

FARMER'S PROTEST VIS-A-VIS AGRARIAN DISTRESS IN INDIA- A REVISIT

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ABSTRACT

Peasants' movements have gathered much significance since pre-British times. These movements in India have been led by several renowned social workers. There were many nationalists who strived very hard towards improving the situation of farmers in India. Though at present some reforms are seen in the agricultural sector, wherein the farmers are going in for modernized pattern of cultivation of crops with the latest technology. At the same time, to some extent, the Government has also initiated subsidies on agricultural products. This has changed the life of farmers. But yet the problem remains unsolved as such benefits are availed only by the rich farmers. The poor and illiterate farmers are not able to utilize the schemes of the Government. The gap between rich and poor farmers is increasing. Moreover, even after the strong national movement, the Government could not take up many steps for the improvement of the life of the farmers. Their situation, in fact, is getting worse day by day. The present paper aims to analyze the peasant movement in India and the impact of the same on the agricultural community and reforms.

Keywords: Peasant, Farmers Protests, Agrarian Reforms, Farmers' Perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

In the last several years in India, there has been a rise and intensification of peasant unrest in rural areas. This unrest is resulting in a deepening agrarian crisis that affects the peasants earlier and then later extends to the non-farm sector. Many researchers have debated on whether this deepening agrarian distress has an impact on all classes. This article tries to examine different peasant movements in India and the persistent agrarian crisis in India. Historically, peasants have all along remained at the receiving end in colonial India. The situation remained unchanged even after independence till almost the mid-1970s when the new farmer's movements gathered momentum in different parts of India Acharya (2008).

BACKGROUND

The Patiala Muzara movement occurred in Punjab to rebel against the Biswedars who at first were mafia guarantors and were gathering income from the workers Anonymous Correspondent (1970). In West Bengal, Harekrishna Konar, a land income minister, declared a program of fast appropriation of surplus land among the landless. He additionally required activity from workers to aid the execution of the program. There were numerous issues with the circulation of land, as quite a bit of it was under prosecution Bandyopadhyay (1973);

Bandyopadhyay (2001).

In the Srikakulam region of Andhra Pradesh, tribes rebelled against the nontribal landlords and moneylenders. They re-established their properties which were grabbed unlawfully from them, compensation was expanded, and the decrease of obligations and free access to the timber was the couple of changes that the upheavals brought into the locale.

Later in the 1980s, the administration began to force new charges for the agrarian terrains that were flooded. Another Farmer's Movement started in 1980 with street and 'Rail Roko' in Nasik of Maharashtra in order to contradict the legislature. There were various demands from the laborers. The laborers halted traffic on interstate and train courses, sat on numerous 'Dharnas' at Government workplaces, kept political pioneers and authorities from entering towns, till they consented to meet their requests. When the mass agitations by Shetkari Sanghatana led by Sharad Joshi on issues of prices offered to farmers were started, a lot of criticism grew and there was huge unrest Kumar & Raghavendra (2019).

The central government of congress in 1991 started neoliberal policies in India and in agriculture. The rural employment schemes and poverty alleviation schemes were cut back. The pressure was there to dilute the law of land ceiling by the states and to lease out land to big companies in India as well as foreign that were in agri-business. Multinational Companies were entering the agriculture sphere in India. However, there were two important contradictions. The first was the sharp division between the large traders, rural rich, big ca farmers, on one side and on the other side the mass of the peasantry, such as farmers, agricultural workers, poor and middle peasants, and rural artists. The second was the growing opposition to LPG policy, from both masses of the peasantry and also rural rich.

With the passage of time, agrarian distress continued to rise. Many scholars have debated on persistent agrarian crisis and rural distress in India after the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the 1990s. It is debated in the literature that even after the revival of growth in the agricultural sector after 2004-05, the crisis was severe for the majority of the farmers. The majority of the farmers were under distress in the rural area for the period 2004-05 to 2013-14. Subsequently, the farmer income was also declining Figure 1 in real terms and along with the casual worker wages also growing at a slower rate than before. The real wages of both the farm sector and non-farm sector in rural areas were stagnant for five years. The suicide rate of the farmer also increased.

The agriculture growth rate was just 1.76% for the period 1998 to 2004. Thereafter 2014 growth rate was 3.84 %. The revival of agriculture was due to a rise in availability of credit to agriculture and an increase in farm investment and minimum support price policies which favors agriculture. For instance, the MSP of Paddy has hiked to Rs. 1310 per quintal in 2013-14 from Rs. 560 per quintal in 2004-05. Similarly, for wheat, it was raised to Rs.1400 in 2013-14 per quintal from Rs. 640 per quintal in 2004-04. Both the rises were more than doubled. This generated higher income in the hands of farmers which was used by farmers to purchase durable goods like 2 wheelers. There was also an increase in demand for labor in employment for the non-farm sector in rural areas. The government also benefited the non-farm sector by the way of transferring funds under various schemes such as NREGA, PDS, etc.

Again, since 2012-13 agriculture has been in distress due to neglect of the agriculture sector and decline in the prices of agricultural produce, failure of monsoon, and drought in some areas. Not only the agriculture sector but the entire rural area has been affected by falling demand for their activity including farming as well as non-farming activities. The government action has worsened the crisis. Subsequently, it was seen that the average size of farmlands was

decreasing.

Since 2016, there have been some large and small protests done by the farmers. In 2017, the farmers from Tamil Nadu sat on agitation at the nation's capital. At Mandsaur in Madhya Pradesh, 5 farmers died during a protest due to firing done by the police. There are some agitations from the many various events taking place overall in India. Among these all agitations, there are only two common demands in all those. The first one is a higher Minimum Support Price (MSP) for the crop, the price should be properly remunerative and the second is the debt trap. The protest resulted in the promises made by the state government and central government and some political parties of waivers of debts and to give higher MSP and also the transfer of income to the farmer's bank account. The effect of this led to a sharp increase in minimum support prices for crops. The three farm bills of 2020 concerning the reversal of a number of existing public support structures in Indian agriculture received severe criticisms. There was huge unrest in the economy and ultimately the government was forced to repeal the bills. The subsequent section discusses the perception of the respondents on the reasons for farmers' protest that has resulted in the unrest in the economy and the reasons for withdrawing the Farm Bill Hardgrave (1977).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies and non-government reports on suicides have identified the larger and broader factors that account for such distress. Some of the vital key issues that have been identified are – the impact of neo-liberal economic policies including the incorporation of Indian agriculture into the world market (Shiva and Jafri 1998; Patnaik 2004, 2006); increasing costs of production (Mohanty 2019); Lack of availability of credit including inadequate institutional; brake or non-acceleration in rural growth (Dev, 2004); dropping down of wages, increasing unemployment and indebtedness (Patnaik 2004; Dev 2004; Sarma 2004), continuous loss of production, and as results of a triple crisis of the economy, society, and ecology (Vasavi 1999). Farmers had committed suicides in Karnataka due to low prices of agricultural produces and the absence of adequate debt in a timely manner Benerjee (2002). Other than these reasons, farmer suicides include diminishing overall agricultural growth Das (2011). Agrarian crisis in India, amid other causes, has largely been debated as the prime reason for the current deteriorating state of farmers. Moreover, it has become important that (psychiatric) epidemiology and public mental health try to develop new mechanisms to understand and implement measures and consider it while attempting health promotion and prevention (Heeger, 1972). This paper tries to analyse the reasons for farmer suicides in India deeper analyses, however, it reveals that there are various other reasons for increasing suicides, which are, small land holding, less institutional support, relying more on monsoon, price shocks, poor credit facility, etc. Rural distress has widened in the last decade, as input costs and wages have risen while incomes have remained stagnant. In the case of cereals, primarily rice and wheat, a system of a Minimum Support Price (MSP) and a mechanism of procuring farmers' outputs through the Food Corporation of India and the state marketing federations have been in place in several states, assuring the farmer of a reasonable price for his output. However, the MSP has increased only this year after stagnating for three years during which farm incomes were stressed (Narayan, 2018).

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The farmers are concerned as the main pillars of the society. Meanwhile, the Indian

peasant has become a market-oriented farmer and is not much dependent on the landlord, but they were much more dependent on the market. This implied that the farmers- whether rich, middle or poor, and marginal – cultivated marketable crops, expecting good prices for their produce so that they could buy things they did not produce. After the introduction of neo-liberal policies in 1990, the issue gained vast momentum and an increased debate on agrarian distress. Recently, the farmers’ protest over three Farm Acts received substantial condemnation and these three farm acts were forced to be withdrawn. The subsequent paragraphs briefly throw light on some of the issues related to the farmers in this context Prasad (2005).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is based on secondary data, the exact opinion of the farmers and the landlords, as well as the Governmental bodies are missing. At the same time, dual statements on a single point are seen, wherein for the author it was difficult to lay the conclusion.

Experts Perception on Farm Bills 2020 and Farmers Protest

The subsequent paragraph throws light on the perception of thirty experts comprising of employees from KVK’s, subject matter specialists, extension officers, and some research scholars. These respondents were asked to give their opinion on a five-point scale (where 1- Strongly disagrees and 5 strongly agree) on the five claims made by the government regarding the farm bills. All the expert respondents disagree with the claims made by the government as can be seen. The claims made by the government as perceived by the respondents clearly indicate that the protest of the farmers was inevitable.



FIGURE 1
EXPERT’S PERCEPTION ON CLAIMS MADE BY GOVERNMENT

Source: Primary Data.

Moreover, it is well known that the agrarian industry of India is dominated by small and marginal farmers, and as such, they possess a poor ability to engage with the corporates. So the protests have spread across states and the Government of India was forced to repeal the three farm Acts. The present study thus highlights the importance of farmers' protest that can give the farmers due attention and help them sustain themselves with their activities. The relevance of the protest and its impacts are highlighted in the study.

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