



The Forgotten Farmer: Understanding India's Escalating Agricultural Crisis

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In the year 1965, Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second Prime Minister of independent India, addressing the nation from the *Ramlila Maidan* in New Delhi, gave the nation one of its most iconic and defining slogans in the form of – *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan!* (Hail the Soldier, Hail the Farmer!).

Today, more than five decades later, the country is witnessing an alarming rise in jingoism and war-mongering in the name of the soldier fighting for it at the border, and nationwide agitations by farmers from across several states over the question of debt induced suicides in unprecedented numbers. It is time perhaps then, to revisit and reexamine where it is that we went so wrong as a nation and how is it that we have failed both these groups, on the backs of which has been laid the very foundations of our sovereignty and democracy. The specific focus of this article is the acute crisis facing our agricultural sector and its horrifying impact on the farmers, who form the very core of it.

In January 2017, the *National Crime Records Bureau* (NCRB) published updated statistics for farmer suicides in India with a breakdown of the various causes to which these deaths could be attributed. It presented a staggering figure of 318,528 as the estimated number of farmers committed suicide in India between 1995 and 2015. This amounted to roughly one suicide about every half hour! Further, considering more recent figures, according to NCRB, there was an enormous 42 per cent increase in the number of farmer suicides from 2014 to 2015. About 60 per cent of the deaths registered in 2015 could be traced to indebtedness, bankruptcy and farming related issues. At the same time, the report also shows, that 70 per cent of the farmers who took their own lives were small and marginal cultivators with land holdings smaller than two hectares.

The alarming nature of the data released by the NCRD, delineating clearly the seriousness of the issue, prompted a bench of the Supreme court headed by Chief Justice of India J.S. Khekar and comprising of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud and S.K. Kaul to ask the Central Government on March 24, 2017 for a detailed plan of action for dealing with the question of farmers' suicides across the country to be submitted in four weeks' time.

The response of the government, while enumerating the various schemes undertaken by it over the last few years such as the *Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana*, soil health cards, *Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana*, National Agricultural Market or e-NAM and the pledge to double farmers' incomes by the year 2020, also emphasized that the biggest problems facing the agricultural sector were structural with several backward linkages and hence could not be done away swiftly or dramatically in one sweep. And while the manner in which these schemes are implemented and the potential they carry for affecting real change is something that needs to be looked at critically, it is indeed true that the current crisis has roots in agricultural trends and practices that have developed over a long period of time. It

would hence be useful to briefly examine these long-term trends within the agricultural sector in India so as to place the situation at hand in perspective.

How Current is the Current Crisis? Analyzing the Impact of long-term agricultural trends and practices

The decade of the 1960s was a difficult one for India marked by the two wars with China and Pakistan and the passing away of two of its Prime Ministers – Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri. But the most serious crisis that loomed over the country was that of food scarcity. In 1966, India produced only 10.4 million tonnes of wheat – a quantity that was woefully inadequate for feeding a population of about 500 million people. It was against the backdrop of a food crisis of such gigantic proportions that Indira Gandhi became the third Prime Minister of India in January 1966 after the sudden demise of Shastri and it now fell upon her to find a way out of it.

The short-term solution was sought in importing 10 million tonnes of wheat from the US under the PL-480 Programme. However, it was clear while this might solve the issue of food scarcity temporarily, this ‘ship to mouth’ way to feeding India’s teeming millions was hardly feasible or sustainable in the long run. The search for a way to end India’s dependence on external food aid came through Mexico, where a similar food crisis had been averted by the efforts of the scientist Norman E. Borlaug. He had developed a High Yielding Variety of wheat that had helped Mexico to become self-sufficient in and an exporter of it by 1963. India imported 18000 tonnes of seeds of this HYV of wheat for plantation. The results were phenomenal. Wheat production was 16.5 million tonnes in 1968; 20 million tonnes in 1970 and 32 million tonnes in 1980. In fact, in 2016 India produced a whopping 90 million tonnes of what making it the second largest producer of the crop in the world.

This exponential increase in agricultural productivity from in the late 1960s and 70s, through the use of new technology, investment in building infrastructure, increasing crop acreage, double farming in existing farmland and the widespread use of HYV seeds and chemical pesticides and fertilizers is what has been termed as the *Green Revolution* in India and specifically in Punjab. No doubt the spectacular *Green Revolution* delivered the task a hand and made India self sufficient in food.

However, over the years, research into its long-term impact has shown, that it also established agricultural norms and practices, that have since intrinsically transformed agriculture in India, giving rise to structural issues that have in their turn substantially impacted the lives of all those, who are employed within or associated with this largest sector of our economy. The fact that today, the largest number of farmer suicides can be traced to regions or states that fall under the *Green Revolution* belt such as Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra is indicative of a connection between the current

crisis and the aftereffects of the *Green Revolution*. It would hence be productive to somewhat distance ourselves from the narratives of triumph associated with it and critically examine these structural issues.

One of the most significant effects of the *Green Revolution* has been the dependence it has fostered on genetically modified, high yielding varieties of seeds for crops such as wheat, rice and cotton. While these seeds definitely result in a much higher crop yield, the catch is that they require much greater amounts of water to grow as compared to the traditional varieties. This required farmers to dig wells and irrigate with groundwater. However, over the years, due to excessive digging, the groundwater levels have drastically receded setting in motion a vicious cycle, wherein farmers have to spend exorbitant sums of money to dig deeper into the ground to reach the water table. As more water is pumped the levels continue to recede requiring even more complicated and expensive drilling mechanisms to tap it. Further, many a times the deep drilling taps brackish underground pools with salty water that poisons the crops.

The other long-term impact of using genetically modified seeds is the adverse impact they have on the soil. To fulfill their much higher dosage of requisite nutrients to grow compared to regular seeds, farmers have had to spent substantial amounts of money in buying fertilizers to provide nutrition externally. However, this excessive use of fertilizers has depleted and altered the natural quality of the soil making it anemic. Restoring the nutrient balance requires more fertilizers leading to further spending, pushing the farmer deeper into an inescapable vortex of debt.

Another way in which the *Green Revolution* irreversibly altered the nature of agriculture in India and which has had repercussions in the present day is by introducing the idea of profitability and market forces into our agrarian system and thereby weakening the age-old direct and simple correlation between agriculture and *food*. In the initial stage of the *Green Revolution*, with its prime objective still being ending the problem of food scarcity, the focus was primarily on the production of food crops.

However, over the years this changed to a primacy given to the cultivation of hi-end, export oriented non-food cash crops such as Bt-cotton, grapes etc. Spurred on by a rhetoric of the potential of these crops - fed with abundant amounts of pesticides and fertilizers – to give bumper harvests and fetch unprecedented profits, farmers with smaller land-holdings but big aspirations were happy to switch to them. However, the switch resulted in gross alteration of traditional cropping patterns. Also the demand and supply of cash crops, which are essentially export oriented, are inextricably tied to the global market forces making farmers vulnerable to them.

Hence, even as the late 1990s saw a great spurt in the productivity of these crops, the excess supply caused prices to fall dramatically. It is perhaps no coincidence, that it was in the late 1990s that the

beginning of a marked increase in the number of recorded farmer suicides can be observed. Following from the above point, it is also important to acknowledge, that the opening up of the Indian markets through the process of Liberalization in the early 1990s ushered in a new set of dynamics in the agricultural sector. The introduction of economic liberalization in a developing country like India was riddled with certain inherent paradoxes.

Firstly, it was apparent in the unequal interplay it fostered between the developed world and India. Hence, while the liberal economies of the former continued to promote their pro-farmer policies internally, they were simultaneously finding ways to make India reform its tariff regimes, so as to pave the way for big corporations and MNCs dealing in seeds and pesticides to penetrate the Indian markets. The villages became these 'free for all' spaces, where these companies openly peddled their wares with promises of wealth and prosperity, while grossly downplaying the risks and vulnerabilities at play. The result was the emergence of an agrarian economy almost entirely governed by uncontrollable externalities, which undermined the autonomy of the farmer's world like never before.

The second paradox of liberalization was manifested in the fact that even as it was essentially an attempt to mimic the economic growth trajectories of the West, the reality of the situation was that it was practically impossible to replicate it in India on account of long-standing historical, economic and political reasons. Hence in the Western economies, the general decline or slowdown of the agricultural sector could be offset with the simultaneous growth in the industrial one, which was able to absorb many of those, who were previously employed in agriculture. However, a similar pattern could not be followed in India on account of the uneven and asymmetrical development of its agricultural and industrial sectors.

Finally, the current crisis is, to a large extent, a legacy of the entrenched socio-economic disparities in agriculture, that in fact predate the *Green Revolution*, but were further solidified by it. Property relations in India largely derive their essential structure from three systems of land revenue collection, that were in fact in place from *Mughal* times and continued to be in place during the colonial period.

These were the *zamindari* system, the *ryotwari* system and the *mahalwari* system. The first, as the name suggests, was a system of land revenue collection, wherein the *zamindar* or the landlord was the sole proprietor of the land entitled to collect land revenue from the peasants at a fixed rate, irrespective how much was the actual produce. In the second system, the *ryot* or the peasant was the owner of his own land and was responsible for directly paying the land revenue, which varied every year depending on productivity. The third category of land revenue system was one, in which the primary unit of collection was a *mahal* or a group of cultivators and the land they collectively owned the size of which

was variable. Research has shown that the type of land revenue systems that specific geographical regions in India were traditionally under, affected the extent to which they were impacted by the Green Revolution. Hence in the states such as Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, where landlordism was practiced, became entrenched with a culture of elites riling the villages with very little incentive to improve the lot of those who were the actual cultivators of the land and were inertial in adopting the *Green Revolution* technologies. At the same time, it is also evident that the *Green Revolution* was most successful where “...pre-existing property relations were conducive to capitalist (and peasant) farming”.

Hence states like Punjab and Maharashtra, which were historically under the *ryotwari* and *mahalwari* systems, were able to imbibe and adopt the spirit and methods of the *Green Revolution*. Further, even in states such as Punjab where the *Green Revolution* was successful, it created deep seated inequities in agriculture, as only the rich farmers with large land holdings could actually afford to invest in the new technology, while the smaller cultivators, in their efforts to keep up were pushed into growing crops, they had no traditional knowledge of and buying expensive infrastructure needed for them.

Countryside in Chaos: Farmer Distress and Protests in Present-day India

It is with this backdrop of India’s agricultural history, that we shall now proceed to understanding the reasons behind the current spate of nation-wide peasant agitations that have now taken center-stage in the current political arena. Battered farmers have been protesting across the country, especially in several of the BJP ruled states such as Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, to capture the Center’s attention to their plight. Their grievances include a combination of issues, ranging from the more long-standing and structural ills afflicting Indian agriculture discussed in the previous section to more current concerns like the impact of demonetization, crop failure, market fluctuations and government inaction on the farming community – all of which has created an atmosphere of hopelessness and dejection in the countryside, reflected in the alarming statistics on Farmer suicides over the last few years.

The beginning of the current agitation can be traced to the protests at the Pipliya Mandi near Mandsaur in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh on June 6 this year. The source of the farmers’ plight in the state is, that despite a bumper harvest of crops like pulses, soya bean, onions and wheat, they have been unable to get expected returns on account of a glut in the market that has caused prices to crash.

The protesters at the Pipliya Mandi were demanding that the government declares a minimum support price for the crops, since they could no longer hold on to on account of inadequate storage facilities and buy the stocks from them on remunerative prices. The protests turned ugly and violent in

reaction to the state government's delusional assertion, that the farmers had called off the agitation. In the ensuing mayhem the police opened fire on to the crowd of protesters and six farmers lost their lives.

The Mandsaur agitation and the death of the six farmers evoked much outrage and a nation-wide response, sparking off a series of protests by beleaguered farmers in other states as well as in the national capital. Rajasthan witnessed farmer protests in solidarity with their counterparts in MP and also to demand prices for their garlic harvest, that would cover the cost of production and not merely the Minimum Support Price (MSP). In Maharashtra again, the main reason for farmers to rise in protest was the state government's reluctance to set an MSP for the bumper harvest of pulses, which was being seen as a blessing after two years of drought. One of the most impactful and resonant protests has been that of the farmers from the southern state of Tamil Nadu which has been reeling under the effect of the ". . .worst-ever monsoon failure for two consecutive years in 100 years or so." This, coupled with the difficulties created by demonetization, due to the severe lack of cash flow, faulty implementation of several welfare and infrastructure schemes, meant for the farming sector, and the protracted inter-state river water disputes, have propelled the farmers of the state into a deep abyss of dejection, debt and ultimately suicide.

The farmers from the state, in an effort to catch the attention of the central government, demand Tamil Nadu to be declared drought hit and for drought packages to be distributed, recently staged a visually shocking protest in New Delhi. The venue *Jantar Mantar* was replete with unforgettable images of farmers with dead rats in their mouth and sitting with the skulls of other farmers, who had committed suicide.

Talking Solutions: The Politics and Pragmatics of Relief and Reconstruction in the Agricultural Sector

On April 4 this year, the newly appointed Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, took the decision of implementing a seemingly massive waiver of farm loans in the state in his very first Cabinet meeting. To a large extent, it was this move, that served as the immediate trigger for the series of country-wide farmer protests, that followed over the next few months demanding, among other things, similar waivers. Consequently, both Devendra Fadnavis, the CM of Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, had to eventually succumb to providing short term relief to the agitating farmers in the form of loan waivers and by declaring the purchasing of farm produce below the MSP a crime in their respective states. However, in any discussion on finding a lasting solution to the current agrarian crisis, it is important to emphasize that such measures, while effective in providing temporary respite, cannot be treated as long term solutions to a problem, that is essentially structural at

its core.

Why then do state governments continue to dole them out as their response to desperate farmers' calls for help? The answer is that it all ultimately comes down to politics and politicking. Farm loan waivers are seen by ruling governments as a way to get the farmers to stop agitating as well as to enable them to consolidate and hold on to a valuable vote bank. However, more often than not, as is becoming increasingly evident in Uttar Pradesh, the actual implementation of loan waivers on the ground is tricky and fraught with several bottlenecks. Further, they also inculcate a system, wherein the honest hardworking farmers become pawn in a larger political game, while there simultaneously sets in a culture of loan-default and fraud.

The long term solutions to the crisis can be formulated and executed only if our leaders, politicians and governments rise above this short sighted politicking and attempt to come up with policy level interventions with genuine intent to help a community grasping for breath. Some of the ways in which farmers' distress can be effectively addressed and alleviated in the long run is by: initiating land reforms that would encourage the consolidation of land holdings; the legalization of land leasing; an overhauling of the fertilizer subsidy regime, encouraging farmers to switch to organic farming; increased investment in modernizing irrigation; making easy credit available for purchase of expensive farm equipment; create infrastructure for better storage facilities; elimination of middlemen from the food supply chain; protecting farmers against price fluctuations.

Most of these and additional measures figure in the recommendations of the *Swaminathan Commission*. Its report has been available since as far back as 2006 but little has been done to actually implement these recommendations. One of its recommendations of fixing the basic price of produce as the cost of cultivation plus 50 per cent as profit is one of the primary demands of the protesting farmers. Incidentally, this was also something, that figured prominently among the promises made by current Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his election campaign in 2014.

The government now seems to have reneged on this promise in particular and on its election time assurances to reviving farmer fortunes in record time in general, by citing logistics and structural problems that it claims (no entirely incorrectly) were created and entrenched over several decades of Congress rule. The need of the hour is to put aside this political blame game and exhibit real willingness to take action.

Even as the current scenario of mounting rural distress paints a picture that appears entirely bleak, not all hope is lost. As pointed out by eminent Indian sociologist, political commentator and activist Yogendra Yadav, the one encouraging aspect of the agitations is the significant solidarity at display by

farmers across the nation for their common grievances. This is evident in the coming together of 150 farmer organizations with different political and ideological leanings under the umbrella of the *All India Kisan Sangharsha Coordination Committee (AIKSCC)* to chart out a common agenda.

This agenda goes beyond asking for temporary relief measures and demands fair remunerative prices and freedom from debt. Yadav further observes, that another interesting and encouraging side of the protests is the emergence of a leadership that has rural roots and a deep understanding of farmers' issues, but also includes those who may not be practicing farmers and can speak in the language of policy makers. It is this kind of larger scale mobilization that gives out hope that what started as a series of 'agitations', that may be perceived as short lived and susceptible to political manipulation, is transforming into a *movement*, that has the force to truly shake up the status quo.