

**AGRARIAN CRISIS AND FARMERS' SUICIDES:  
REFLECTING ON THE GREEN REVOLUTION MODEL**

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**Agrarian Crisis and Farmers' Suicides:**  
***Reflecting on the Green Revolution Model***

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The research problems in social sciences could be identified to be of two types. First are of empirical nature, which can be answered, based on relevant and adequate facts. The second type of problems are those that are theoretical and interpretative in nature. There may be lot of empirical data available but we do not know how to make sense of them and to establish the interrelationships [Kaviraj 1984.]

The problem of the agrarian crisis and farmers' suicides is of the second type. A lot of data is available in the public domain in the form of journalistic reports, activist field reports, different fact-finding committee reports, government committee reports, research findings by scholars, etc. As a result, we have lot of details about the farmers' distress but what seems to be lacking is a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon showing the complex patterns and interconnections.

In the understanding of the farmers suicides, three ways of looking at the problem can be identified. Firstly, the tendency to individualise them by looking at them as individual acts resorted to out of desperation when there is no perceptible alternative. The official response generally tends to view the suicides as acts that are not entirely reducible to farm crisis but are significantly influenced by individual exigencies and incorrect decisions and also attributable to certain psychological problems or family disputes.

Second way of looking at the problem is to view farmers' suicides as seasonal cycles of crisis generated by crop failures that could be caused by the vagaries of nature or human error. Thus they are not seen as symptomatic of any systemic crisis in agriculture.

The fact that the suicides have become a regular and an almost uninterrupted feature of Indian countryside, with not even a day passing without the reporting of a suicide in some corner of the country, we can no longer afford to individualise them or attribute them to natural factors alone. For a proper perspective they need to be viewed as symptomatic of a systemic crisis in rural India - the precise nature of which can be understood only when they are seen in a theoretical perspective.

What lends credence to the view that the suicides are an index of a deeper systemic crisis in rural India is the fact that they are not only committed as silent individual acts resorted to in privacy out of desperation but even assume explicit forms of conscious political action. The farmers' attempts to publicly burn themselves or consume poisonous pesticide in the official precincts in the presence of concerned officers or to burn their produce have to be seen as conscious political acts of protest by farmers at the apathy and inaction on the part of the state or perhaps to elicit moral response from the civil society at their distress.

The following factors could be found emphasized in the analyses of the crisis in Indian agriculture, though not in isolation but mostly in their complex multiplicity and interrelationships:

- i) Most of the studies argue that because of the rise in the cost of agricultural production the farmers tend to accumulate debts and when they reach unbearable proportions they tend take away their lives [Vyas 2004; Mohanty & Shroff 2004; Gill and Singh 2006]
- ii) Reduction of public employment as part of the economic reform process leading to the decline of extension services and regulatory mechanism; this in

turn opened the field to the private dealers and traders in the input market causing increase in input costs and widespread sale of spurious seeds, fertilizers and pesticides [Vasavi 1999; Vaidyanathan 2006].

- iii) Neo-liberal economic reforms leading to the reduction and/or withdrawal of input subsidies and the privatization and marketisation of economic activities [Patnaik 2006]
- iv) Financial sector reforms (emphasizing financial viability and credit worthiness as the criteria) adversely impacting on the availability of institutional credit to the farm sector (and especially the small and middle peasantry) forced the peasantry to look towards the informal sources of money thereby leading to their indebtedness. [Sidhu *et al* 2011].
- v) Losses on account of failure of inputs, bore wells and loss of production pushing the peasantry into further indebtedness and crisis [Citizens' Report 1998].
- vi) The agrarian crisis in post-green revolution areas, as amply demonstrated in the case of Punjab, is due to the declining productivity, escalating cost of production, indebtedness, and resultant decline in farm incomes. The solution suggested to this crisis is the diversification in the cropping pattern and also to agro-processing and other non-farm activities in the rural areas. [Sidhu 2002; Singh 2004; Gill and Singh 2006]
- vii) the rapid changes in the rural social context, decline in the support systems and impoverishment social relations leading to alienation and distress thus forcing the vulnerable farmers to suicides [Parthasarathy and Shameem 1998; Sarma 2004]

- viii) Opening up of India's agrarian economy to the global market and the resultant competition impacting on the farmers. [Mitra, and Shroff 2007; Jeromi 2007; Patnaik, 2006]

Corresponding to the above diagnoses, the following solutions to the crisis are emphasized:

- i) Continuation and renewal of input subsidies to the farm sector;
- ii) Restoration of extension services to farm sector, which have suffered immensely as a result of the decline of public investment, which in turn is a consequence of economic reforms.
- iii) Enhancement of public institutional support in the form of credit, increase in the budgetary and plan allocation for infrastructure development and especially irrigation, etc.
- iv) Regulatory mechanism to be put in place to ensure quality of inputs, appropriate extension services and crop insurance to be made available to overcome any adverse eventuality.
- v) Crop diversification and support and expansion of agro-processing and allied farm and non-farm activities in the rural areas.
- vi) Reversal of neo-liberal policies and protection to Indian farmers in the domestic market.

The above diagnoses and solutions based on empirical evidence are now part of commonsense. But the question is do they capture the gravity of the agrarian crisis in its complexity and can the crisis be addressed merely by churning out the above solutions?

I think the crisis experienced in the rural India is much more complex than what the above diagnoses suggest. The dominant analyses tend to see the crisis firstly, essentially in terms of economic and natural factors and secondly, they tend to generalize the crisis thereby losing sight of the internal dynamics of the political economy of agrarian transformation. The complexity of the agrarian crisis, therefore, has to be addressed at a conceptual level in order to capture the multi-dimensionality and also the specificity to arrive at a concrete analysis and appropriate solutions and action.

The crucial concept in this analysis is the concept of *Agrarian Question*. It helps us in capturing the changing *relations internal* to the agrarian society and the relations emerging between *the town and country* on the one hand and the *relations between different classes and the state in the process of accumulation*, on the other. This therefore makes the agrarian question a political question.

The analysis here attempts to make sense of the agrarian crisis that has two faces. Firstly, it is a result of the way the agrarian question has evolved and shaped in the post-Green revolution period and the resultant changing class- caste relations internally and the linkages this change has resulted in with the market economy. This change has to be seen further in relation to the economic reforms and the opening up of Indian economy to the global process.

Secondly, the crisis is also a result of the transposition of the Green revolution model onto the agro-climatic regions that are suitable for the dry and largely coarse grain production. This has aggravated the conditions of the already vulnerable small and middle peasantry who dominate the dry land agrarian economy and their subsistent agriculture. To appreciate the agrarian crisis we need to examine the interconnections between the agro-climatic regions, shifts in the cropping pattern, the changing agrarian relations in the post-Green revolution period in its caste and class dynamics and the market impact and its local and global dynamics.

### *Agrarian Question in India*

Theoretically, two models of the resolution of the Agrarian Question that is the agrarian transition to capitalism could be identified. Though historically, there could be a wide range of variations in the agrarian transition logically it would be instructive to identify two principal models [Byres: 1986]. First is the model, known as 'Junker path' which was dominant mode in central Europe, where resolution of agrarian question was attempted 'from above'. In this a section of the landlord class would transform into capitalist landlords/ farmers thus acting as the agency of capitalist transformation of agriculture.

The state also plays an important role in this transformation. As a result, in this process the tenantry, small and medium peasantry would get pauperized and join the ranks of proletariat. This model extrapolated from the Prussian experience has theoretical relevance to the Indian reality because large parts of colonial India and princely states had huge concentration of feudal estates. But in the pockets, which saw militant anti-feudal peasant struggles, we see a considerable decline in their power and control. The legitimacy of the state would have been grossly compromised if the independent Indian state were to posit an agency only on to this class for agrarian transformation in the post-colonial period.

In the second model, the agency of agrarian transformation emerges 'from below' through the involvement of the peasantry. The classic case of this model is the North American experience characterised by the historical absence of feudalism and landlord class. The possibility of this model of agrarian transition is premised on the non-existence or decline of the feudal landlord class. It is a possibility obviously in the instances where the landlord class has been weakened due to militant agrarian struggles.

The post-independent Indian experience in a significant sense combines the characteristics of both the models. The presence of a stubborn landlord class supported by



the colonial state and native princely rulers and the politics of militant peasant and tribal movements resisting them characterise the agrarian history of India. The agenda of the post-independent Indian state thus could be seen shaped by the history of agrarian conflicts on the one hand and the need to resolve the tension between the necessity of modernizing Indian agriculture and class compromises with the landlord class that is historically based on extra-economic forms of exploitation and disposed by habit against the modernization of the rural social relations. This tension is evident in the progressive agrarian legislations like Zamindari and Jagirdari abolition, tenancy reforms and land ceiling acts and their tardy implementation or non-implementation resulting in a bloody history of agrarian struggles in the post-independence period led by the CPI (ML) groups.

If in the early decades of post-independence, the agrarian reforms of the Indian state involving the abolition of the intermediaries and protection of the tenancy were meant to level up the grossly uneven landed gentry then the subsequent land reforms aimed at the homogenization of this upper crust. The emergence of this landed class in the Indian countryside was seen to be instrumental in ushering in of the agrarian development required to transform India into a modern nation. The green revolution was meant to give it the wherewithal to transform it into a market savvy class that would act as the agency of agrarian capitalism in the countryside.

### ***Post-Green Revolution Developments***

In the early period of the Green revolution, the landed gentry and rich peasantry in fact benefited hugely from the subsidized agrarian modernization provided by the Indian state. It is no surprise then that Pranab Bardhan [1984] recognizing its phenomenal economic growth, perceptible ideological presence and significant political clout by late Seventies and early Eighties should consider the rich peasant class as a part of the core class constituency of the Indian state. This class in terms of its objective class nature, social character and political posture has displayed widely different personalities depending on the historical, social and political specificities of regional States in India. Though it would be an exaggeration to characterize it as a pan-Indian class but its arrival

on the national scenario was obvious as evident in the political prominence its issues, demands and their ideological articulation has amply demonstrated. The emergence and consolidation of regional political parties and rise of non-Congress governments in the Indian States has further vindicated its political consolidation and its decisive place in the emerging power structure.

By the 1980s, we find significant socio-political changes occurring in the rural milieu that could be seen as signaling the political announcement of this class. This is not to suggest that this class is homogenous across the spatial locations and social milieus. But what is significant to note is that despite the historical differences, locational variation, physiognomic heterogeneity and diversity of political expression this class has for the first time brought into focus and asserted the significance of the regional and vernacular in Indian politics. The following inter-related dimensions of this class are worth noting. One, its appetite to expand its economic personality by shifting from agriculture to the urban service and business vocations; two, that this class found its interests to be in opposition to, if not in conflict with, the pan-Indian capitalist class; three, its aspiration to achieve political power in the regional States and also to influence the political configuration at the national level.

The assertion of its presence and the desire to achieve the above objectives could be seen in the different forms of expression it has assumed and mobilization it has resorted to: it took to streets for input subsidies as evident in the farmers' movements in the post-Emergency period in different states; it wielded arms against the subaltern resistance to its dominance in states like Bihar in the form of different landlord private armies like Ranveer Sena; it fought the elections through the regional parties to come to power in the local and State elections and dominate the national elections.

As suggested above, the agrarian question has regional specificities that defy pan-Indian characterization. Therefore it is necessary to examine it in its specificity.

### *Economic Reforms and Agrarian Question*

The decades of 1970s and 1980s form the context for the structural transformation in the agrarian context. A series of developments apparently unconnected but happening simultaneously shaped the process of agrarian change. The broad contours of this process could be identified as follow:

- i) The Green revolution catalysed agrarian productivity after witnessing a phenomenal rise entered into a phase of stagnation during the Eighties. This has prompted the dominant caste-classes to look out of agriculture for its investible capital in urban trade, service and consumer sectors.
- ii) The gradual withdrawal of the subsidies to agriculture packaged as part of the Green revolution strategy has made agriculture no longer an easy option as an occupation. A significant aspect of agrarian change in the post-Green revolution period is the transfer of agrarian surplus into usury and money lending.
- iii) The growing assertion of the agricultural labour and rural poor as a result of the left-wing movements (the Naxalite movement being the most prominent) the dalit movement; and the populist and welfarist thrust of political parties and regimes due to compulsions of the electoral politics and mobilization and the logic inter- party competition.
- iv) The economic reform process and trade liberalization made agriculture no longer a viable let alone an attractive option as the state support in terms of input subsidies, infrastructure, investments and costs and prices decisively became a thing of the past. This on the one hand. On the other hand, the market liberalization has exposed Indian agriculture to global forces and also opened up other opportunities.

- v) With the exit of the dominant caste peasantry from farming, the vacuum thus created is seen as an opportunity and sought to be occupied by the small peasantry, agricultural labour, the traditional artisan and service caste people through tenancy, sharecropping and purchase of lands. If the decline of the traditional caste occupations leading to their displacement is one reason then the desire emanating from the view that taking up farming and becoming a farmer would lead to better economic position and also to class mobility is another.
  
- vi) As a result by 1990s we see a perceptible change in the social composition of the agrarian population: the exit of the dominant peasant castes and entry of backward castes including those with non-peasant background.

Rural unrest, subaltern assertion, shift in the state's role and market reforms that are part of economic liberalization process have been crucial factors in the shaping of the agrarian transition. But it must be noted that the general analysis attempted above has to be read against the background of the regional historical and socio-political specificities.

### *Changing Agrarian Character*

With the above changes, the rich peasantry that was posited with the historical possibility of the resolution of the Agrarian Question has generally shown a tendency to move away from agriculture to non-farm occupations or combine it with the latter. One of the principal causes of the farmers' misery which needs to be properly perspectivised is the fact of the agrarian surplus assuming parasitic forms of investment and becoming the source of exploitation and thereby the cause of the tragedy of the small and middle peasantry.

The experience of rural transformation for instance in Andhra Pradesh since the late 1980s in fact typifies this dimension of emergent agrarian reality. The perceptible shift of the landed castes, especially the Kammas and also Reddys and Velamas, to agriculture

related businesses – seed, fertilizer, pesticides agencies, and in fact to usury and money lending (*girgir* banks in Telangana) and investments in urban institutions like schools and colleges, hospitals, real estate could be observed. This is in addition to their already existing hold over civil and excise contracts they enjoyed due to the political patronage of and control over the regional power structure. The process of shift of the members of these communities to non-farm sectors could be seen ever since the generation of agrarian wealth assumed significant proportions [Upadhyaya 1988 and 1997; Srinivasulu, et al 2014b] . But what has marked a large-scale shift of these communities could be witnessed since the 1990s. The agrarian crisis leading to a large-scale occurrence of suicides of farmers’ belonging to the traditional peasant castes in the coastal districts during the late 1980s catalyzed the shift away from cultivation. As a result of this, one could witness a perceptible prevalence of tenancy in these areas; needless to say, the tenants mostly belong to the backward castes. The liberalization process leading to the expansion of the service sector and speculative economic activities gave a further fillip to this shift [Srinivasulu 2014a].

These developments have the following consequences for agriculture.

- i) Shift of the traditional agrarian castes principally to a variety of businesses;
- ii) Shift of the agrarian surplus to non-farm sector.
- iii) A part of the agrarian surplus thus shifted assuming the form of mercantile, rentier and usury capital and thereby acting as a parasite on productive agriculture. [Upadhyaya 1988]

Thus what has happened in the post-Green Revolution and post- liberalization phase is the integration of the farming sector into the market network and its increasing assumption of capital intensive character. With the entry of genetically modified varieties into India it is clear that Indian agriculture is no longer based on local agricultural practices conforming to the historically evolved traditional patterns. It is today

increasingly linked to the global agri-business funded hi-tech scientific innovations and therefore to the dynamics of global market. In this, the recent converts to business and urban services play the role of middle operators. Encouraged by the state's withdrawal from agriculture extension services and policy of decontrol and delicensing they could also float fly-by-the night companies. Thus a neatly worked out system could be found in place. This is one of the important factors causing the present crisis.

The agrarian surplus thus assuming the mercantile, usury form is the root cause of the crisis in the rural economy. The novice backward farmers have no option but to comply with the capital and technology intensive option.

Its vulnerability in such a situation is double folded:

- i) It finds itself in a scenario transformed by the green revolution;
- ii) Once it finds itself in the capital intensive market integrated agriculture in particular and liberalized market economy in general it cannot disentangle itself from the web. The talk of 'irrational cotton farmer' ( as cotton farmers constitute the bulk of the victims) is made by turning a blind eye to this structural change in Indian agriculture.
- iii) There is a phenomenal decline in the share of the agrarian sector in the wealth produced in the country –the share of service sector and industry being disproportionately high. A large percent of population has to share the rapidly declining proportion of agricultural income.

### ***Sociology of Agrarian Crisis***

Besides the political economy, it is instructive to look at the sociology of the agrarian crisis. Agriculture since the Nineties has, as shown above, predominantly become the lot of small and middle peasantry belonging to the backward castes. The long suppressed

desire on the part of the latter to graduate into peasant proprietors through land purchases and through tenancies facilitated this process rather smoothly. With exit of the dominant peasant castes, it is these backward caste farmers who find themselves in the crisis ridden agriculture in post-green revolution and post-liberalization period. A major section of them, belonging to the non-farm service and artisan communities and not being familiar with the field of agriculture with its practices and risks and lacking in the economic and social resources find themselves in a precarious position. The rapid changes in the political economy of agriculture seen in the context of liberalization have as it were only added to their woes.

The physiognomy of farmers' suicides since the 1990s demonstrates the above sociology of agrarian change and crisis across India. This reality is brought out clearly by the fact finding committee reports that have gone to the root of the problem based on the field enquiries. The majority of the farmers committing suicides for instance in Andhra Pradesh according to the Citizens' Report (1998) are from the non-agrarian service castes like Chakali, Mangali Telaga, Besta, Uppara besides artisanal castes like Padmashali, Wadla.<sup>1</sup>

The agrarian crisis cannot, contrary to the official diagnosis, be entirely reduced to the natural and economic factors. In this analysis we have tried to suggest that the agrarian crisis in large parts of India has been due to a deeper underlying political economic and sociological change.

The political and policy regimes in different state theaters played a key role in shaping the context of the crisis being witnessed now. It paved the way for homogenization of agrarian and cropping practices leading to the decline of the importance of dry land coarse food grain varieties. It has led to the decline the earlier agrarian practices and rural institutional structures without replacing them with appropriate substitutes. This, coupled with subsidized power supply to the agrarian sector has had disastrous consequences for

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<sup>1</sup> The TISS report [2005] on Vidharbha and Marathwada regions of Maharashtra also notes a high proportion of OBCs in the suicide victims.

the ecology and sociology of the countryside leading to the decline traditional surface water resources, over-exploitation of ground water resources in the dry areas, decline of subsistence agriculture, rapid inclusion and integration of the peasantry into the market economy as a result of mono-cropping, overwhelming dependence on the market for inputs leading to indebtedness and entrapment of the peasantry in the hands of usurers and moneylenders. The social specificity of suicides of the small and medium farmers from the backward castes forming the bulk of the victims has to be seen in this context of change and crisis.

The economic liberalization policies pursued since the early 1990s have only further worsened the conditions of the lower peasantry and tenantry. The withdrawal of the state from its role as provider, regulator and protector of the agrarian classes seen in an aggressive form for instance in states like Andhra Pradesh [Srinivasulu and Sarangi 1999] coinciding with the shifting social basis and class character of the agrarian sector characterize the agrarian crisis today. This reality has to be seen as an integral part of the hierarchy of forces that characterize the international regime of power relations in the context of globalization.

In other words, the rich peasantry- turned- moneylender-cum-agent- cum- trader is part of or local point in the chain of relations that culminate at the global level. Thus there are interconnections and linkages with the emerging global reality therefore the present agrarian crisis cannot be attributed to factors seen in their separateness but to be viewed as a result of a matrix comprising local class-caste forces –the local power regime- Indian state-global capital.

### ***Comprehensive Solution***

In view of the above, the contingent policies/ schemes often suggested like enhanced institutional credit, increase in allocation for infrastructure development and especially irrigation and general public investment in agriculture would only provide some succour but not address the problem in the long run. It would be a welcome by the parasitical



mercantile/ contractor face of agrarian capital for it would stand to gain from such investments. Thus the hope of the survival of the peasantry cannot be pinned down upon interventions and initiatives seen in isolation but requires a systematic and comprehensive strategy that can counter the might of the forces the peasantry finds itself in contradiction with.

The state instead of coming forward with contingent solutions should have a clear headed road map for agriculture. Besides providing multi-pronged strategy that addresses social, economic, policy issues there should be serious plan to diversify the agrarian population into other sectors. The alternative road map also keep in view i) social question of equity and efficiency; ii) the food security of the country. This of course requires a radically different vision and tremendous political will and persuasion.

In the absence of this these peasantries under the pressure of unfolding globalization would disintegrate and collapse. Despite the periodic succour, in the form of subsidies, hiked public expenditure, protective legislations by the political regimes under the pressure of electoral compulsions, the logic of globalization is such that it would push the peasantry into further and deeper crises – eventually to its disappearance.

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