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**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NERO'S GUEST: RAISING VOICE AGAINST
FARMERS SUICIDE: A CRITIQUE OF LAND REFORMS POST-INDEPENDENCE**

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ABSTRACT:

Agricultural sector holds importance in the development of any country. India being an agrarian society is facing a hike in the number of farmers suicide each year. Activists and Scholars have offered a number of reasons for farmers' suicide such as crop failure, irregular rain patterns, personal problems etc. In response to widespread farmers' suicide, the government implemented a number of policies and schemes such as *Pradhan Mantri Fasal Beema Yojna*, *Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojna*, *Agricultural debt waiver and debt relief scheme* etc. However, despite the implementation of various schemes, suicide amongst farmer's community is unstoppable and these schemes prove a failure in finding a solution to this draconian situation where each day our country faces death of those who grow food for our survival. Who is to be blamed for this? The Government? The law of the country? The people of India?

INTRODUCTION:

India is an agrarian country with a majority of its population depending directly or indirectly on the agricultural sector. Due to the rapid change in structure of the country along with the increasing pressure of industrialization and capitalist economy, the country has been facing a large number of farmer's suicide every year. Despite the increasing figures of farmer's suicide, no mainstream media bothered to bring public's attention over this fact. Hence, the number of deaths are increasing day-by-day due to lack of government's attention.

In this paper, I will take certain aspects of the documentary to analyze the effect of Green Revolution on Indian agrarian society and give a critical Marxist perspective on modern legal system for explaining how the system itself validated growth of capitalist relations in agriculture sector. Thereafter I will critically analyze the introduction of Green Revolution in India and also look at various other countries to draw an overall conclusion about the success of the Green Revolution.

ABOUT DOCUMENTARY:

Nero's Guest is a documentary directed by *Deepa Bhatia* which revolves around the issue of farmers' suicide from 1997 and the government's reluctant response towards the same. The lead role is played by Rural Affairs Editor of Hindu- *P Sainath*. He constantly worked on this issue and kept a track on change in agrarian society and financial crisis faced by this group which ultimately led to self-killing due to failed crops and miserable living conditions. He also talks how such a grave issue gets no coverage by the mainstream media and remains unnoticed by the government. He wrote on this issue at different levels so as to enlighten this issue to the masses as to where the country is leading to. He makes an attempt to make us see the real face of India and the growing wealth disparities. He also brings the story of a Roman ruler Nero who burnt thieves and prisoners to illuminate a party hosted by him for all the Romans and how no one objected to the same. *Sainath* ends this documentary with a closing dialogue and asks us not to become Nero's Guest to this situation.

STATE, LEGAL SYSTEM AND CAPITALISM:

Marxist conception of law views Law as a tool of suppression, working in favor of ruling class. According to Karl Marx, Law is used as a tool of "*ideological domination*", that is, the process which produces and reaffirm social order legitimize class domination in a broader sense. Law via its presence and absence acted as a tool of primitive accumulation and enable capitalist to regulate his factory by private legislation. The presence and absence of law create hegemony in society by allowing capitalists to exploit the weaker section under the veil of law. Despite the presence of law, the manner it is implemented facilitates the interest of capitalist in making profits. For instance, the Industrial Dispute Act recognizes collective bargain by workers in a "limited form".¹ This means that there is a constant surveillance by state over industrial dispute and the act does not focus on 'collective response' by labor against oppressive conditions by industries but rather focuses on adjudication of these disputes in a manner desired by the law. This implies that the law itself regulates the behavior of labor and for getting their claim admitted; the labor should oppose capitalists in a certain manner to make their claim fall into the parameters of law. Further state enjoys the position of sole arbitrator in deciding the existence of a dispute and hence the state cannot be forced to

¹UpendraBaxi, "Law and State Regulated Capitalism in India: Some Preliminary Reflections".

refer an industrial dispute for adjudication. This clearly indicates that the law itself regulates the conflict between labor and capital.

LAND REFORMS AND CAPITALISM:

Indian Government had two major tasks: eradication of poverty along with making country self-reliant and hence the country saw many reforms, especially in terms of land. Since the beginning, 'Law' is used as a tool for extending growth of capitalism in agriculture in the name of extensive agrarian reform, acted as an instrument to theft property of people. The government of India, after independence, brought a wave of land reforms which allowed state to acquire private property under the name of "public purpose". Studies have shown that laws relating to land reforms suffered from certain infirmities which proved beneficial for rich section of society. The implementation of land ceiling act exempted a number of categories of land which included land held by agricultural co-operative societies, which ultimately favored big landlords. The responsibility of implementing land reforms rested with revenue administration which terribly failed in implementing it in a desirable manner because the higher positions in administration were held either by politically strong landlords themselves or those who had close links with; therefore in every state, administrative organization couldn't provide with speedy and effective implementation of land reforms.²

Upendra Baxi, in this context, points out the badly drafted land reform legislation which took away the "*Right to Property*" for ensuring security to tenants by allowing them 'personal cultivation'.³ The rate of compensation provided to acquire ownership of a land was too high in certain regions like Punjab which proved to shoot beyond poor tenant's capacity to pay and acquire a piece of land.⁴

Hence, the land reforms intending improvement in condition of tenants further became a tool of promoting the interest of rich section of society as the reforms brought a shift from feudalism to capitalism.

²Ratan Ghosh, 'Land Reforms And The Draft Five Year Plan 1978-83' (1979) 14 Economic & Political Weekly <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4368117>> accessed 25 March 2018.

³Ibid 1.

⁴SuchaGill, 'Changing Land Relations in Punjab and Implications for Land Reforms' (1989) 24 Economic & Political Weekly <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4394993>> accessed 25 March 2018.

GREEN REVOLUTION:

Post-independence, India faced a great difficulty in feeding its population and had to rely on Pakistan for import primary goods. Nehru, being the then Prime Minister of India took the responsibility of reducing the problem of food scarcity and hence India saw the legalization of various agrarian reforms. For reducing disequilibrium created by Second World War and partition, the government started coming up with 5 Year Plans; which on the face tried to improve agrarian sector in terms of increasing output but also gave a platform to capitalists for fulfilling their interests. The Third Five-Year plan emphasized the need of improving agrarian sector with special focus on production of wheat. Not only this plan but also the First and Second Five-Year plans worked in this direction. The First Plan focused on the development of India after independence and thus it strongly supported the agricultural sector along with industrialization. In India, Green Revolution started in late 1960s to make country self-sufficient in terms of food grains. Some people talk of the unqualified success that Green Revolution brought in terms of making country sufficient in food grains; however, there is a group of people who critique it for destroying the ecological and social structure. Along with the glory that Green Revolution brought, the farmers are the one who suffered the most in terms of degraded soil quality due to use of high yielding variety (HYV) seeds and other expensive inputs which they could not afford. The aftereffects of this can still be seen in India today in terms of large-scale farmers.

For understanding the role of legal system in regulating capitalism, one must understand the hegemonic role played by state in agrarian sector. It means that law under the veil of radical social justice worked in furtherance of promoting capitalist relations in agricultural sector. Studies have shown that two American foundations named Bill & Melinda Gates and Rockefeller Foundations which earlier played the role of philanthropist in addressing the issue of agricultural productivity gradually advanced to capitalist means of production and in doing so, they introduced HYV seeds to boost wheat production.⁵In 1951, Rockefeller Foundation and Indian State signed an agreement for allowing the foundation to bring agricultural development in the country. This implies that Green Revolution was an attempt made by non-state actors whose interest lied in creating more wealth through social reforms.

⁵Cameron Scherer, 'The Color of Money: Philanthropy and the Green Revolutions in India and Sub-Saharan Africa' (2011).

<https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/6723/2011SchererC_thesis.pdf?sequence=8> accessed on 21 March 2018.

It would be misleading to suggest that only these two foundations were the actors in reforming agrarian sector as the Indian State also played a major role in facilitating this reform. The role of post-Nehruvian government should not be overlooked in this context who implemented various policies for adopting HYV seeds and allowed subsidiaries on foreign inputs that incentivized industrialized agricultural production.

Green Revolution technique is capital intensive and the nature of HYV seeds is such that it gives substantially increased output when used with foreign inputs like chemical fertilizers, pesticides. This means that for having an effective outcome of such seeds, the farmers were forced to give up their traditional methods of production and had to buy other inputs produced by industries. Considering the financial status of small-holding farmers who had limited credit to purchase technology such as seeds and fertilizers, many of them became dependent on the sale of their products to allow them for purchasing such technologies.⁶ Hence Green Revolution did not help those for whom it intended to enhance productivity but rather created a framework where peasants were subjected to commercial mode of production. Such approach made farmers dependent even more on capitalist mode on production which further led to their exploitation as they are forced to sell off their labor in order to afford expensive agricultural inputs. In many cases it has also been seen that when the prices of fertilizers and oil increased, the least prosperous farmers were forced to seek loans for meeting the demands of new harvesting methods. Therefore, these farmers had to sell off their produce in order to repay the loans.

Even the Centre for the Study of Social Change in 1973 in its report disclosed the ill-effects of Green Revolution and stated that green revolution worked differentially for Indian farmers as small and marginal farmers were placed at disadvantage because of their incapacity to afford expensive technology.⁷ Apart from creating interpersonal inequalities, Green revolution not only created an economic inequality amongst farmers of different regions as HYV seeds required proper irrigation and those parts of India which had a better irrigation system (like Punjab) benefitted more out of this new technology. Sainath covers this problem in his documentary and explained the outcome of farmer's dependency on industrialist inputs. The

⁶Behrooz Morvaridi, 'Capitalist Philanthropy and the New Green Revolution for Food Security' (2012) 19 International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food <<http://ijsaf.org/archive/19/2/morvaridi.pdf>> accessed 22 March 2018.

⁷D.N. Dhanagare, 'Green Revolution and Social Inequalities in Rural India'(1987) 22(19/21) Economic & Political Weekly<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4377016?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents> accessed 22 March 2018.

documentary shows the aspect of crop failure and heavy debts incurred by farmers who dream of getting birth as cattle of U.S. because these are the ones who get food grains to fill their stomach but on the other hand, indebted farmers are forced to sell off their output which is then used to feed these cattle. At last, forced by hunger and disappointment, farmers end up committing suicide to free themselves from the debts owed to industrialists. Hence Green Revolution further ensured in creating a hegemony and class division in the society as poor went poorer due to lack of purchasing capacity and rich went richer.

Another critical report prepared by the London based Halslemere Declaration Group claimed that the government of India treated Indian farmers differently while promoting Green Revolution as certain facilities granted by government like institutionalized subsidies and cheap credits were made more available to big landlords and farmers than small farmers.⁸ Thus, not only expensive technology and differential geographical structure added to the plight of small farmers but also unjust and bias treatment by Indian State created capitalist relationship in agrarian sector.

GREEN REVOLUTION IN OTHER COUNTRIES:

The ill effects of Green Revolution did not only haunt India but several other countries like Pakistan, Africa etc.

In Pakistan, studies have shown the real picture of Green Revolution and revealed the fact that apart from affecting the economic growth of country, Green Revolution also changed the relationship between different social grounds and distribution of income within the society. It has been argued that Green Revolution lead to an increase in social and economic inequality because it was introduced in such an agrarian structure where structure of land ownership was highly unequal.⁹ Therefore Green Revolution further helped big landowners to increase their profits by using HYV technology and other advanced tools and inputs. It was also observed that Green Revolution along with social inequality also created economic inequality because Punjab and Sindh had a larger portion of their area under irrigation as compared to Baluchistan.

Green Revolution also hit Africa in a negative way as it did to India. The government of Africa, in order to make Green Revolution a success, subsidized seeds and fertilizers during

⁸ Ibid 5.

⁹, AkmalHussain, 'The Green Revolution' < <http://www.akmalhussain.net/Publish%20Work/data/3.pdf> > accessed 24 March 2018.

initial stage but soon withdrew all such subsidies owing to the oil crisis and economic shock of mid-1970s.¹⁰ Hence in Africa too, Green Revolution resulted in creating class inequality. The establishment of Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa in 2006, an organization funded by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation, for supporting small landholders could be seen another tool of creating inequality as it is not clear how the technologies promote by AGRA would be accessible to poor small-scale produces in the absence of central role of state.

CONCLUSION:

The ill effects of Green Revolution are not only prevalent in India but spread to various other countries. Green Revolution under the veil of improving food sufficiency promoted capitalism as the farmers were not seen as producers but rather consumers of those companies engaged in producing inputs required for making Green Revolution successful. Green Revolution, despite increasing production of food grains, created inequality both in social and economic context. Recently, farmers in Maharashtra went on strike and demanded a waiver of loan along with higher support price for their produce. For grabbing attention of government and ignorant urban population to this leaderless strike, the farmers threatened to stop seize supply to urban markets.¹¹ Demonetization of currency in 2016 had draconic effects on farmers as it leads to the collapse of wholesale vegetable prices and farmers were forced to sell their crops at a much lower price than minimum support price set by the government. Hence, even after 55 years of introduction of Green Revolution, the small Indian farmers still remain the prey of capitalist section who leave no other option for the farmers but to use the expensive seeds, fertilizers and pesticides produced by them.

Sainath in the documentary shows the harsher picture of society which remains unaware of farmer's hardships; a society interested in the world of fashion and glamour; mainstream media covering fashion shows; newspapers and channels having fashion, glamour, society correspondence and none of them having a full time working correspondence on poverty. Often it is seen that the government does not aid farmers in paying off or reducing debts and even is reluctant in aiding the families of those farmers who committed suicide.

¹⁰Ibid 5.

¹¹<<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/why-are-farmers-of-maharashtra-onstrike/article18956218.ece>> accessed 24 March 2018.

It is the high time when the government should intervene for protecting small and medium farmers from the atrocities of Green Revolution. I believe that the government should provide greater decision making authority to the section for whom scholars of Harvard, LSE take policy decisions i.e. farmers should have at least some role in policy suggestions. However, it should be careful decision and space should not be taken away by rich farmers. The government should further ensure that loans are provided at soft interest rates and farmers should be discouraged to take a loan from private money lenders, middlemen should be eliminated by creating a platform where farmers can directly reach the market and cheaper insurances covering crop failure should be provided. Also, costly fertilizers and pesticides should be provided at a cheaper rate to those farmers who could not afford the high costs.

The models walking on ramps with fancy cotton clothes catches everyone's attention, however, suicide of a farmer who grows it tends to get no attention at all. It is the duty of everyone to at least get aware of the problems faced by farmers and not become *Nero's Guest* and let the farmers burn in the fire of capitalism. We should not lighten and comfort our lives at the cost farmers' deaths. As an individual, it might be difficult for one to provide direct help to farmers but it could be done if we start making organizations that could work in the interest of farmers. These organizations could demand a provision for certain amount of money to be provided by those companies who are indulged in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) work. This money should be distributed on a need to need basis and remain untouched from the influence of rich farmers. Further CSR companies should work in skill development of farmers and start giving them temporary employment till the next sowing season starts. This way the farmers would be able to earn some money besides their engagement with sowing crops and hence we would be able to save at least some farmers from being crushed under the thumb of capitalism.