Ever since the advent of human civilisation when the land was tilled for the first seed to be sown as a sedentary life began with the clearing of land for cultivation, from the primitive to the most advanced form of agrarian activity, the peasants have been an indispensable link in the transition from an ancien régime to a new qualitative state of a higher order. The agrarian question has retained a seminal importance in the polity from the ancient times till the immediate present and will continue to do so even in the distant future.

Peasant radicalisation and struggles have decided the course of agrarian history and Land Reforms have brooked large on the agenda of all modern nation-states in contemporary history. The peasant movement especially in the erstwhile colonies have essentially reflected a protest against feudalism and imperialism. The peasantry through its organised struggles have been able to secure many concessions and the hitherto landless and oppressed classes have been able to improve their condition. India also witnessed the continuation of the oppressive caste system even while capitalist development penetrated the countryside.

In the modern era the condition of the peasantry under colonial rule had been one of abject poverty and a parasitic class of landlords and usurious interests was patronised by the Empire with the specific objective of developing a loyal class of retainers who would provide the Empire with the much coveted security. The ideology of economic liberalism that was practised by the colonial rulers only led to stagnation in the rural agrarian scenario and the forced commercialisation of agriculture only exposed the peasantry to the vagaries of the world commodity market. The recurrent famines even as late as the 1940s exposed the link between economic liberalism and underdevelopment.
The colonial experience and the peasant mobilisation against feudalism and imperialism in the post Second World War era forced the ruling classes in independent India to raise the rhetoric of ‘Land to the Tiller’. The vestiges of feudalism however continued and the caste system also adapted itself into more sophisticated forms. Few honourable exceptions notwithstanding, the real content and the economic and social consequences of Land Reforms have not been of the desirable nature.

It was under such a situation of absence of any radical alteration of the concentration of landholding that capitalist techniques in agriculture in the form of the New Agricultural Strategy or the ‘Green Revolution Technology’ were implemented. Although, certain regions endowed with assured irrigation initially benefited and production of wheat and paddy increased, the technology itself was elite-biased and only those with access to capital or credit facilities could resort to it.

The return of economic liberalism in its incarnation known as neo-liberalism, and the impact of the process of imperialist globalisation pursued at the behest of the global trinity of World Bank-International Monetary Fund-World Trade Organisation has once again come to haunt the peasantry in former colonies. Despite the experiences of Latin American countries and its own past, the Indian state also religiously has embarked on the path of neo-liberal economic policies. Indian peasantry once again is exposed to the vagaries of an ever fluctuating world commodity market and the state has been forced to withdraw from social sector expenditure, leading to cuts in agricultural subsidies, reduction in employment generation schemes, withdrawal from a universal Public Distribution System and actual capital investment in the countryside. Land Reform as it meant till about two decades ago has been relegated to the background or rather reversed with the zeal of predatory revanchism and is coming to mean rather, a relaxation in the land ceiling and market driven in character. The Open General Licence and the cuts in
protective tariffs have led to frequent price fluctuations and distress for the peasantry. The Indian states which have been in the forefront of ushering in the 'Neo-Liberal Revolution' have been witnessing a spate of suicides by farmers in distress who have fallen irretrievably into a debt-trap. Even the other states have been faced with an agrarian crisis and peasant distress. In such a context within India there are diverse development trajectories that different states have embarked upon. The present study seeks to probe into the condition of the peasants and agricultural workers in the specific context of the present stage of economic development. We would be comparing the states of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala by analysing the findings of the questionnaire based field survey undertaken in eight Gram Panchayats spread across the two states. In doing so it would look into the question of class-caste correlation in the countryside, the credit-indebtedness situation, costs of cultivation, access to PDS, unionisation and political participation and the wage-structure and the classification of the peasantry not merely on the basis of acreage but also value of productive assets. New contradictions in the countryside would be looked into especially with the advent of commercialisation and corporatisation and the role of MNCs and Traders-Usurers Capital in the rural economy. Development of policy alternatives will be attempted.