

A Review Paper on Gravity of Farmers Distress in Punjab



Social Science

KEYWORDS : Green Revolution, Resource Intensive, Farmer's distress, De-Peasantisation, Farmer's Suicide.

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ABSTRACT

Green revolution sustained till the eighties, after which the agricultural production in the state showed the signs of stagnation. The farming system promoted by the green revolution was resource intensive, making farmers heavily dependent on inputs such as HYV seeds, chemical fertilizers and extensive means of irrigation etc. There is a rise in the farmer's distress in the state. Punjab has seen a sudden spurt in the cases of de-peasantisation and farmer's suicides. The farmer's distress has reached to the extent where it has jolted not only the State Government but also the Government in the Centre.

Introduction

"If agriculture goes wrong, nothing else would go right" (Swaminathan). It is a paradox, with its granaries busting and overflowing and unable to store a massive production of wheat and rice, Punjab, the food bowl of India is reeling under agrarian crisis. Punjab is considered self sufficient in food production. It led the green revolution of the country and was crowned as India's 'Bread Basket'. It is one of India's most prosperous and developed states with a low poverty rate. But, the other side of the picture seems very dark. Many factors indicate that development story of the state is very much of a delusion. Of all the states of India, Punjab's agricultural growth rate was quite impressive. Punjab state comprising only 1.54 % of the total geographical area of India contributes 13-14% towards the total food grain production of the country. Green revolution sustained till the eighties, after which the agricultural production in the state showed the signs of stagnation (Singh et.al). Punjab the pioneer of green revolution in India is no more a state of ever booming agriculture, as it is facing economic crisis. The agriculture sector is losing its sheen. The farming system promoted by the green revolution was resource intensive, making farmers heavily dependent on inputs such as HYV seeds, chemical fertilizers and extensive means of irrigation etc. which forced the farmers to take large amount of loans that are mostly found through informal sources, due to the paucity of the formal credit system. Beginning with the early nineteen eighties the word crisis became the dominant mode of representing Punjab. At present the state of Punjab, earlier regarded as agriculturally developed region of India has been passing through a severe economic crisis. The ever increasing cost of production with stagnant productivity and unremunerative minimum support price has made the agriculture less profitable. On this uncertain weather conditions and mounting indebtedness has compounded the problem. The reversal of growth in agriculture has raised a serious question about the future sustainability of development in Punjab. There is a rise in the farmer's distress in the state. The distressed farmer's often decided to leave the unprofitable farming and opted for some other more secure occupational options, thus giving rise to de-peasantisation and those who decided to continue doing farming, after a while found it hard to survive and choose the path of suicides. This article is an insight into the two major outcomes of agrarian crisis i.e. de-peasantisation and farmer's suicides.

De-peasantisation

The farming sector of Punjab has witnessed large changes in structure of crop patterns, employment, productivity and income since introduction of the high yielding seeds of wheat and rice crop. The period of the seventies and the eighties was a golden period for the agricultural economy, when the productivity of important crops grew significantly, the farmers income improved, agricultural employment increased and national food economy turned from being a deficit one to a self sufficient one. However, the period of nineties was critical for the farming economy of the state. The technical changes dried up, the

realization of potential productivity of major crops i.e. rice and wheat reached the level of 80%. The productivity of cotton slumped due to the severe pest attack and productivity of rice and sugarcane ceased to grow further. The fixed costs showed high growth during this period putting pressure on profitability. Also the negligible growth in the minimum support price of wheat and paddy is further squeezing the profitability of Punjab farmers, in the wake of rise in the use of inputs as well as their prices. The economic viability of the small and marginal farmers is thus being threatened. Deceleration of economic growth of Punjab economy in general and agricultural sector in particular has further aggravated the situation. The promises of the green revolution dwindled rather rapidly. Even as early as 1983 experts were expressing concerns regarding the livelihood of marginal and small farmers: " Serious doubts have been raised, both in India and abroad, regarding the impact of new technology on Income distribution and specially on the level of living of marginal and small farmers and landless labour" (Bhalla). Dwindling income levels of small and marginal farmers made it difficult for them even to meet their household consumption needs leave alone the agricultural input requirements. One of the main consequences of this agrarian distress has been that the marginal and small farmers, who find it increasingly hard to sustain on farming, are getting pushed out from agricultural sector. Punjab, once the torch bearer of green revolution and dominantly and agricultural state has been facing a strange situation of de-peasantisation. It is the process of shifting of farmers from agricultural to non-agricultural sector for an alternate livelihood. The most agonized are the smaller farmers who have been hit hard by the financial crisis arising out of rising cost of production, declining productivity and reducing returns (Sukhpal Singh)

The major highlights or the force behind de-peasantisation in Punjab is the increasing indebtedness. During the era of high growth the farmers attained high living standards which also led to being extravagant. The indebtedness among small and marginal farmers increased more than what they can actually repay, that led to their distress. The agrarian distress reached a climax by early 2000, when Government of India sponsored and all India independent NSSO study (2003) which reported that 40% of the Indian farmers and 37 percent of the Punjab farmers have expressed their desire to leave farming, it being not a profitable occupation (NSSO, 2005). There is a decline in the proportion of cultivators in the total workforce of the state. The proportion of cultivators in the total work force decreased from 35.4% in 1981 to 31.7% in 1991 and further to about 23% in 2001 (Singh Karan, 2009). In a study by Government of Punjab, 2007, the maximum decline was observed in case of small and marginal farmers from about 5 lakh in 1991 to 3 lakh in 2001. The plight of about 2 lakh of these farmers who left farming is not known. Over capitalization of the farming operations has increased the polarization between rich and poor farmers. In a study conducted by Home ministry on 'The cause and Nature of the Current Agrarian Tension' identified inequality in landholding as a predisposing factor for agrarian tensions. The fact which was true in 1969 has held its ground in current agriculture scenario in 21st century. The in-

equality generating effects of the green revolution were built into the strategy of 'building on the best'- the best endowed region and the best endowed farmers. The poorer peasants were unable to maintain their land holding under the high input economies of the green revolution and chose the exit door. According to a study (Bhalla, 1972) "both in the high yielding wheat and rice area, the distribution of operated land has shifted in favor of big farmers." In a study conducted by Punjab State Farmers Commission, Mohali and Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana it was observed that out of 8440 sample farmers from 40 selected villages 920 farmers had left farming i.e. 11% of the total sample. A considerable proportion of marginal and small farmers are pushed out of agriculture because it is non-viable and majority of them joined other sectors like wage labour.

(b) Farmer's Suicide

The State of Punjab has been showcased as an Indian agricultural success story since the inception of Green Revolution. During the Green Revolution, production was improved with the use of modified seeds, which increased yield only when combined with expensive chemical fertilizers and irrigation. Unable to afford sufficient amounts of these expensive inputs, small farmers found their holdings becoming progressively less profitable. (Singh Harkawaljit et al, 2015). To compound the problem, ever increasing input costs and non-remunerative prices have made the Punjab Agriculture economically and ecologically unsustainable. The short term economic viability of high profits for the 'progressive' farmers of Punjab, and cheap and assured food supplies for India's Urban population was created at what was eventually be a high political and economic cost for Punjab's farmers. In less than two decades since the inception of Green Revolution Punjab's farmers, the main beneficiaries of the green revolution strategy were beginning to feel victimized. Initially the state as well as central government failed to register the farmer's distress arising out of fading away of benefits. Once initial euphoria of Green Revolution settled, farmers of Punjab felt cheated, they started to feel as if they had been held hostage to feed the rest of India. The Rice-Wheat mono-culture was becoming expensive day by day but India's dream project of food Security needed Punjab farmers to continue with these two crops; faced with mounting debts, falling yields and increasing cost of production, the poor farmers fate became miserable. This condition of farmer's distress has received little attention from the state. This has given birth to phenomenon of farmers suicides since mid 1980's. In fact farmer's suicides in Punjab over the past one decade or so have completely changed the discourse of Punjab agriculture. In Punjab, suicides by farmers became a public issue since the mid 1980's. The state government has reported that 2116 suicides had taken place since 1986 but many more cases might have gone unreported (Gill et al, 2005). As per MASR a Punjab based NGO that documents farmer suicides, estimates 50,000 suicides across Punjab from 1988 to 2009 (MASR). In 2006, Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) estimated 29,766 cases (from random sampling and not census sampling) in eight Punjab districts and estimates 90,000 suicides in Punjab from 1990-2006 (Kaur Mallika, 2010). Farmer suicides in Punjab expose the extreme rural plight that is otherwise over shadowed by the prevalent narrative of "India Rising"- as one of the world's fastest-growing economies (Singh Harkawaljit et al,2015). The plight of farmers in Punjab became bad to worse because of the denials from state government. Some reason for this may include general apathy for the poor, corruption, unwillingness to direct resources to the less vocal sections of the electorate and fear that negative rhetoric will replace the narrative projecting the state as being one of the most prosperous in India (Kaur Mallika, 2010). Same was the case with Central Government which was hesitant earlier to acknowledge the problem of farmer's suicides as this would mean the failure of their policies and highlight the state of Indian Agrarian systems in general and Punjab in particular- the so called bread basket of India. The height of insensitiveness of

Central Government towards the farmers suicides in Punjab can be judged from the fact that in 2008, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh awarded a 71,000 crores relief package (debt waivers) for Indian farmers- Punjab received only 0.75% of this package (Express News Service, 2009). The manifestation of agrarian crisis in the form of suicides has reached dangerous levels in Punjab. Near stagnation is the agricultural sector, extreme poverty, crop failure, mounting debt burden and the agony of not being able to pay back the debts have forced the farmers to take their own lives instead of living a life full of miseries and hopelessness.

CONCLUSION

Agrarian crisis that has engulfed the Punjab economy is changing the very structure of Punjab agriculture. Now farmers are leaving the farming in favour of some other non-risky ventures where they are more assured of regular income. Punjab is facing a new trend of de-peasantisation. Those who are unable to move out of agriculture chose the path of suicides. The farmer's distress has reached to the extent where it has jolted not only the State Government but also the Government in the Centre. It is an urgent need on the part of the Centre as well State Government to confront the various issues of farmers distress and they should come up with a concrete solution to lessen the agonies of farmers especially the small and marginal farmers who are hit really hard because of insensitiveness of authorities.

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