

# **Revolutionary potential of women workers in agriculture**

**Jaya Mehta**

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, on the occasion of International Women's Day, the German Democratic Party began party's 'Red Week' for the year 1914. On that occasion, Rosa Luxemburg said;

*Proletarian Women's Day inaugurates the 'Week of Social Democracy'. The party of the disinherited places its female columns in the front lines by sending them into the heat of battle for eight days, in order to spread the seeds of socialism into new fields. And the call for political equality of women is the first one they make, as they prepare to win over new supporters for the working class as a whole.*

One hundred years later and from a country very far from Germany .I salute her and talk about the revolutionary potential of proletarian women in rural India.

## ***Introduction***

Rosa Luxemburg was the first scientist to put forward the thesis of imperialism, according to which the surplus value of a dynamic capitalist economy can be realized only by encroaching upon a social organization of a non capitalist nature. The only way to realise the unconsumed surplus value in a capitalist economy is to enter into commodity exchange with a pre capitalist system and obtain additional constant and variable capital in material forms. Any pre capitalist formation will not serve the purpose. Capitalist accumulation requires a pre capitalist formation of a particular form with which it can engage into commodity exchange. To obtain the desired pre capitalist formation, capitalism then fights a battle of annihilation against non suitable pre capitalist formations. And this is done by using political force and violence.

In the end, the encroachment of capitalist sector on to the non capitalist sector results in assimilation of the latter into the capitalist world. With this hypothesis, her logical theory of inevitable collapse of world capitalism follows. Capitalist accumulation proceeds by assimilating the pre capitalist sector whose existence is a necessary condition for the accumulation to continue. With time, the size of pre capitalist sector will reduce unilaterally, till a stage arrives when pre capitalist formations have all been assimilated into the capitalist sector. However, the capitalist economy cannot survive in isolation. To survive accumulation must proceed and without the pre capitalist formations accumulation is not possible. Therefore, collapse of capitalism is inevitable. Of course, Rosa Luxemburg was quick to add that much before this inevitable end stage arrives; the system will be overthrown by a conscious revolutionary programme of the working class.

There are two aspects to Rosa Luxemburg's theory of imperialism – one is its genesis and the other is

its impact. The genesis of the theory relates to the internal dynamics of mature capitalist system which makes existence of pre capitalist formation a necessary condition for the accumulation to proceed. The impact of imperialism discusses how the encroachment of capitalist sector affects the pre capitalist or non capitalist formations. On both counts the details of theoretical formulations have been contested by Marxist scholars and also by the feminists but the broad theme of her thesis has been vindicated by history. A large number of Marxist and third world scholars have underscored the historical fact of colonial exploitation. The German feminists have used the thematic framework to talk about the subsistence labour performed by women.

The end of 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a prolonged crisis in the capitalist world and a complete breakdown of the Soviet type economies of the socialist block. World imperialism entered a new phase in the garb of globalization and neo liberal policy frame. A crucial feature of the new phase of imperialism is a vast increase in the relative importance of accumulation through encroachment. This has taken place across national boundaries and within the third world countries where the ruling class has got increasingly integrated with the metropolitan capital.

This has brought Rosa Luxemburg's thesis at the center stage among the Marxist and third world scholars. Encroachment into the resource base and production structures of peasantry and petty producers through unethical market practices and use of force and violence is being reported on a frightening scale from the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Along with the assault of the capitalist sector there are myriad stories of valiant resistance put up by the peasantry and petty producers. The revolutionary potential of these struggles in terms of joining force with the working class struggles to overthrow the unjust and exploitative and barbaric capitalist production system needs to be studied carefully in a creative analytical frame.

The paper discusses the resistance offered by the non capitalist sector to the capitalist accumulation through encroachment in the Indian case and the specific role of women workforce in these struggles.

### ***Primitive accumulation in Indian economy: Land grab***

In 1991, the development policy frame of India underwent a major directional change. The Nehruvian planned development model was replaced by the neo liberal policy frame which was dictated by IMF's structural adjustment programme.

In the neo liberal phase agricultural land has rapidly got transferred to non agricultural uses. Corporate capital both domestic and multinational has encroached upon the agricultural sector in a big way. Accumulation through encroachment of pre capitalist or non capitalist sector has taken two different forms. One is the direct takeover of land from peasantry and indigenous population by corporates for mining purposes, for setting up industrial units and for real estate development. The other is a continuous income squeeze on peasantry and petty producers through the operation of market forces till they reach a stage where they give up their means of production and are pauperized.

In the first instance, Indian state facilitated the land grab by corporates by invoking the antiquated 1894 Land Acquisition Act of Colonial government and used force to oust peasantry and indigenous people from their land and livelihood. There was widespread and sustained resistance to the use of force and violence resorted to by the state. The resistance was powerful enough to compel the Indian state to repeal the Land acquisition Act, 1894 and replace it by 'The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013'. According to the new act, the land cannot be acquired by the state without the consent of the land owners. Thus, land can be acquired for private projects with public purpose and for projects with public private partnership only when 80 per cent and 70 per cent of land owners on the concerned land agree to sell their land. Moreover provision is made in the bill to ensure fair price to the land owners and rehabilitation to all those, whose livelihoods depended on the concerned piece of land. Of course, the Act has just come into existence and it is yet to be seen how effectively it will be implemented and to what extent it will offer protection to peasantry and others dependent on land. In any case, the Act does not put any restriction on the operation of market forces and in this sense offers only a partial protection to peasants, indigenous population and others.

This brings us to the marginalization of peasants and petty producer through an income squeeze on their livelihoods enforced by the market forces. The unsustainable land use and ownership pattern and lopsided industrialization inherited from the colonial past could not be corrected adequately by the planned development trajectory of Independent India. The Indian planners failed to resolve the agrarian question in the economy. Thus, planned development led to the growth of industry and service sector and their share in the National income grew but a corresponding shift in the labour force from agriculture to other sectors did not take place. The majority workforce (more than 60 per cent) remained confined in agriculture whereas its share in the National Income registered a secular decline (from 59 per cent in 1950-51 to 36.2 per cent in 1982-3 to 29 per cent in 1990-91). Even then the state support to petty producers under the Nehruvian model of development offered fragile livelihood equilibrium to rural households. The neo liberal policy frame shattered this equilibrium. The government withdrew state support from all quarters, removed international trade and investment barriers and handed over input and output markets of agricultural produce almost entirely to private corporate sector. Since 1990s, Indian agriculture is engulfed in a deep intractable crisis. During the boom phase of Indian economy, when National Income growth rate touched double digit figure, the agricultural sector stagnated. Along with growing number of Indians joining billionaires' rank at world level, the per capita food grain availability in the country declined and the extent of malnourishment acquired frightening proportion. The farmers response to this assault on their livelihood by market forces was 180 degree at variance from the one mentioned above. In this case the response was unprecedented rate of farmers' suicides. Since mid 90s more 200,000 farmers have committed suicides across the country.

Invariably, the reason for suicide has been inability of the farmers to repay their debts. Farm incomes

for small and marginal farmers have become more and more uncertain because of increased weather contingencies, risks associated with new technology and extremely volatile world market prices of agricultural commodities to which our farmers are exposed. Slightest of perturbation upsets their fragile equilibrium and in desperation they consume the pesticides, which they had procured for protecting their crops.

Apart from those who committed suicides, a great many small and marginal farmers have parted with their meager resource base (mainly land) partly or completely in order to repay their debts.

There has been a dramatic drop in the total cultivated area in the country. During the period 1992 to 2003 total land area under operational holdings has decreased from 125 million hectares to 107.6 million hectares – a decline of 17.4 million hectares. The decline is unfailingly registered in all major states. A decline of 17.4 million hectares cannot be explained just in terms of direct takeover of farm land using force. A much larger area is transferred to non agricultural uses through operation of market forces which imposed formidable economic compulsions on peasantry and other petty producers.

In the year 2010-11 the share agriculture in the National income has gone down to less than 15 per cent. The share of work force has also come down to a little less than 50 per cent. This, however, does not mean that labour has shifted out of agriculture due to new higher productivity employment space generated in other sectors. The shift only indicates that the sponge capacity of agriculture to accommodate surplus labour is shrinking fast and labour debouched out of agriculture is drifting into low productivity-low income service sector and construction sector. The labour moving out of agriculture is by no means better situated than before.

To complete the picture emerging out of the macro statistics it is necessary to delineate the access to the main resource base 'land' among rural households.

#### ***Inadequate resource base and its skewed distribution***

The central statistical organisation in India conducts a detailed survey of land holdings every ten years. The latest survey data available is for the year 2003. The data for 2013 is yet to arrive.

According to this data, on 107.6 million hectares of farm land there are 101 farm holdings. This means that the average size of holding was 1.06 hectares in 2003. However, every rural household is not fortunate enough to have its own land holding. According to the same report 41.6 per cent of rural households do not own any land other than homestead. Therefore, average holding size of 1.06 hectares relates to only 58.4 per cent households who own farm land.

Even among the land owning households the distribution is skewed. About 70 per cent holdings are marginal holdings which are less than 1 hectare in size. Another 18 per cent are small holdings which are between 1 to 2 hectares in size. The large holdings with more than 10 hectares of land are 3 to 4 per cent. Looked at from another angle we find that top 9.5 per cent of rural households own 56.6 per cent

of land area and remaining 90.5 per cent households own just 43.4 per cent of land area. There are 10 per cent rural households who do not own any land not even house land.

It is clear that the total farm land available with the rural households is not sufficient to provide livelihood support to entire workforce currently dependent on agriculture. Out of 459 million workforce in Indian economy 244 million are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. Resolution of agrarian crisis then necessarily requires generating space for productive employment outside of agriculture.

Secondly, such large number of rural households without land and equally large numbers with very small holdings engender an intrinsic vulnerability in the agrarian sector. Therefore, redistribution of land alone is not sufficient to take care of the plight of rural work force. If rural workforce is not to be left at the mercy of neo liberal accumulation process which dispossesses and pauperizes them, then collective resistance is required. Extra economic forces have to be resisted through collective political strength but effective resistance to economic assault requires a collective economic base. Individually, it is impossible to resist market encroachment on the meager resource base.

This is the background in which we contextualize the women workers in agriculture.

### ***Women in agriculture***

In 1978, the famous German feminist and sociologist Maria Mies studied 'subsistence labour' of female agricultural labourers in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh in India. Maria highlighted the complete lack of control of the women over means of production required for agricultural operations. The women had no control over land, well, plough or draught animals. The only tools and implements in their possession were sickle, baskets and winnowing fans. Again, huts and tenaments belonged to the head of the households i.e. men and women possessed household utensils used for cooking.

While men controlled land and tools which involved use of other than human source of energy, women possessed tools with which they performed labour using their own physical energy. Discussing the organisation of work processes Maria pointed out the crucial difference between tasks performed by women and those of men. While men performed tasks like ploughing or irrigation which were done individually, women's work was organised collectively. Maria describes the task of transplanting paddy performed by women: "*In transplanting rice seedlings teams of 20 to 30 women had to work simultaneously, wading through the mud and putting individual plants into the soil. They worked in a row, all bending down and moving forward as they worked .... All workers performed the same movements.: in one hand they held the seedlings, with the other they stuck them into the mud. All followed the same work rhythm.*"

Maria then describes a struggle waged by these women for increase of wage rate and points out that the nature of work process results in a collective consciousness which is then reflected in their

collective strength and resilience when they wage small and big struggles.

More than three decades later the situation remains broadly the same. Indian women in agriculture can still be described with apt observations made by Maria Mies. Women do not have control over means of production. They work long hours in the field and in the house. And their work processes give them a collective consciousness which explains their strength and their resilience in adverse circumstances and their enthusiastic participation in struggles.

The magnitude and classification of workforce in India is available through census data and sample survey data obtained by the central statistical organization. We give below the figures obtained from the sample survey on Employment and Unemployment for the year 2009-10.

In the year 2009-10, the workforce in India was estimated as 456 million. There were 332 million male workers and 127 million women workers. Among the women workers 87 million women (68 per cent) were engaged in agricultural work. If we consider only the rural female workforce then the share of agriculture will be more than 80 per cent.

Eighty seven million women engaged in agriculture are further classified in the categories of agricultural labourers and cultivators. Although there are state wise variations, at all India level around 40 per cent i.e. 35 million women workers in agriculture are classified as agricultural labourers. The rest are classified as cultivators. But it is interesting to note that more than 75 per cent among the cultivator categories are unpaid family labour with no control over means of production and no participation in decision making. Only around 25 per cent women cultivators have 'some' degree of control over means of production and decision making. We briefly discuss the three categories of women workers in agriculture.

#### *Agricultural workers*

Since 41 per cent of rural households do not own any farm land ,men and women from these households have two options - either to take land on lease and become tenant farmer or work as agricultural labourers in other people's farms. Incidentally, agricultural wage work is also sought by members of marginal farm households with very small holdings. The wages are low often not conforming to the official minimum wage regulations. Further, agricultural work is not available throughout the year. It is mainly demanded during sowing and harvesting season. In most states in India the agricultural wage work is available for only 100 days or less. When agricultural work is not available men migrate to other villages or urban centers in search of work and women take up activities like collecting wood from the forest or some construction job in the neighborhood. And so on.

In this overall marginalized scenario, women workers are further disadvantaged due to gender bias. There are tasks which are done only by men. These are ploughing, well digging, cane crushing, irrigation and others. Wage rates for these tasks are higher in the range of Rs. 200 per day or more.

There are tasks where men and women both are employed. For these tasks the wage rates are lower and for the same tasks wages received by women are invariably lower in every state. All India daily wage rates for men and women for some of the activities are as follows:

	Sowing	weeding	transplanting	Harvesting
men	Rs125.75	Rs.111.22	Rs.120.19	Rs. 122.53
women	Rs 98.17	Rs 95.7	Rs 104.17	Rs. 102.36

Shrinking employment space for rural workers compelled the government to enact Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005. This provides guarantee for 100days employment for rural unskilled labour. It is interesting that women have taken employment under MNREGA schemes with much greater zeal than men.

#### *Unpaid Family Labour*

Women categorized as cultivators are largely those who work on the family farms as helpers. The land is in the name of their husbands, fathers or in laws. Traditionally women in farm families take care of the seeds and cattle and poultry. They are also involved agro - processing activities for subsistence needs. The exact description of their work varies with region, with crops grown and with cultural norms defined by caste and religion.

However, what is common is the fact that their work on the family farm has no separate account and of course no separate remuneration. As they have no control over means of production they have little participation in the decision making process and in the end no control over the income received from farm operations. The women participate in the family farm work not as principal workers but as subsidiary workers. In fact their participation in the family farm work is flexible. When required they are available and when not required they can withdraw themselves. In other words they constitute the reserve army of labour for subsistence work.

In fact, inclusion of these women into the workforce itself is volatile. During 2004-5 to 2009-10, 20 million women have withdrawn from agriculture. They have not engaged themselves in any other occupation. They have withdrawn themselves from the workforce itself. These 20 million women belong to the category of cultivators and within that unpaid family labour. If the need arises for additional labour and men move out to other occupations, they may again pool in their labour.

### *Women cultivators as principal workers*

A small percentage of women categorized as cultivators do have defacto control over land, other means of production, farm operations and farm incomes. These are women headed households where husbands have either died or migrated on a permanent basis. Getting this control is invariably an uphill task for most women. They have to fight their in-laws and many times village community as well.

Traditionally, land rights of women in India (both in Hindu and Muslim community) are limited to sustenance rights or custodial rights in case of minor children. Custodial rights of land to young widows are never given easily.

In Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, a spate of farmers' suicides has left a large number of women dependent for their livelihoods on land for which they do not hold legal titles. The common practice is that in case of such eventualities, other male members of the family take over and start cultivating their husbands' share. However, more and more women are now asserting their right to cultivate their husbands' share themselves. Getting de facto control to cultivate the land is of course not sufficient. It does not allow them to take institutional credit. They cannot transfer the land to any other person. And perpetual insecurity is there that land can be snatched away anytime. But getting legal title to land involves another long battle for the women. Sometimes the papers are not given by in-laws. Sometimes the papers are not in order. Land owned jointly by the family and has not been transferred in their husbands' name. And sometimes the registration charges are too high for these women to get the land transferred in their names.

And the women who get legal title to the land are also not secure.

Jaimurti Devi from Bihar is extremely poor and belongs to the lowest caste. After the death of her husband she got his land legally transferred in her name. She has been cultivating this one acre of land and also regularly paying revenue to the government. Recently, with the construction of a subsidiary canal the plot has become very fertile. A rich farmer in the village belonging to higher caste now wants to take away her plot. For last three years she is not allowed to sow seeds in the farm. If she tries to sow seeds he ploughs the land again or leaves his cattle there. The local administration is helping the rich farmer to dispossess the woman from the land which she legally owns. Jaimurti Devi has not given up. She is still fighting for her rights with the help of some friends and other small farmers of her caste.

The community bias against women's land rights get reflected in state instruments also. Sonebhadra district in Uttar Pradesh is an area where Naxalites have a base. Hundreds of tribal men have been killed or jailed in this district. Their widows illiterate and exploited are left alone to look after the children without any land. When they demanded their land rights from the administration they were also branded as Naxalites and jailed.

### ***Revolutionary Potential of the Dispossessed Farmers and Disadvantaged Workers***

Historically whenever peasantry has risen up to protect their land or to demand their fair share, the women of the community have valiantly stood by in the front line.

After the devastating Bengal famine a major agrarian struggle took place in united province of Bengal in 1946. The Tebhaga struggle was the struggle of agricultural labourers and share croppers against the Jotedars and absentee landlords demanding two third share of the farm produce. Women participated in this agrarian movement on par with men. In many places they took on a frontal role in defending the gains of the uprising and countering the repression of the state. Women's fighting troops called 'Nari Bahini' were created. Members of the Nari Bahini were doubly oppressed women from the scheduled caste community and the tribal community. There were also Muslim women who joined the organisation. Many Hindu widows who are traditionally outcastes became local leaders. In this way the semi militant organisation also had a class character. These women had no training in militant struggles. They had only local household instruments like broom sticks and knives for their defense but their courage was outstanding.

Eventually, the Tebhaga movement was crushed by the colonial government but after independence, governments on both sides enacted legal statutes to give share croppers and agricultural labourers their share.

One can talk of contemporary scene like the Narmada Bachao Movement in Madhya Pradesh. This is the biggest social movement in the country, and has questioned the building of big dams and the whole development paradigm in independent India. Tribals and the poor peasantry from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have waged a long drawn struggle since the mid 1980s, as entire villages have been submerged in the backwaters of dams on the Narmada River.

Once again women have participated in struggles with a great deal of courage and resilience. Many of them lack formal education but are articulate in formulating their demands and spelling out the technical details of dam height and area submerged. They can address meetings of thousands of people, shout slogans, and also argue their case with the government officers. On many occasion they have stood in neck deep waters for days together to protest against the rising dam heights.

The government responds to these protests by stopping the progress of work temporarily, only to begin again after a while, in violation of several court judgments. The Narmada Bachao struggle has continued in order to stop further dispossession and for the rehabilitation of the dispossessed.

In talking of contemporary struggles of peasantry, we should also remember the vibrant presence of hundreds and thousands of women pitted against the mighty assault of state and capital on their meager resources in the state of Odisha. These are ordinary women struggling for their livelihoods and largely invisible. But standing against the state police and company goons you can see them amongst beetle vines, in lake water, on sandy alluvial soil, on bauxite mountains, in the paddy fields and in the forest. Odisha is one of the states, where capitalist accumulation through encroachment has been taken up on a

frightening scale.

Among various companies, which have launched mining and industrial ventures in Odisha, POSCO India is mostly widely known. In 2005, the company signed a memorandum of understanding with state government of Odisha to set up an integrated steel plant along with iron ore mining and mining of other ores in Jagatsinghpur district. The project involves acquisition of thousands of hectares of land and displacing people from forest and from there villages. Men and women together have resisted the land take over and company goons and state police has brutally suppressed the people's resistance. Women have blocked the villages by standing steadfastly when police fired teargas shells and cycle pellets on them. In 2011, they laid down on hot sea shore sand for seven days. As a strategy of protest demonstration and roadblock Tribal and scheduled caste women even place their babies on the road. While protesting these women sing: 'earthworms we are — without earth how can we survive!'

The above instances narrate women's contribution in peasant struggles which were directed against state and extra economic instruments used by capitalism. Women have fought bravely along with their partners. Their confidence in collective strength and their resilience in case of adversity will be recorded in history.

It should be noted that in these and other peasant struggles, the primary focus is on protecting the livelihood resource base of land, water and forest. It is observed that beyond this single factor any other issue hardly gets attention in these struggles. Other structures of dominance and inequality such as caste relations, gender relations and unequal land relations remain in the background. Women stake their lives to protect the household resource base but within the household they do not automatically get their share of control. Women's struggles against patriarchal social and economic relations have to be fought independently. Mass movements prepare the ground which makes struggles against patriarchy relatively easy.

Along with political and social space, getting economic space in the patriarchal society is important for women. Here it needs to be noted that in case of agricultural labourers, share croppers and marginal farmers the economic space available to the household itself is very small. Getting a minuscule share from a minuscule whole is no solution. The economic space has to be expanded by pooling the resource base together and creating collective economic space. Women having a collective consciousness and not having individual property base to begin with, can take a lead role in creation of collective economic base among the resource poor peasantry. As we pointed out, collective economic base is necessary for responding to capitalist encroachment executed through operation of market forces.

We illustrate the above hypothesis by discussing the collective farming initiative of women of Kerala under the 'Kudumbashree' mission.

'Kudumbashree', which means 'glory of the family', started as a poverty alleviation programme in 1998. Initiated by the left front government, it is a programme based on a community-government interface.

Poor women were first persuaded to form neighborhood groups. These groups were formed on a community initiative in which the left parties played an important role. Apart from thrift and savings the women in these groups are encouraged to venture into various income generating activities. The activities range from small scale manufacturing to social and community services to providing outlets for cheap and hygienic food and arranging weekly markets etc. One of the very important activities taken up by Kudumbashree women is farming on a collective basis.

The Kudumbashree mission covers all districts of Kerala and has around 4 million participants. Although the programme is no longer restricted to women from below poverty line families, most participants in the programme are from poor background.

Farm operations have been taken up by around 200,000 women. They are cultivating 27000 hectares of land spread across the entire state. Most women who have taken up farming under Kudumbashree belong to landless families. If there is a small piece of land in the family it is seldom in woman's name. Collective farming groups are formed when 4 to 10 women from neighborhood groups come together and identify a piece of land in the village which they can get on lease. The leased land is cultivated by them as in a cooperative. The decision making is participatory and work load is shared according to their respective capacity. The farm income is distributed equally among them. Many of the Kudumbashree farms get support from the government in terms of subsidised seeds and fertilizers, labour support for land preparation and production and area incentive in cash. The women grow paddy, banana, vegetables and tubers.

Women have worked hard and they hold a promise to change the agrarian scene in Kerala.

#### *Agrarian scene in Kerala*

The crop pattern in Kerala and the land distribution is different than that in other states. A great deal of acreage is under plantation crop which is exempt from land ceiling laws. The rest of the land has been redistributed and generally the farm holdings are small in size. Apart from cultivation on farm land homestead farming is common in Kerala.

The younger generation has higher educational levels and is not interested in farming. The migration rate in Kerala is high. With left front governments and strong unions, the agricultural wage rate for men is very high. In other states, even small and marginal farmers employ and exploit wage labour on their farms; this is not possible in Kerala. However, as a consequence, a substantial amount of farm land has shifted to plantation crops like coconut and rubber and many other farm holdings in villages are lying fallow because the land owners do not find it profitable to cultivate them. The acreage under paddy has come down causing worry.

Traditionally, women were generally engaged in homestead farming and not in farm cultivation. Further the wage rate for women is much lower than that for men. The Kudumbashree mission has

offered a chance to change this, and for women to engage in farm cultivation. Women's groups came forward to take on farm cultivation. They cultivated fallow land and brought paddy cultivation back on track.

For this they received much appreciation from their immediate families and from the village community at large. In many cases husbands and other male members of the family have worked gratis on the farm. Panchayats provided all the support by ensuring smooth delivery of all their requirement. Of course, Kudumbashree itself has the administrative coordinating body of CDS (Community Development Service) at Panchayat level.

However, far more important than these very visible achievements is the fact that Kudumbashree farmers have made a beginning of a 'new institutional arrangement' for land use. This has to do with the collective use of the land. Not only do the Kudumbashree farmers think of their specific farm as a collective farm, they work on an informal exchange basis with members of neighbourhood Kudumbashree farms. The community feeling spreads much wider than an individual farm.

A socialised ownership can become a formidable asset with which marginalised peasantry can effectively resist accumulation through encroachment whether it is direct or through an income squeeze.

And if Kudumbashree farmers are developing a consciousness of collective economic base, this should not be undermined. Hopefully this consciousness, which is in its incipient stage at the moment, will spread to wider community and will lay down the foundation to build a new development paradigm.

This is plausible because the empowerment of Kudumbashree women took place at a rapid pace. Not only have they got a higher status within the family, they have been quick to take control of public space.. Kerala government introduced 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayats, i.e. local self government bodies. Women have been quick to get into local self governance.

Recently, when the United Front government tried to divert funds from the Kudumbashree Mission, women from across the state gathered in state capital and staged a seven day sit in in front of the state secretariat. They were not very well versed with administrative fine points but they were very sure of their rights and their collective strength. In the end, government agreed to their demand.

It needs to be noted that in the initial stages the Neighbourhood Groups were formed at the instance of Left parties ground work. Now these women have become a political force in themselves. They no longer take dictates from the party hierarchical structure.

And they are a progressive political force. One looks forward to growth in their strength and their progressive thinking. One also hopes to see other sections of the society rising from other quarters—rejecting the extant capitalist accumulation process and demanding an alternative development paradigm.

## ***Conclusion***

I have argued that the women workers in agriculture have revolutionary potential not just to resist the accumulation through encroachment but to transcend to an alternative (socialist) development paradigm. Further, forming a collective economic base is pivotal for translating this potential into a meaningful programme. I argue this fully knowing the reservations that Marxist scholars have regarding bringing revolutionary change through a reformist agenda. I have studied in detail the recalcitrant attitude of peasantry and their unwillingness to accept socialized ownership of land in the post revolutionary societies of 20<sup>th</sup> century. I also know the limitations of the concept of collective economic base or cooperative in a capitalist economy.

But living in the third world and witnessing the shrinking organised working class surrounded by a vast reserve army of labour, I am convinced that allies have to be identified from this reserve army. Women in agriculture constitute an important ally. I propose that womens' organization and their strength should be looked at differently than that of their men partners. Women have the advantage of not having any personal experience of ownership of individual property. This brings them much closer to the proletarian class as compared to their men partners.

Further, a collective economic base can also retain their class character and can be protected from being hijacked in the capitalist structure. In struggles these collectives can offer crucial support as was offered by the Russian Mirs in 1905 uprising of the Russian peasantry.

It is possible that I am mistaken but in this workshop when we are paying our tributes to Rosa Luxemburg one should not be afraid of making mistakes.

\*\*\*\*\*

## ***References***

- Awasthi, Puja. 2006. 'Whose family, whose land?'. India Together. [www.indiatogether.org/myland-women](http://www.indiatogether.org/myland-women). June 17, 2006
- Biju, B. L. and Abhilash Kumar K. G. 2013. 'Class Feminism: The Kudumbashree Agitation in Kerala'. *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVIII No. 9, March 2, 2013.
- Cuters, Peter. 1986. 'Women Role in Tebhaga Movement'. *Economic & Political Weekly*. Vol. XXI No. 43, October 25, 1986.
- Custers, Peter. 1997. *Capital Accumulation & Women's Labour in Asian Economies*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications (A division of Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd)
- Joshi-Adhikari Institute of Social Studies (JAISS), 2011, *Agrarian Crisis: Life at Stake in rural India*, Survey Report, New Delhi.
- Lee, George. Dec. 1971. Rosa Luxemburg and the Impact of Imperialism. *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 81, No. 324.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. 2003. *The Accumulation of Capital*. London and New York: Routledge Classics
- Mazumdar, Indrani and N. Neetha. 2011. 'Gender Dimensions: Employment Trends in India, 1993-94 to 2009-10'. *Economic & Political Weekly*. Vol. XLVI No. 43, October 22, 2011.

Mies, Maria, 1986, 'Indian Women in Subsistence and Agricultural Labour', *Women, Work and Development Series, No. 12*, Geneva: ILO.

Pallavi, Aparna. 2007. 'Land titles don't come easy for farm widows'. India Together. [www.indiatogether.org/widowland-women](http://www.indiatogether.org/widowland-women). June 1, 2007.

Pat, A. K. 2005. 'Kudumbashree: A Poverty Eradication Mission in Kerala'. *Economic & Political Weekly*, November 26, 2005.

Padhi, Ranjana and Pradhan Pramodini. 2013. Women in Resistance Struggles in Odisha'. *Mainstream Weekly*, Vol. LI, No.33, August 3, 2013.

Patnaik, Prabhat. 2008. *The Value of Money*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.