



T R I B U T E

P. Sundarayya, 1913–1985 A Centenary Tribute

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION¹

May 1, 2013 was the hundredth birth anniversary of Puchalapalli Sundarayya² – communist, freedom fighter, one of the founders of the All-India Kisan Sabha (Peasants' Union), leader of the great Telangana people's struggle of 1948–51, and first General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Sundarayya's writing and teaching on the agrarian question drew on many sources, including the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao Zedong; works on agrarian India, including the available sources of secondary statistical data, data from the surveys and other types of empirical study conducted by him (particularly in Andhra Pradesh) from the 1930s to the 1970s; and the experience that came from his involvement in peasants' and rural workers' organisations and struggles.³ He conducted what may be called the first detailed Marxist village studies in India. It can be stated without exaggeration that nobody has had as hard-worked and profound an influence on the formulation and understanding of the agrarian question in India by the organised Left as has Sundarayya.

The article by P. Sundarayya carried in this section and published as a centenary tribute reproduces a document given by Sundarayya to me in 1980. Internal evidence indicates that the article was written in 1959, and the population of Andhra Pradesh to which the author refers in the article is that of mid-1959. The manuscript that he gave me is typed and cyclostyled, with handwritten corrections by the author. It was certainly circulated, perhaps within the Communist Party and sections of the peasants' organisation, although it has never before, to the best of our knowledge, been published.

¹ Niladri Sekhar Dhar co-edited the section titled "Data on the Economics of Farming in Andhra Pradesh" with me and helped format and interpret all the statistical tables; Yasodhara Das helped format the tables; and Madhura Swaminathan and Yasodhara Das keyed in the original text.

² We have used the spelling Puchalapalli throughout; this is the spelling used by Sundarayya in the biographical information form filled in by Members of the Legislative Assembly.

³ See Karat (2012) for a centenary tribute to Sundarayya, and Ramachandran (2012) on Sundarayya's contributions to the understanding of the agrarian question.

The version published here follows Sundarayya's manuscript; we have corrected obvious proof errors, and edited the text for syntax and readability. All the statistical tables here appear in Sundarayya's manuscript. We have, however, numbered, titled and edited all of them. There were no table numbers in the original manuscript, and the tables were preceded by introductory sentences but left untitled. We have reformatted and redesigned the statistical tables in order to make them more accessible to readers than they were in their original form. Two tables had to be omitted because the columns were not labelled in the original; the main conclusions from the tables, however, have been described in the text. The original article had no glossary.

The article itself is of extraordinary documentary value. Its skilful and critical use of secondary sources of statistical data and primary empirical information, which is clearly influenced by Lenin's use of Zemstvo data and Mao Zedong's use of first-hand material, is methodologically very instructive. Its attempt to characterise different farming systems, typologies of farms, and farming practices in different agro-ecological regions of the State must stand as a lesson to contemporary students of the agrarian question. It is an important new addition to the literature on the modern economic history of farming and agrarian relations in Andhra Pradesh.

V. K. Ramachandran⁴

FOREWORD

Puchalapalli Sundarayya was an intellectual whose philosophical efforts were always linked to revolutionary practice. His book *Visalandhra lo Praja Rajyam* (*People's Rule in a Unified Andhra*), which was written after a thorough study of the nationality question, acted as a manifesto for the movement for a unified Andhra Pradesh; similarly, his examination of agrarian relations, or of developments in the fields of literature and culture, were always linked to practice. This quality was also evident in his draft Plan for the comprehensive development of Andhra Pradesh, a document in which he identified water resources in the most remote areas in order to design a complete plan for irrigation, and when he wrote the famous treatise titled *Telangana Peoples' Struggle and Its Lessons*.

Sundarayya gave the utmost importance to the study of concrete social conditions. He was averse to adducing conclusions without examining extensive information, including quantitative data and other types of evidence. His arguments and counter-arguments were always based on facts. That is why he was a researcher and student throughout his life. He always carried a big notebook in which to jot down useful

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information – gathering facts and figures from wherever he could for later use. He had a strikingly large shirt pocket to accommodate this notebook.

His quest for knowledge made Sundarayya a keen seeker and collector of books. Among his collection of thousands of books were encyclopaedias from all parts of the world, and atlases and maps of every kind. The Sundarayya Vignana Kendram that has been established in Hyderabad honours the importance he gave to books and libraries. The Kendram, which has a collection of over 300,000 books and journals, stands today as a fitting monument to this legendary revolutionary communist.

Right from childhood, Sundarayya was able to recognise the role of the village in bringing about social change. At the very beginning of his political life he came to the conclusion that it is not possible to achieve social change in the country without understanding the rural economy. He believed that understanding the village amounts to understanding the country. That is why, between 1929 and 1934, he spent most of his time in his native village, among the working people. In the village, he studied the caste system, which was the root cause for social oppression, and he fought against it. He observed from close quarters the patriarchal relations that were entrenched in the village, and the unequal status of the women in every family. He came to understand the importance of women's equality. He carefully observed the various forms of economic exploitation of the rural poor. He noted how agricultural labourers were paid wages in kind in small measuring pots, how Dalits were paid lower wages than others, and were overcharged in grocery and provisions shops. Sundarayya's understanding of the close relation between the ownership of land and exploitative, oppressive social relations was first gained from these experiences in his village.

He acknowledged his debt to this phase of his life in the following words in his *Autobiography*:⁵

So while working in the fields, the farm servants used to narrate their living conditions and the deprivations they had to undergo at the hands of the landlords and the rich peasants of the village. (p. 85)

All those experiences, right from my student days to the four- or five-month period I was in the village in 1931–32, helped me in drafting a charter of demands on behalf of the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. (p. 85)

His interest in studying agrarian relations continued through his life. We can gauge the depth of this abiding interest from passages in the *Autobiography*:

I was considered an expert on peasants' problems. I did contribute something to reorient the party and the peasant movement in 1953–54. (p. 311)

⁵ Page references are from Murali (ed.) (2009).

I studied the whole problem in depth and was responsible for the classification of the peasantry – that is, [for identifying the] classes of the peasantry that should be co-opted in our struggle against feudalism. Such classification was done for the first time in Andhra. I wrote an article in *New Age* in 1937 – based on revenue records – explaining in detail the whole class hierarchy in the coastal districts of Andhra. The issue of joint pattas and how much rent they were paying to the landlords was dealt with. More importantly, a broad categorisation of the peasant community was done, applying Marxist–Leninist theory. An alliance of the oppressed classes in the agricultural sector was proposed. The way in which the classification was done, using the meagre revenue records that were available to us, was extraordinary for those times. (p. 312)

During the underground period of the Telangana struggle the questionnaire that we used to elicit information for understanding the class composition of the peasantry, applying Marxian principles, served as a basis for writing an article entitled “The Agrarian Question at Present.” Basavapunnaiah and Rajeswara Rao differed to some extent with some of the propositions and theories mentioned therein. The article was published in *Janata*. I have got a copy of it even now. I met the area committees in Mathapuram, Nalgonda, and other such places to study a few villages and report back with the gross statistics. They were summarised in the article that was published in *Janata*. (p. 312)

After we came out of the underground after 1950, there was a big controversy over whether or not we should have a new agricultural labourers’ association. The Bengal comrades and others said no, while we insisted on starting such a union. The Politburo had opined way back in 1942–43 that we should have an agricultural labourers’ association...It was necessary for the Indian conditions, but where and how [to] start such unions was the task. (pp. 312–13)

The main issue here was...the resolution that the Party adopted on the peasants’ question at Madras in 1953 [and] in the Central Committee earlier. My own contribution and the contribution of the Andhra comrades was significant, especially our classification theory, in drafting the resolution. We proposed that the land ceiling should be such that it should come nearer to the rich peasants. We did not want to touch the rich peasants’ lands...[It had to be sufficiently low but without affecting the rich peasants, so that the maximum possible land could] be acquired for distribution to the poor landless agricultural labourers. That was the first formulation. (pp. 313–14)

Later, in 1973, there was a controversy over whether or not the landlords were entitled to keep land up to the ceiling level...The Party Central Committee agreed with my contention that land should be given only to the actual tiller. This interpretation was made in 1973. (p. 314)

In the 1950s, there was an intense debate on agrarian issues inside the Communist Party. Sundarayya was among the most prominent of the many important leaders who participated in the discussion on how to formulate the Party’s agrarian policies. He was a member of the sub-committee that prepared the draft of the agrarian policy document that was eventually accepted by the Central Committee in 1954 as the document titled “Our Tasks Among the Peasant Masses.” He also played an important

role in formulating the document “Some Aspects of the Agrarian Question,” adopted by the National Council of the Communist Party in 1958.

During this period, Sundarayya did a great deal of research on the agrarian question. In 1954, a committee constituted by the Communist Party in Andhra Pradesh prepared a report titled “The Party’s Agrarian Programme in Andhra Districts.” Sundarayya played an important role in drafting and finalising this report. In 1958, he wrote a note titled “The Party and Agricultural Labour,” arguing for the necessity of improving the work of the Party among agricultural workers, and making his case, as always, with the help of experience gained and information gathered in the field. He also wrote a note titled “Agrarian Reform Bill: Suggestions” in 1958.

Sundarayya wrote many notes to help him in inner-Party debates, some of which may have been circulated as inner-Party documents. A preliminary identification of some of the material that can be used for studying Sundarayya’s contribution to our understanding of the agrarian question was made by V. K. Ramachandran in his article “P. Sundarayya on the Agrarian Question,” published in *The Marxist* last year (Ramachandran 2012). More material, including unpublished material, is to be found in his personal papers, now preserved at the Sundarayya Vignana Kendram. The information in these documents can be of great use to researchers and students.

Throughout his life, Sundarayya continued to use the field-based observation-and-study method that he imbibed in the course of his work in the villages. A good example of the application of this method is his research on two villages in Andhra Pradesh in 1974, on which his monograph, *The Land Question* (Sundarayya 1976), was based. He also applied this method of study to the training classes that he conducted. In 1969, for example, he gave a lecture on diverse forms of extraction of surplus value in agriculture to cadre working on the agricultural labour front; the lecture was based on empirical information he had gathered in the field.

The importance of villages and agrarian relations for the revolutionary movement – recognised by Sundarayya in his childhood – has not diminished even today. If 80 per cent of people were living in villages then, 69 per cent of our population still live in villages today (Census of India 2011). Despite the major changes that have occurred in the Indian economy over the last six or seven decades, the importance of agriculture has not diminished. Although the share of agriculture in GDP fell to 14 per cent in 2012–13, two-thirds of our population still depend on agriculture for their living. That is why agrarian studies continue to be a crucial aspect of the revolutionary movement.

In India, more than in any other nation, the agrarian question continues to be not only a critical political issue but also the most controversial. It is an issue of great complexity. Some of the reasons for the agrarian question becoming so complex in our country are the following: the size of our country, which is almost a

sub-continent in itself; the historical evolution of diverse agrarian practices and relations in different regions; changes in agrarian relations brought about by colonial rulers; changes in post-Independence India that were driven by the needs of modern capitalism; and changes that occurred as a result of linking our agriculture with the world economic system in the post-liberalisation period. This complexity naturally gives rise to differing perceptions and arguments, and also creates hurdles in arriving at common nationwide conclusions.

Most of the Left, in spite of other differences, subscribes to the view that radical agrarian reform, which includes the abolition of landlordism, is the foremost task before the revolutionary movement in India. This viewpoint is now being challenged from various quarters, a recent example being the theory of “frozen” class differentiation and polarisation (Harriss 2011), which denies the centrality of redistributive land reform. Even among Left intellectuals, there are divergent views with regard to the importance of different contradictions in rural life and the role played by various classes in the struggle for radical social change.

If we have to understand the complexity of agrarian conditions and find proper answers to the various questions thrown up by that complexity, there is no way forward other than the concrete study of concrete conditions. As Sundarayya did, we too will have to constantly study agrarian relations. The Foundation for Agrarian Studies is making a good effort in this regard. It is a happy development that one of the documents written by Sundarayya on agrarian relations is being published in the *Review of Agrarian Studies* at the initiative of the Foundation. We have to appreciate the efforts of Professor V. K. Ramachandran to bring it before us all. Let us hope that other unpublished documents by P. Sundarayya will also be made available shortly.

B. V. Raghavulu⁶

A NOTE ON THE USE OF DATA

The article by P. Sundarayya published in this issue of the *Review* is one that is of much relevance and interest to scholars of contemporary problems of rural India. In particular, all those attempting to investigate and understand the nature of rural society and classes in rural India will find parallels between the problems raised in this paper and current debates.

The first big question that interests P. Sundarayya here is class differentiation in the countryside, and the first set of methodological exercises undertaken in this paper shows the limitations of using available data and statistics to identify rural classes. The conceptual motivation for Sundarayya’s recomputations is clear: *occupational*

⁶ Secretary, Sundarayya Centenary Celebration Committee; Secretary, Andhra Pradesh Committee, Communist Party of India (Marxist); and Vice President, Andhra Pradesh Committee, All-India Agricultural Workers Union.

categories used by the Census of India and other sources of secondary data are not coterminous with *socio-economic class* categories.

The Census of 1951 used an eight-fold occupational category. Sundarayya argues that the class of agricultural labourers is much larger than the populations of Categories II (cultivators of land wholly or mainly unowned) and III (cultivating labourers), which were normally used to identify the class. Specifically, he argues for the inclusion of persons in Categories V (occupations other than cultivation) and VIII (other services and miscellaneous services) in the class of rural labourers. He corroborates his computations based on Census data with findings from the village surveys conducted by the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee and his own empirical observations.

While the Census classification has changed over time (as has the classification in the Rural Labour Enquiry conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation), the point that the class of rural manual labourers in rural India extends beyond those classified as such in official, large-scale surveys remains pertinent.

In a recent paper, Niladri Sekhar Dhar shows the limitations of the most recent Rural Labour Enquiry (RLE) in identifying the class of rural workers. Although the RLE uses income as the single criterion to identify a rural labour household,

no statistical exercise is undertaken to obtain either the absolute levels of income of households, or the shares of income from various sources in order to assign households to specific occupational categories. The methodology relies entirely on the *perceptions of the enumerator and respondent* in respect of income. (Dhar 2012)

This can result in a misclassification of rural labour households, as for example, if “small land-holder households depend heavily on income from labouring out, but perceive themselves to be self-employed.” Examining data from household surveys of three villages of Andhra Pradesh, Dhar finds that “even where detailed source-wise income data are available, it is very difficult to draw a precise boundary between poor peasant households and manual worker households.” He concludes that

it is even more difficult (or even unfeasible) to separate small and marginal peasants from rural labourers on the basis of National Sample Survey data, since the National Sample Survey Organisation neither collects information on incomes from all possible sources, nor classifies households on the basis of objective criteria. Where self-perception is all, it is likely that a not-so-negligible section of households that would be labour households by an objective income criterion could report themselves as cultivators. (*Ibid.*)

Identifying differentiation of the peasantry from official statistics is, of course, even more difficult. Sundarayya tries to arrive at empirical estimates of different sections of the peasantry by imaginative use of the data on land ownership and land leasing from the Census of Landholdings of 1953. As researchers of modern India recognise, identifying peasant categories from large-scale survey data is difficult, and

estimating the number and type of tenant cultivators is near impossible. Most large-scale surveys define tenants only as those with registered leases, thus excluding the majority and diversity of land-lease arrangements in the countryside.

The second section of the article deals with the standard of living of agricultural labourers, and Sundarayya uses a variety of sources to identify wages, days of employment, consumption, indebtedness, and housing conditions of rural workers. This is a detailed record of “the wretched condition of agricultural labourers” in different districts of Andhra Pradesh.

The third section attempts to identify the development of capitalism in agricultural production, specifically, by moving beyond the criterion of use of wage labour, and examining the use of modern inputs, credit, machinery, shifts to commercial cultivation, and so on. The article provides estimates of the productivity of labour in different cropping systems, based on a series of careful calculations. To illustrate, Sundarayya calculates the economics of farming in different regions of Andhra Pradesh, taking into account different farming conditions, that is, varied cropping patterns, and scales and types of farming. Detailed expenses on all crops are worked out, and, finally, estimates of net yield per acre and net yield per work-day are provided. He also calculates and provides empirical support for what can be demanded by the agrarian movement as a “reasonable fair wage.” Such computations of productivity per person-day in relation to actual wages are rare even today.

From this elaborate empirical exercise, Sundarayya concludes that while “a rapid development of capitalist form of exploitation [that is, the employment of wage labour,] has occurred...the capitalist mode of production in agriculture has not gone to the extent of large-scale use of modern agricultural machinery, nor a big increase of productivity per labour unit throughout Andhra Pradesh.”

V. K. Ramachandran and Madhura Swaminathan⁷

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