 per cent income during the last three decades. The lack of skill, lack of investment in the infrastructure and the poor voice of the government at the Centre are some of the main reasons for such backwardness. In the present Dr. Manmohan Singh's

governments at the center, not a single fellow from the state could find a berth in the central cabinet. In the last reshuffling of ministry at the centre held in the month of February, a single fellow from Orissa was nominated to the ministry with a state rank ministry having redundant portfolio. As Prof. Mohanty rightly remarked, "the vast natural resources of Orissa are utilized for national economic development while the condition of stagnation continues in the state. The ruling strata of Orissa is a subservient partner of the ruling forces at the national level and has not proved its leadership by effective intervening in the existing process."³⁶ The number of industries including small, medium and big accounted 957 in the state in year 1971 had gone up only to 1456 by 1998³⁷.

The industrial scenario of the state is found to be much worse as compared to many other states. Its per capita gross output and value added by manufacturing during 1998-99 were Rs. 3068 and Rs. 812 respectively as against the corresponding figures of Rs. 8072 and Rs. 1789 at the all India level (Govt. of Orissa 2002: ANX62). It is further found that the share of registered factories in the state declined from 1.71 per cent in 1948-49 to 1.30 per cent in 1992-93 notwithstanding an increase in its share of factory employment from 0.47 per cent to 2.08 per cent and that of fixed capital investment from 0.62 per cent to 3.60 over the period. Even though the states share of value added in the country has increased during the period 1960-61 to 1992-93, a share of only 1.98 per cent in 1992-93 is very negligible³⁸. In the early 1990s the employment figures of industrial work force in the developed states like Gujarat, Maharashtra were 18 and 17 respectively for every 1000 persons, whereas in Orissa it was found to be only 5 as compared to 10 at the all India level.

The poor performance of Orissa's Industrial sector is mainly due to increasing sickness, external and internal factors such as lack of working capital, use of obsolete technology, poor entrepreneurial quality, lack of market, supply constraints of raw material and above all the state's political economy and narrow policy vision of the government responsible for industrial debacle of the state³⁹. Even the exploitation of minerals continue to increase, but the condition of miners and the people of the region remain unabated. In such a paradoxical situation the slow and negligible expansion of industries, petty production, which does not generate surplus, the lack of employment generation, further aggravates the socio-economic condition of peasantry. Mr. Nabin Pattanaik's government policy to invite multinationals for industrializing Orissa economy without proper Planning has invited several protest movements in different parts of Orissa. The recent incident took place at Kalinga Nagar in which around twenty tribals lost their lives in the movement. Since neither the industry nor agricultural situation in Orissa is able to accommodate its surplus population by providing gainful employment, exodus out migration of peasants and agricultural labourers to far of places is a day-to-day phenomenon in Orissa.⁴⁰

So it is no wonder to see that a large number of its population lives in absolute poverty (around 70 % in 1977 and now 47 % in the year 2000).⁴¹ The per capita income of NSDP at current price stands at Rs. 9273 the lowest in the country. For Punjab it stands at Rs. 25048; for Maharashtra Rs. 23726, for Andhra Pradesh Rs. 16373 and for the country Rs. 16487.⁴² Thus it proves the utter failure of the successive governments to eradicate poverty.

Given such a vicious circle of highly un-equal land control, widespread tenurial system, high wage rate and paucity of employment opportunities, parcelization of land followed by slow agricultural modernization, low investment in industrial infrastructure, one need not wonder about the existing state of agricultural stagnation and poverty.

Despite this sorry state of affairs, the achievements made by the modern credit institutions like the Banks or the Agricultural Credit Societies have hardly add any thing cognisance for appreciation beyond pious enunciation of their normative principles. There are around 2753 co-operatives function in the state with 413000 members and have advanced loan worth Rs. 51852 lakhs, and the average amount per member turned out to be Rs. 1264 only. Likewise the Commercial Banks have brought very limited impact on rural areas. The fact reveals that the population per Bank in Orissa stands at 16.6 (in thousands) with a credit deposit ratio of 45.6 against credit deposit ratio 61.6 for Andhra Pradesh, 107.1 for Maharashtra, and 62.3 for the country.⁴³ Thus the poor growth and poor performance of modern credit system leave the needy and poor peasantry at the mercy of the private money lenders . Nearly 90 per cent rural credit comes from money lenders,⁴⁴ Who have been popularly recognized in the rural areas as “ poor man’s Bank”. The interest rate normally varies between 25 per cent and 50 per cent and even sometimes higher depending upon the nature, time and terms of repayment. Most of the loans are meant for family consumption, to meet the expenses on rituals and ceremonies and very rarely for agriculture. Many of the defaulters have to submit themselves to the moneylenders as domestic servants. Further, this usurious capital helps in parcelization and alienation of land causing serious agricultural stagnation, poverty, malnutrition and hunger among the vast majority of rural population.

The slow growth of agriculture is further, severely affected by the unprecedented climatic conditions and vagaries of nature. The frequent occurrence of cyclones, floods and droughts completely washout the standing crops, leaving the peasantry at the borderline of survival. The incident of Super Cyclone is still in the fresh memory of the affected population of the state and let alone in the country and whole world. Thus it adversely affects to their purchasing power, expansion of home market and let alone national and international market.

In Orissa, the rich peasants hardly invest 2 per cent of their surplus in agriculture. Thus the rack renting usurious money lending and speculative trade have been their principal methods of appropriation of agricultural surplus, which they largely spent on conspicuous consumption and luxury livings.⁴⁵ The availability of cheap labour in abundance due to non availability of secondary employment resources, the acute and chronic indebtedness of peasantry and accumulation of quick profit through trade, further strengthen their counter productive roles.

III

This description of the agrarian structure of Orissa clearly demonstrates the continued domination of feudal/semi-feudal relations of production.. The upper caste absentee landlords enjoy absolute privileges, generate economic and political influence. Utter failure of land reform measures; forever strengthen the hands of this class. The highly unequal distribution of means of production and land-man ratio, inadequate investment in agricultural infrastructure and industry, slow agricultural modernization followed by near stagnation of agriculture, has resulted in slow economic growth, abject poverty and starvation. The capitalist relation of production has not been able to penetrate the Orissan agrarian structure. In such a dwindling economy, any progressive patchwork like 20-point economic programme on rural development could neither bring any desired change nor could it liberate the large masses of work force from the feudal and semi-feudal exploitation. The so-called progress

both in agricultural and industrial front claimed by the successive governments during the last three decades has been nothing but ‘myth’ and “Eye Wash” and the reality yet remains to be properly appreciated. The only alternative to the present agrarian structure is some radical agrarian reform, which can be only possible by the awareness of exploited masses of rural poor. And if this does not happen in near future, the protest movement occurred in Kalinga Nagar will be repeated now and then in the state in a large scale. The rural peasantry will not tolerate the continuous ruthless exploitation. The naxalite cadre had its presence only in a few interior pockets of Southern Orissa. Now the cadre is spreading and has shown its tentacles in many parts of the Coastal and Western Orissa. Around thirteen districts are now infected with naxalite problem. Naxalite problem is not merely a Law and Order issue as emphasized by the State Government. The issue is much deep in socio-economic in nature and needs to be addressed with serious thinking with meticulous planning for overall development of the state to eradicate poverty.

Table A: Area under Principal Crops in Orissa in (Area in 000 hectares)

Sr. No.	Crops	Year				
		1970-71 *	1974-75 *	1978-79 *	1994-95 **	2000-01 *
01	Rice	4471	4432	4372	4455	4434
02	Jowar	17	24	33	29	13
03	Maize	72	97	131	46.79	54.37
04	Wheat	13	5	62	4.94	8.82
05	Ragi	156	191	277	80.95	83.98
06	Mung				230.53	147.44
07	Biri				160.67	109.10
08	Kulthe				120.79	76.00
09	Tur/Ahar	51	56	70	-	-
10	Ground hut	70	104	144	87.36	72.36
11	Seramum				71.96	50.50
12	Palato				9.66	8.25
13	Onion				47.81	26.77
14	Sugar Cane	30	44	46	-	-
15	Chillies				99.97	69.65
16	Turmeric				25.23	25.31
17	Jute	44	47	49	7.36	3.90
18	Tutalpulses				933.97	554.69
19	Toral vegetable				887.40	356.19

Source : (I)* Statistical Outline of Orissa 1979, Bureau of Statistics and Economics, Govt. of Orissa, pp. 63,70

(II)** Statistical Abstract of Orissa 2002, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Orissa, pp. 45,51

Table B: Changes in Agricultural Productivity in Orissa (in average kgs per hectare)

S. No.	Crop	Year					
		1970-71*	1974-75*	1978-79*	1994-95*	1997-1998**	2000-2001**
1	Rice	917	714	981	1426	1395	1041
2	Jowar	610	580	654	622	525	575
3	Maize	820	750	857	977	1222	1266
4	Wheat	1423	1573	1886	1350	996	1462
5	Rigi	901	672	706	590	375	554
6	Mung	-	-	-	1373	202	198
7	Biri	-	-	-	354	311	249
8	Kulthi	-	-	-	352	382	191
9	Tur/Arhar	630	490	53	-	-	-
10	Groundnut	1240	1370	1216	1123	1079	794
11	Sesamum	-	-	-	222	194	133
12	Putato	-	-	-	11168	9832	10407
13	Orion	-	-	-	7562	3674	8570
14	Sugarcane	5389	6250	6047	58987	61214	57444
15	Chillies	-	-	-	769	813	846
16	Turmeric	-	-	-	1964	2373	2395
17	Jute	750	710	863	6290	7440	9364

Source: (I) * Statistical outline of Orissa 1979, Govt. of Orissa, pp. 79-81.

(II) * Statistical Abstract of Orissa 2002, Govt. of Orissa, pp. 45-63.

Table C: Percentage of Operational Holdings and Area Operated by Size of Operational Holdings

Size class in hectare	Total Holdings 1970-71		Total Holdings ** 1990 – 91 census		Total Holdings ** 1995 – 96 census	
	No.	Area	No.	Area	No.	Area
Below 1.00	43.30	11.94	53.58	19.72	54.08	20.68
1.00 – 1.99	32.89	20.89	26.29	27.00	27.89	29.59
2.00 – 3.99	13.28	21.13	15.06	29.55	13.72	28.21
4.00 – 9.99	9.09	27.83	4.68	19.09	3.93	16.80
10.00 -	1.44	12.52	0.39	4.64	0.38	4.72
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source : * Statistical Outline of Orissa 1979, Bureau of Statistics and Economics, Govt. of Orissa, pp. 62.

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Table D: Rural Daily Wages of Male/Female Labourers in Orissa

Sr. No.	Year	Money Wages in Rs.		
		Male	Female	Children
1	1960-1961*	1.22	-	-
2	1967-1968	2.18	-	-
3	1971-1972	2.16	-	-
4	1977-1978	4.09	-	-
5	1996-1997**	29.02	23.13	21.47
6	1997-1998	31.07	25.33	22.69
7	1998-1999	33.66	27.69	25.08
8	1999-2000	37.33	30.82	27.53
9	2000-2001	40.44	33.09	29.97

Source : * N.K. Panda, “Agricultural Growth and Rural Poverty in Orissa”, *Vision*, II (4), p.28.

** Statistical Abstract of Orissa, 2002, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Orissa, p.137.

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 - (2) Orissa Estate Abolition Act – 1951
 - (3) Orissa Tenant Protection Act – 1948
 - (4) Orissa Land Reforms Act – 1965
 - (5) Orissa Debt Bondage Act – 1948
 - (6) Orissa Land Reforms Act – 1973

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