

Ecology and Proletarianisation: Increasing Need for Attention

Anil Kumar Vaddiraju

Associate Professor and Head of the Centre, Centre for Political Institutions, Governance and Development

Institute for Social and Economic Change, Nagarabhavi, Bangalore-560072

anilvaddiraju@gmail.com, anilkumar@isec.ac.in

Abstract

This brief article argues three points with an illustrative case study: a) proletarianisation is increasingly also caused by ecological reasons; b) this is significant for India from regions such as Telangana, Bundelkhand, to Vidarbha and many other parts ; c) this phenomenon of ecology induced proletarianisation is however indirectly owing to accumulation of capital on global scale. The article also argues that this phenomenon affects agriculture in the global South far more adversely.

Key words: Ecology; pauperization; developing countries; agriculture

Ecology and proletarianisation: Increasing need for attention?¹

' The 1995 estimate of 25 million environmental refugees is cautious and conservative. Scattered throughout the developing world are 135 million people threatened by severe desertification, and 550 million people subject to chronic water shortages. While certain of these people have been included in the 25 million figure, many could well have been driven to migrate without being counted as environmental refugees'

--Norman Myers(2001)

' The studies of UNEP(United Nations Environment Programme indicated that, over the preceding 20 years, the problem of land degradation had continued to worsen due to human activities and climate change such as prolonged or frequent droughts aggravating land degradation. This led defining desertification as "land degradation"....'

National Climate Centre, Pune,(2011)

Classical theories of proletarianisation emphasise enormously on economic and social dimensions of the process. This paper argues that in the conditions of increasing effects of globalization, and consequent climate change on agriculture, we need to pay renewed attention to ecological factors. The 'ecological refugees' as the affected populations have come to be known, migrate not only internationally but also intra-nationally in search of livelihoods. The paper illustrates this with a case study and further argues that under the circumstances of globalization, increasing accumulation of capital at global scale does accentuate climate change; however, the local stories of the impact of this increasing climate change led ecological effects on agriculture should be narrated with proper nuanced view of a combination of local and larger factors that lead to all too desperate conditions of proletarianisation and consequent migration.

The classical theory of proletarianisation holds that it is the process of dispossession of peasantry during the capitalist development process. First taking taking place in agriculture, with internal differentiation proceeding apace and land concentration on one hand and land less proletariat forming on the other. Secondly landless proletariat then migrate or forced to migrate to cities, where they are absorbed into industry and become industrial proletariat. Capital and labour gradually get polarised with increasing number of peasants being pauperized, driven to cities and finally into industry as labour power providing labour. Within Industry again there is polarisation between capital and labour where increasing concentration of capital on one hand

increasingly pauperised proletariat on the other forms. The classical marxist theory thus argues for social polarisation despite pre-existing agricultural conditions of differentiation and conditions of production. This notion forwarded by Marx has been influential and led to debates between: populists and bolsheviks in Russia; for example between populists and Lenin. Karl Kautsky and others such as Eduard David in SPD(Social Democratic Party) of Germany; between Stalin and Chayanov during collectivisation of agriculture in Russia.(Vaddiraju:2013)

These debates however underplay the importance of pre-existing differentiation in agriculture—for example a predominantly small peasant economy with no enclosure movement and few prospects of absorption into manufacturing. These theories under emphasise the productive forces of agriculture and specificity of agriculture. The theory also underestimates the ecological complex in which agriculture takes place. These conceptions underplay the a) vulnerability of agriculture to nature and b)vulnerability of its productive forces to nature. As Ashok Rudra once pointed out entire debate revolves around the dialectic of society and economy determining every aspect of the change. However, the dynamics of change in agriculture are crucially determined by the dynamics of nature; and dialectics as applied to society and economy—could be proven incorrect in the face of drastic changes in the nature of agricultural productive forces. In fact the very over emphasis on social relations and economic relations at the expense of the understanding of changes in the nature and the dynamics concerning it are very fundamental flaws in ‘agrarian question’ discourse. In contrast to the above we argue here that the causes for proletarianisation could also be ecological. Recurring droughts, lack of water for irrigation and cultivation, near famine conditions can drive all classes of farming community to become labourers elsewhere, in either rural or urban/ semi-urban settings. Mostly this leads to intra-rural migration to irrigated regions.Eg. From parts of Bihar to Punjab and within and between different states in India

Here the agricultural populations are affected by recurring droughts, desertification and lack of water. These often are called ‘ecological refugees’ and they migrate to developed countries owing to the situation in homelands.(Myers:1995,2001).However the situation seems to have only worsened since Myres has highlighted this phenomenon. Globally ecological proletarianisation is most prominent in sub-saharan Africa, Sahel region and in Horn of Africa. Myres estimated the global ecological refugees to be at 25 million in 1995 and more and more thereafter. Here the agricultural populations are affected by recurring droughts, desertification and lack of water. These often are called ‘ecological refugees’ and they migrate to developed countries owing to the situation in homelands.(Myers:1995,2001).However the situation seems to have only worsened since Myres has highlighted this phenomenon. The below case study illustrates this argument.

II Case Study-I: Yepur

Devarakonda is one of the Mandals in Nalgonda district. Some basic features of Nalgonda are: Net sown area is 48.4 percent of the district only. Dependency on ground water is high. 71 percent Net Irrigated Area is under wells. Marginal and small holdings consist 80 percent of total holdings. Telangana state average is 82 percent. Rest are medium holdings. Rarely a few large holdings(for which data is not available).Nalgonda consists of 12 percent of total area of Telangana state.Devarakonda is one of the Mandals in the district.(CESS:2016)

The village agrarian structure showed marked stagnation vis-a-vis land owning classes and out migration and pauperisation vis-à-vis labouring classes. State intervention in terms of holding periodic Panchayati Raj elections did not lead to shift of power from upper castes to lower castes. The only aspect of the state intervention, which had beneficial impact on village agriculture as well as quality of life, was electrification. The shift in political power from upper castes to lower castes came in 1995, but it was because of electoral reservations rather than because of general political awareness. Thus, in this village from drought prone region ecology plays a crucial role in determining the economic stagnation of the dominant castes/classes and the out migration of the entire peasantry for work. There was an obvious process of proletarianisation of

peasantry into migrant labour. But this process was more induced by ecology and drought than by the dynamics of village political economy.

The Productive Forces

Before discussing the survival strategies of different rural classes, it is important to discuss the village productive forces. The village has 2060 acres of land under it. Of this only 1340 acres is arable and the rest is simply uncultivable. The village has four small tank-like structures under which a total of 45 acres gets irrigated depending on the rainfall. Rainfall itself is extremely low in this region. Earlier there used to be one more tank but it dried up and was later levelled up for cultivation. Of the 1340 acres cultivated, 45 acres of paddy is cultivated under tanks. Besides since 1980 many private tube wells have been sunk. Under these tube wells, numbering around 69, about 120 acres of paddy, groundnut etc., are grown. Thus, the total irrigated land of the village is only 165 (120 + 45) acres. On rest of the 1175 acres of arable dry land mainly crops such as castor, Bajra and millets are grown. The soils being infertile red soil and water being extremely scarce, no high value commercial crops can be grown. Added to this scenario is the fact that ground water table is falling every year.

Survival Strategies of Different Classes

Ecological conditions determine the strategies of reproduction of different classes. Here land ownership has only relative importance in determining the politico-economic strategies of survival, because ecological conditions affect all classes evenly. Thus, it is not difficult in this region to locate even a landowner of 15 acres among the seasonal labourers. The land values in this village are extremely low: Rs. 8000 to 10,000 for dry land and about Rs. 20,000 for wet land.

But in spite of the above blurring of class distinctions (in the face of drought), differentiating landlords from peasantry (in a broad sense) is still useful. The survival strategies of each in the face of the common enemy, drought, are different.

The landlords have adapted themselves to the situations in two ways: firstly, by making modest (sometimes quite successful) ventures into urban tertiary sector and trade and secondly, by switching over from traditional crops such as castor, millets to horticulture. Some landlords successfully combine both the aspects mentioned above and some pursue either of the strategies separately.

Firstly, given the dismal agricultural situation many landlords have put a high premium on the education of their children. In the course of the fieldwork it was found that one of the sons of a landlord was studying engineering in the U.S.A. Social pressures within the upper castes have been added to this. Where the efforts at education have not been successful the attempt was to turn to trade and business.

Secondly, within the agriculture the landlords have shifted to horticulture. It is common for a landlord to have a mango or sweet-lime garden of 10 to 25 acres. These are high yielding varieties and the crop can be harvested within four to five years of planting. Shift from traditional crops to horticulture is a major strategy of surviving drought. Some backward caste peasants also started emulating landlords and have planted sweet-lime and mango on smaller plots ranging from one to two acres. Thus, in the village Yepur 11 backward caste peasants had planted orchards in land totalling 42 acres.

Table-1**Land ownership pattern of Yepur village**

Holding size in acres	No. of Holdings	Total Land in acres
1-2	20	35
2-5	40	160
5-10	50	400
10-20	20	300
20-35	10	320
above 35	4	125
Total land:		1340

Source: Primary field survey.

Droughts and Out Migration

There is a clear-cut process of ecology-induced pauperisation in the village. Nearly three fourths of the village goes to the irrigated region of Nalgonda in search of work as seasonal migrant labour. All the middle, small and marginal peasants travel along with their families to irrigated region for work. In fact, calling these migrant labourers as so many categories of peasants are meaningless, however much land they may have back in their villages. These seasonal migrants are divided into labour gangs or groups. Each group consists of 50 to 120 labourers. They form groups across castes. The much emphasised caste distinctions disappear when they are formed into groups. When they migrate, in the irrigated region, they work together and live together. Even Dalit labourers share the same thatched shed with other caste labourers. It is a clear case of class formation in a sense. The migrant labour acts as a class, despite the fact that it is divided along caste lines. The same phenomenon does not operate once they are back in the village. The peasants/labourers, when they come back from the irrigated canal region step back again into their caste roles, living in their caste determined streets and houses of the village, thus firstly, there is migration to a great extent of even land owning peasants. Secondly, they migrate as a class in spite of all the differences.

The process of out migration by different classes of peasants is one survival strategy in the face of acute drought conditions. Every season nearly 700 to 800 peasants travel to the canal irrigated region from this village and get engaged in agricultural labour. These migrant labourers generally prefer wages in kind to wages in cash. It is generally the opinion that they migrate seasonally to paddy growing region precisely to earn some rice. The villagers see the seasonal migration as a work opportunity. Not only they migrate as seasonal labourers some also migrate as annual farm servants i.e., as jeetas. This migration for annual contract Jeetam occurs less frequently. But in general, the migrant peasant sees the activity of migration as a great help before the acute crises which he otherwise faces.

III Accumulation by dispossession?

Two points need to be mentioned:) the process we described above is not amenable to explanation with the theory of 'accumulation by dispossession'. Capital is not involved directly in dispossessing and displacing the peasants. It is nature. The point, however, is that such displacement and caused indirectly by the larger process of accumulation at global scale. When accumulation and consumption happens on global scale it causes wide

spread damage to the climate and ecology of third world agriculture, and this combined by the contingent local factors, leads to ecological proletarianisation. We contend that a) Climate change and ecological change are caused by capitalism; b) This form of pauperisation of agriculture is indirectly determined by the process of capital operating at global scale; c) And this leads to not only ecological crisis caused by increasing global warming, but also leads to pauperisation of third world agricultural populations. This is different from 'accumulation by dispossession' such as the process which takes place when agricultural or indigenous populations are displaced owing to capital investments or industrial displacement of peoples. Ecology affects proletarianisation leading to labour migration that is intra-rural and rural-urban. This needs increasing attention today with climate change and global warming escalating. Accumulation of capital at global scale leads to climate change which affects third world agriculture. However the relationship is indirect, and we need much nuanced explanation of a combination of local ecological factors plus the global phenomenon of climate/ecological change. Local ecological systems determine livelihoods and survival strategies of different classes. Again we need a much nuanced picture of local effects of increasing global changes of climate. Capital accumulation on global scale does adversely affect livelihoods in the Global South. Since climate change is taking place fast, its impact on ecologically –and not just economically– or even socially-- induced proletarianisation is increasingly significant today than ever before. More research is needed on this phenomenon.

References

1. CESS (2016)Telangana Human Development Report: District Profiles, Hyderabad: Centre for Economic and Social Studies.
 2. Myres N.(2001) ' Environmental Refugees: Our Latest Understanding', Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B:356 16.1-16.5.
 3. Gore , P.G. B.A.Roy and H.R.Hatwar (2011) Impact of Climate Change on Land Degradation over India, Pune: National Climate Centre.
 4. Vaddiraju, Anil Kumar(2013) Peasantry, Capitalism and State: The Political Economy of Agrarian Societies, New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
-