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Agrarian Crises in Contemporary India: Some Sociological Reflections

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KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

Having been born and brought up in an agricultural family, I have had ample opportunities of observing at close quarters the agrarian situation in the countryside. Also, being a son of a famer, I had to work along with family members in the field on many occasions. I do visit my village regularly and this has kept me abreast with the agricultural situation in rural India. Thus, I have an advantage of being an insider to the theme of this paper.

After deciding to write this paper, I visited my village, especially to reorient myself with the present agrarian situation. I held several discussions with my peasant friends on the issue under discussion. This paper is the outcome of my experiences as an insider to the situation and the explorations I made after the in-depth discussions with the peasant friends.

Agriculture in India has never been smooth sailing, as it is always confronted with one or the other problems. The life of the peasants being largely dependent upon agriculture has never been easy as his livelihood is determined by several social and environmental factors. Exploitation of the peasants by the merchants, middleman, money lenders etc., gamble with monsoon and inadequate irrigation, crop diseases, costly agricultural inputs, fluctuating and unremunerative agricultural inputs, smallholdings, low yield from land are some of the important problems of agriculture. Above all, a dualistic kind of development model, and ineffective implementation of the government policies and programmes have deepened the miseries of the peasants and widened the gap between rich, middle, small and marginal peasants and landless peasants.

Agricultural crisis in India is not something new. There have always been agrarian crises in India. These crises may be individuals specific, crops specific, class's specific or regional specific. However, the nature and the extent of these crises have been changing from time to time with changing policies and conditions at both national and international level. Therefore, the statesmen, academicians, policy makers and politicians are debating this issue since long. In this paper an attempt is being made to trace this changing trajectory of agrarian crises.

However, one finds a definite and steady change taking place in the villages in general and agriculture sector in particular. But these changes are either too small to make a dent on agricultural and other problems or they have created adverse conditions to the agriculturists.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The agrarian crisis began with the advent of British rule in India. In fact, the process of the agricultural deterioration started with the introduction of new land system by the imperialist rule. It laid a foundation for the capitalist form of agriculture by introducing Zamindari and ryotwari systems. The British policies had a far reaching impact on Indian agrarian society. It culminated into the lop-sided and unbalanced situation of agriculture, overcrowding and underdevelopment, de-industrialisation, the low yields, the waste of labour, the sub-division and fragmentation of lands the growth of absentee landlordism, exploitations of tenants, steep rise in the rural debt, serfdom, poverty etc. The agrarian economy was in a state of acute crisis. The economic misery of the rural people was unbearable. In general the agrarian situation was explosive during British raj in India. The ceaseless discontent and unrest that often busted in the form of peasant uprising, insurrections, struggles, movements etc was the reflection of acute agrarian crisis that exited in the rural society. The Kol Insurrection of 1832-33, The santal insurrection of 1855-56, Indian revolt of 1875, Champaram peasant movement, Moplah Rebellion, Bijolia movement etc. were all the result of deep agrarian crisis that prevailed during the British regime.

Even after independence the conditions which led to agrarian unrest arising out of agrarian crisis did not change much. As Mahatma Gandhi wrote: "if you went to the villages of India, you would find utter half-starved skeletons, living corpses" (Quoted in Vasant Desai, 1988:2) Also A.R.Desai(1990:23) writes: "the Indian country side is becoming a vast cauldron of boiling lava of tensions, antagonisms and conflicts ". It was under these conditions that certain measures were taken by the government to deal with vital problems of the rural India. However, these measures did not yield the desired results.

The land reforms introduced by the government were largely in favour of the land owning class. Many loopholes left within the laws along with their resources, power and influence helped the Zamindars to evade them. The indifferent and apathetic attitudes of the administration also contributed significantly to the failure of land reforms. The insufficient budgetary allocations were another constraint in the implementation of land reforms (Joshi.P.C, 1975:87-100).

The story of the green revolution is also not different. The main components of Green Revolution like high yielding variety of seeds, mechanization of agriculture, utilization of chemical fertilizers, pesticides etc. helped the landed class rather than the poor peasantry, as the poor peasants has no0 enough resources and land to make use of these. In fact, green revolution resulted in the growth of agricultural capitalization and uneven distribution of income (Bhalla, G.S and Chandha.G.K, E.P.W, Vol.17, No. 20, 1982:826-833).

The community development program was yet another step taken by the government to improve the lot of the weaker section of the society. Most of the community development programmes were for the agricultural development. Consequently, a small group of rich agriculturists benefited from them.

Integrated Rural Development and other programmes introduced in the later years met with similar consequences.

Co-operative movement was yet another programme introduced by the government to improve the socio-economic position of people of small means. But today we know the status of co-operatives in India. They are riddled with many problems

like corruption, maladministration, favouritism, politics, dominance of the rich etc. In many states co-op movement has failed.

The story of all such measures taken by the government runs, more or less, in the similar way. The 1990's reforms laid the further foundation for the present agrarian crisis.

GENESIS OF THE AGRARIAN CRISES IN INDIA

The genesis or the roots of the agrarian crises are multiple and change with changing policies, environment and global political and economic situation. The agrarian crisis in contemporary India is the result of cumulative effect of several factors operating since long. The roots of this crisis can broadly be discussed under the following headings:

Impact of British rule:

The genesis of today's agrarian crisis can be traced to the British rule. The adverse agricultural policies of the British government caused irreparable damage to the agricultural sector. The British introduced a revolutionary change in the existing land system. The new land relations and revenue system created adverse conditions to the peasants. It not only led to feudalism but also to fragmentation and sub-division of land. Commercialisation of agriculture introduced India into international market. As a result, the Indian agriculturists began to produce for the Indian and the foreign market. This led to the exploitation of the Indian Peasantry by the middle man, money lenders and merchants. Thus, the Indian Agriculturists were subjected to all the vicissitudes of the market. The shift from food crops to cash crops leading to the opening of paths to the world markets increased the need for credit. At the same time, the rising value of the agricultural land, the legal provision for sale, purchase and mortgage and also the favourable administrative machinery facilitated the operation of money lenders in the rural areas. As a result, rural indebtedness swelled during the British rule. Ironically, even after more than six decades of independence, Indian is plagued with these and other problems of the British rule. The country has utterly failed to address these problems successfully.

Failure of Govt. Policies and programmes:

After independence govt. has introduced several policies and programmes to deal with agricultural problems in particular and rural backwardness in general. However, the defective and lopsided policies (policies formulated without diagnosing rural problems) of the government have created adverse conditions to the rural populace. The government programmes like land reforms, green revolution, community development programmes, IRDP etc have failed to yield the expected results. Also, they have resulted in the unintended consequences affecting countryside adversely. The land reforms and green revolution ended up in creating capitalist land lords and capitalism in agriculture. The green revolution also increased the indebtedness among the peasants. It has resulted in environmental problems like over exploitation of ground water resources and consequent decline in its level, loss of soil quality etc.

Inadequate public investment and corruption:

The public investment in agriculture sector has always been less compared to its need. It has particularly dwindled with the structural adjustments or economic reforms introduced during 1990's. The rural development expenditure as percent of GDP was 14.5 during the 7th plan(1985-1990), 11.7 during 1991-92, 6.0 during 1995-96, 5.6 during 1997-98 and 5.9 during 2000-01(Pathaik Utsa, 2003:26). As if this is not enough, the widespread corruption has further drained the financial resources of the agricultural sector.

Impact of liberalisation:

The liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation policy of the government had multi-pronged effects on the agriculture in India. There was a paradigm shift in the government expenditure from agriculture and rural development to industrial and urban development. The withdrawal of the state from the public expenditure affected the investment in critical areas like water supply, power, health, education and infrastructure. Several mechanisms created and institutionalised by the state to promote green revolution either became defunct or become inactive. Agricultural subsidies saw reduction resulting in increased agricultural cost. The removal of the tariff barriers subjected the Indian agricultural products to the prices determined by the forces of the world market.

Natural factors:

Agriculture in India is largely affected by variations in factors associated with nature. Even today agriculture in India gambles with the monsoon. Frequent occurrence of floods and droughts affect the agriculture badly. Due to climatic changes and other factors, spread of crop diseases has become common. The problem of insects and pests causes substantial agricultural loss to the peasants.

Misplaced priorities of the government:

We seem to have forgotten the well-known and widely accepted thoughts "the development of India lies in the development of villages", "India lives in villages" and "agriculture is the backbone of Indian economy". Our priorities and thrust areas of development have changed from agriculture to industry, tourism, information technology, mining and urban areas. Our emphasis is not on sustainable development with equity. Our focus is on achieving higher growth rate within limited time to get the political mileage. We seem to be in race to achieve faster growth with little regard for the sustainability and equity. The poor budgetary allocations to agriculture and rural areas have created a "rural-urban divide". Therefore, the agriculture sector is suffering from number of problems like irregular power supply, inadequate irrigation, absence of storage facilities, lack of roads, transportations etc. There has to be paradigm shift in our thrust areas of development. Agriculture sector should receive the priority it had received during initial five year plans.

Sharp increase in agricultural costs:

Due to sharp decline in the subsidies, the costs of agriculture inputs have risen sharply. The commercialisation of agriculture has compelled the peasants to use fertiliser, modern technology, power, pesticides and insecticides, irrigation etc. The labour cost has also gone up. The peasants also have to spend on transportation of the produce. All these factors have contributed to the increase in agricultural cost. To crown all this, the spurious seeds and adulterated insecticides, pesticides and fertiliser increase the woes of the peasants.

Unremunerative prices:

Agriculture today is subjected to the vicissitudes of the international market. The removal of quantitative restrictions on imports and reduction in tariffs levels has resulted in large scale imports of agricultural products and also stiff competition from exports in the international markets. Also, the free trade agreement has increased the competitiveness. These have affected the prices of agricultural products negatively. Non-remunerative prices have put the peasants in great loss. There is no fixed and permanent price for any agricultural produce. The prices vary frequently beyond the imagination of common man.

Fragmentation and sub-division of land:

In India the landholdings are very small and they are spread at different places. This renders them uneconomic and unviable. The peasants cannot use the modern technology on these fragmented and sub-divided lands. It also leads to waste of time and energy. The effect of all these is low yield per acre and consequently low income for peasants.

Land acquisition by the government for the public purposes:

Acquisition of cultivable and fertile land is a cause of concern. Quite often such lands are acquired without conducting socio-economic impact study. The compensation is generally less, and is in the form of cash. The illiterate and ignorant

farmers, in the absence of investment plan spend the money for unproductive purposes. Thus, they lose not only their land, habitat but also money. In the absence of clear and definite rehabilitation policy, the displaced people are subjected to social and economic suffering. Recently, the land acquisition bill is passed by the parliament, which is said to protect the interests of the people. We will have to wait and see how best it is going to be implemented.

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE AGRARIAN CRISIS

It appears that the country has failed to comprehend the seriousness of the manifestations of the agrarian crisis. These manifestations are either considered as a temporary phase or a false thinking that they can be resolved easily. These manifestations are of serious nature and are seen in all sectors of agriculture. The peasants in general and the poor peasants in particular, are the worst sufferers. Some of the significant areas of the agrarian crisis are:

Decline in agricultural growth:

During 1990's, one notices a sharp decline in the rate of agricultural growth and stagnation in agricultural produce. According to Usta Patnaik(2003:23) "the food grains growth rate declined by half and at 1.8% in the 1990's, for the first time in 30 years ". Using the data from the Agricultural Strategy for the Eleventh Plan, Pillai Ramchandran R (2007:23) writes "the agricultural GDP Growth declined from 3.62% during 1984-85 to 1.8% during 1995-96 to 2004-05". The state wise trends indicate that the larger decline in agricultural growth have occurred in states that are predominantly rain fed.

Increasing threat to food security:

The most distressing and sociologically significant is the decline in the production of food grains. This may pose a threat to food security for the people. The emphasis on commercial crops particularly export oriented has a potential to create food shortage. Many farmers today are buying food grains from the market, as they have completely changed their cropping pattern towards commercial crops.

Agriculture has become uneconomical:

Most of the peasants today are of the opinion that the agricultural occupation has become less profitable. They express that in agriculture "nothing remains" for them. They have developed a feeling that agriculture today is of no benefit. Thus, agriculture today has become unremunerated and unviable. Pillai Rmachandran (2007:2) quoting the survey of NSS on Situation Assessment Survey of Income, Expenditure and Productive Assets of farmer Households states that "96.2% of the farmers households surveyed, owing less than 4 hectares of land, had incurred monthly consumption expenditure in excess of their average monthly income from all sources. Only the top 3.8% farmer's households earned enough to meet their monthly expenditures. The rest were in deficit". The net agricultural profit is too meager from the sale of agricultural produce and in some states like Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Andra Pradesh etc. the farmer's incur losses. The main cause of this is increase in the prices of agricultural inputs and the unremunerative agricultural prices.

Apathy towards agricultural occupation:

Due to many factors like uncertain prices for agricultural produce, increasing indebtedness, exploitation, unreliable monsoon etc. the agriculturists are developing apathy towards agriculture. Despande and Prabhu (2005:4665) in their article have mentioned that in India 70% of farmers are frustrated with their occupation and 40% of the farmers wish to quit their occupation, if they have their opportunities. The second generation of agricultural families is not willing to take up the agricultural occupation. Most importantly, the farmers themselves do not want their children in agriculture. Like industrial urban society, the farmers in villages are also experiencing increasing strains and stresses. The growing unhappiness and dissatisfaction among the farmer's poses a great threat to agriculture in India.

Growing farm debt:

The shift in land use and cropping pattern from food grains to commercial crops has increased the cultivation cost enormously. Modern agriculture requires significant expenditure on fertilizer, seeds, pesticides, electricity, irrigation, technology etc. But due to several market forces, both domestic and international, the trade in primary agricultural commodities is largely unfavourable. This has created a mismatch between the cultivation cost and the income from agriculture, thus contributing significantly to the farm debt. In fact, one can trace the rural indebtedness to the green revolution. The agricultural practices that were promoted during the green revolution involved significant capital investment. The subsidies given by the government prompted the farmers to seek loan from the financial institutions. This in course of time, for various reasons, caught the farmers in a debt trap. The economic reform introduced in 1990's not only reduced subsidies on agricultural inputs but access to cheap institutional credit. This forced the farmers, particularly small holding farmers, to seek loans from informal sources of credit like money lenders, middle man, commission agents etc. To add to this, with the opening of international market for agricultural products, the uncertainty level has increased as the farmer is neither sure of getting a crop nor assured of remunerative prices if he gets a good harvest. All these factors have contributed to farm debt (University of Oxford, Dissertation Cover Sheet, 2012:12-14).

Shortage of labour:

Another manifestation of the agrarian crisis is the increasing shortage of labour in the agricultural sector. The agricultural labourers are changing their work from agriculture to industrial. The push factors like better wages dislike towards agricultural work and status enhancing industrial jobs are responsible for the labours joining the industrial sector. The impetus given by the government policies for the industrial and urban policies for the industrial and urban growth have generated new opportunities to the rural agricultural labourers. These labourers are working in the nearby industrial estates. Therefore, today agriculture is becoming the occupation of women and elderly.

Farmers suicides:

There are a number of factors that are associated with farmer's suicides like declining agricultural production, low profits, low income, increasing cultivation cost, unremunerative prices, failure of crops, commercialisation of agriculture, lack of irrigation and so on. However, the primary cause, resulting from all these factors, is the growing indebtedness of the farmers. Decline in the government support in terms of agricultural credit and subsidies have forced the peasantry to seek loan from informal sources like the money lenders, traders, commission agents etc. (University of Oxford, Dissertation Cover Sheet, 2012:13-14). Such loans are very costly, which increase the debt burden of the peasants enormously. The ultimate result is the farmer's suicides resulting from inability to cope with the debt burden.

Loss of soil fertility:

The continuous use of land for multiple cropping without reclaiming practices, use of chemical fertiliser, pesticides, unscientific and uncontrolled and unsystematic irrigation has led to salinity of land. The regular use of pesticides has increased the immunity of pests.

Development of sense of relative deprivation:

The rural people in general and peasants in particular have developed a feeling of relative deprivation. They strongly feel that urban India is developing at the cost of rural India. There is a wide gap in the standard of living of rural and urban people. The infrastructural facilities like roads, electricity, pure drinking water supply etc. are inadequate. They opine that in cities and town's even graveyards have roads. So villages are less important than graveyards. The cities and towns get uninterrupted supply of electricity but the villages do not het electricity even for 6-7 hours. Government is spending more money on urban development than rural development. This

sense of relative deprivation has created discontent among the peasants. This may take the form of peasant revolts and violent peasant movements, as it happened during 1970's and 80's. They seem to have lost inspiration for cultivation.

Increasing landlessness:
Along with Sub-division and fragmentation of landholding, the landlessness is growing. Viswanathan P.K et al (2012:47) wrote that "landlessness is acute in India as National Sample Survey Office Surveys show, more than 40% of rural households are landless and inequality in landownership worsened between the 48th (1992) and 59th (2003-04) NSS rounds".

SOME SUGGESTIONS
The resolution of agricultural crisis requires a total change in our approach, priorities and policies. Our approach and policies should be based on the premise that agriculture being the main occupation of the country, it rightfully deserves the top priority and attention. Also, we need to recall our commonly held thinking that India lies in villages. The development of country lies in the development of agriculture in particular and the villages in general. We were able to withstand the earlier periods of global economic depressions because of our agrarian economy. Thus we need to focus our attention and divert our efforts towards this primary occupation. We need to abandon myopic views and solutions, and adopt a holistic approach to resolve the agrarian crisis.

Firstly:
The agriculture requires state support. Given the nature of agriculture and socio-economic conditions of peasants, the agriculture sector requires huge public investment. The government has to significantly increase the budgetary allocations to invest in basic needs of agriculture like irrigation, power, roads, storage facilities, agricultural markets etc. Agriculture sector cannot be left to itself as it surfers from multitude of risks and weakness. So, the state intervention and support is must

Secondly:
We need to protect the agriculture sector from the vicissitudes and volatilities of both domestic and international market, and also from other adverse effects of liberalisation. We need to create appropriate and adequate safety nets to protect our agriculture from economic reforms like GATT, FTAs, and TRIPS etc. A strong base has to be created by strengthening the infrastructure of all kinds to develop necessary abilities and skills among the peasants to cope with the effects of liberalisation. We need also to determine to what extent the agriculture sector can be subjected to the liberalisation policies.

Thirdly:
Today peasants are the victims of both significantly increased agriculture cost and unremunerative prices for agriculture. Trade liberalisation in agriculture and reduction in tariffs have resulted in the low prices for agricultural commodities. The peasants are exploited by middlemen, traders and commission agents. Therefore, there is a need to ensure remunerative prices for agricultural commodities by formulating appropriate and pro-farmer policies. As the government appoints a pay commission to fix the pay of government and other employees, the agricultural prices commission to fix the prices of agriculture scientifically on certain criteria should also be established. Unless the agriculture is made profitable, the agriculture growth is not possible.

Fourthly:
There seems to be gap between the dissemination of knowledge and promotion of modern technology. The government is promoting use of high yielding variety (HYV) of seeds, genetically modified crops and use of latest technology in agriculture. But farmers are ignorant about how to make use of such things. Proper and sufficient knowledge is not given to the peasants about the intricacies of such technology and cropping. As a result, the peasants are not in a position to make correct and better use of modern seeds and technology. Therefore, frequent workshops, training camps etc of the farmers at the village or hobli level should be held to bridge the gap between promotion of modern technology and the dissemination of knowledge about it.

Fifth:
Land reforms have remained as an unfinished task. The government should reinitiate the process of implementation of these reforms with all sincerity, commitment and vigour. This will help in solving many problems of agrarian crisis. This will curb fragmentation and sub-division of landholdings, brings consolidation of holdings, and promotes co-operative farming and redistribution of land among the landless and so on.

Sixth:
Considering the significance of agriculture to Indian economy, an independent and statutory Agriculture Development Authority should be established**,** as ministry of agriculture and planning commission have failed in their efforts to develop the agriculture. Such an action will bring in focused attention to agriculture sector. Such an authority should be constituted by academicians, peasants and their leaders, NGO's working in agriculture sector, Social activists etc.

Seventh:
Boost to the promotion of agro based other small scale industries to create additional or alternative employment opportunities in the villages should be given. This will help not only in dealing with the problem of unemployment but also in promotion of agriculture growth.

Eighth:
The Acquisition of land particularly the fertile land may pose a threat to food security and render many landless. Therefore, acquisition of fertile cultivable land should be avoided.

Ninth:
We need to inspire and motivate youth particularly educated, to take to agriculture. Their dislike for agriculture emanates from unviability of agriculture, low social status attached to it, agrarian problems etc. Today agriculture has become the occupation of the elderly and the women. Introduction of youth to agriculture can bring new ideas, new technology, added energy and enthusiasm into it, which is essential for agricultural growth. To achieve this, we need to make agriculture occupation more attractive by making it highly profitable.

Conclusion:
Agriculture in India is a base for the growth of Indian economy. A sustained agriculture growth provides a strong base for overall growth of the country. Moreover, the agricultural growth with broad base and without any fluctuation contributes significantly to food security, generates employment and income, helps in growth and expansion of markets by increasing purchasing power and ultimately reduces poverty. Thus, the agricultural growth can address the socio-economic problems of the peasants. If India has to shine, then villages will have to shine, and for the villages to shine agriculture has to grow uninterruptedly and the only way for uninterrupted growth of agriculture is to resolve the present agrarian crisis.

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