



THE IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION AND FARMERS' SUICIDES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In India, the Farmer suicide is a post-liberalisation phenomenon. It started and has intensified since 1995. Neo-liberal economic policies pursued by successive governments led to devastating changes in the country's agricultural policy. As a result, public investment in agriculture gradually declined. Newly-adopted fertiliser policy caused the closure of public sector manufacturers and dependence on import which resulted in continuous increase in its prices. New patent policy allowed big multinational companies to capture our seed and pesticide markets leading to unprecedented rise in their cost. Declining investment in irrigation promoted private irrigation system which increased water prices. Massive increase of diesel and petroleum prices only added to the cost of pump irrigation and transportation. Costlier electricity also contributed to the rise in pump irrigation cost.

The government's surrender in WTO also did away with quantitative restriction and our farmers were thrown into the wild competition with agricultural products from advanced countries. Not only that, Free Trade Agreement with several developed countries heightened the stiff competition. The change of policy from production for consumption to production for export also brought new problems for cultivators. All these contributed to the increase of import cost and massive increase in the cost of agricultural production. Along with that, the government procurement policy failed to pay remunerative price to the farmers for their produce. This made farming continuously a loss-making venture. As there was no cheap institutional credit, farmers were also forced to borrow money from private moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates. All these factors pushed farmers to mounting debt and failure to repay the loans forced them to end their lives.

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the National Crime Records Bureau of India reported 5,650 farmer suicides. The highest numbers of farmer suicides were recorded in 2004 when 18,241 farmers committed suicide. The farmer's suicide rate in India has ranged between 1.4 and 1.8 per 100,000 total populations, over a 10-year period through 2005. India is an agrarian country with around 60% of its people depending directly or indirectly upon agriculture. Farmer suicides account for 11.2% of all suicides in India. Activists and scholars have offered a number of conflicting reasons for farmer suicides, such as monsoon failure, high debt burdens, genetically modified crops, government policies, public mental health, personal issues and family problems. There are also accusations of states fudging the data on farmer suicides.

IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON FARMERS

The Boundary with Globalisation Globalisation, essentially means transformation in social and economic geography, marked by the growth of supra



territorial spaces (Scholte, 2000). Economic globalisation is a further distilled component of aggregate globalisation, but generally, the arguments in the literature focus only economic globalization and therefore the discussion is directed towards that. The concept emerged in the process of development thinking immediately after the Second World War but remained active below the surface for a long time to re-emerge prominently during nineties. The process began vigorously after the end of the Cold War, and due to the widespread macroeconomic failures in developing economies and consequent interventions by the world institutions like the IMF, World Bank and WTO. Free flow of goods, services, capital and technology under a competitive market was the core ingredient that provoked and spread globalisation in the world. India was certainly not an exception in this exodus of policy changes.

At the same time as in the defense of Globalisation Bhagwati re-emphasises the benefits of free trade and the ways to emerge out of the embargoes of the controlled regimes. But he also cautions in no uncertain words that “And so, in these different ways globalisation must be managed so that its fundamentally benign effects are ensured and reinforced” (Bhagwati, 2004, p 35). He further raised concern about the plausible vulnerability in the process of globalisation saying – “the sense of vulnerability or economic insecurity is arguably greater today than in the earlier periods because the growing integration of nations worldwide into the international economy has intensified competitive pressures from actual and potential rivals elsewhere” (Bhagwati, 2004, p 12). This statement clearly brings out the link between the two fortified arguments which are seemingly opposite but worried about similar possibilities.

The process of globalization in the world began simultaneously with the demand and supply side pressures. Many of the developed nations vied for the access to the huge markets in developing economies. Till nineties many developing economies were following a strict protective policy in their international trade. Their trade was rather dictated by the domestic demand and the surpluses generated in the economy, than an engine of growth. Nevertheless, at the same time a number of developing economies were looking out for growth opportunities based on trade. As a result the policy originated taking advantage of the economic conditions prevailing then in the two parts of the world.

DECLINE IN PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH AND EXTENSION AND IRRIGATION

Historically, public investment in Agricultural research and extension in India has been seen as creation of 'public goods'. Vaidyanathan (2000) opines that the widespread specialized statefunded agricultural research centres under the India Council for Agricultural Research and the Agricultural Universities, working with and through the National Extension Service, have contributed historically to the growth of agricultural productivity by specifically developing and diffusing knowledge, skills, better varieties of seeds and practices. This trend reversed during the phase of economic reforms. Liberalization led to a drastic decline in the growth rate of public spending on agricultural research and extension. The growth rate of



public spending on agricultural research and extension during 1980s to 1990-2005 has fallen from 6.3 and 7 per cent to 4.8 and 2 per cent respectively (see Table 10). To compensate the decline, private sector investment in research and extension was encouraged; 100 per cent foreign equity was allowed in the seed industry, and import of seeds was permitted for research purposes under the Open General License (OGL). The government withdrew subsidies on extension services to create a favourable field for private players in seed industry and biotechnology firms. The gradual declining of state-support also means that several state-run agricultural institutions or corporations which had provided support including skills to farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers, disappeared or became largely inactive due to shortage of funds.

However, decline in public investment in agricultural research and extension and consequent changes have proved to be disastrous for agriculture in India. According to a Planning Commission review, the sluggish growth in Indian agriculture during the phase of economic reforms was significantly caused by 'unresponsive agricultural research, nearly broken down extension [and] inadequate seed production, distribution and regulation' (Government of India 2005: 197). A commission, constituted by the state of Andhra Pradesh, has also noted that the collapse of public agricultural extension services has been one of the most important contributory factors to the generalised agrarian crisis in the state (see Government of Andhra Pradesh 2004). Though there has been a clear shift in cropping patterns towards cash crops that requires more water for cultivation, the total net irrigated area remained stagnant (GoI 2007). Referring the situation in Andhra Pradesh, Posani writes that 'it actually declined from 43.5 lakh hectares in 1990-91 to 37.1 lakh hectares in 2004-05 (GoAP 2007). Successive state governments have grossly neglected investment in surface irrigation infrastructure. Consequently there has been an increase in private investment in exploiting ground-water sources (mainly bore wells), which have been growing relative to canal and tank irrigation' (Posani 2009: 29). This has added heavily to the cost of irrigation or cultivation, made agriculture a highly risky enterprise, and 'led to overexploitation of ground-water and a falling water table, forcing farmers to deepen their wells every few years' (Posani 2009: 29).

MAGNITUDE AND TRENDS IN FARMERS' SUICIDE IN INDIA:

The Official Data The main source of data on farmers' suicide is the annual reports on accidental and suicidal deaths published by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. The reports consist of a range of tables; one of them is on the distribution of suicides by profession that includes a category for self-employed persons in farming/agriculture. An all India-wise consistent and complete data on farmers' suicide or suicide by persons employed in farming/agriculture is available for ten years from 1997 to 2006.

This period covers the largest part of the economic reform period in India. Regarding the data pertaining the suicide rate among farmers, which is defined as number of farmers' suicides per 100,000 farmers, Nagraj rightly claims that it 'can be calculated on a reliable basis only for the year 2001 because that is the only year



for which we have reliable data on the number of farmers in country, and in different states, from the Census of India' (Nagraj 2008: 7). Given this, we have calculated and tabulated the farmers' suicide rates only for the year 2001. NCRB data show that during these ten years as many as 166,305 farmers committed suicide in India.

It is also clear from the Table that every seventh suicide in the country was a farm suicide during this period. However, this distressful number is considered by many as an underestimation of the actual number of suicides by farmers in the country because, as Nagraj writes, These data published by the National Crime Records Bureau, as we have noted above, are put together from the police records from different states. Our experience during our field visits in Andhra Pradesh as a member of the Farmers' Commission set by the state government in 2004 was that the police often adopted a rather strict and stringent definition of a farmer in identifying a farm suicide. The title to land was taken as the criterion for identifying the farmer and this often left out a genuine farmer from the count. For example, a tenant farmer who leased in land and hence did not have a title to the land could be denied the status of a farmer; so also a farmer if the title was in his father's name (Nagraj 2008: 3-4).

DURKHEIMIAN ANALYSIS OF FARMER SUICIDES IN INDIA

Emile Durkheim has identified broadly four types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic and anomic. He explains these types and their causes on the basis of two important variables: social integration and social regulation. Of the four types, fatalistic suicide is of least importance. According to Durkheim, fatalistic suicide occurs due to excessive and oppressive regulation. The examples of this type include the suicide among the feudal slaves and the death among the barren married women. The pressure exerted upon them by the society compels them to do so. However, along with Durkheim, recent sociological scholars also lay very less importance to this type because they argue that examples of fatalistic suicides have become rare in recent times. Altruistic suicide occurs out of excessive integration of the individual with the society. The individual always feels that it his duty to sacrifice his life for the collective good and he feels privileged and honoured to do so. Some scholars argue that altruistic suicide is a basic feature of the primitive society. In contemporary societies, this type of suicide is committed mostly by the military personnel, who sacrifice their life with a sense of patriotism. Egoistic suicide occurs when the tie between the individual and society is weakened and there is a lack social integration. The greater the social isolation, the lesser the individual participates as a social being. He feels meaningless and unwanted by the society. He develops a sense of apathy and detachment from life. The social ties get diluted that binds the members of the society together. This is called egoism. Durkheim believes that family protection against suicide because it represents a higher degree of social cohesion due to greater sentiments. Therefore, suicide rate is higher among the unmarried people and among the widows, divorcees and childless women. Anomic suicide occurs when social regulation is too weak and disrupted. According to Durkheim, individuals are regulated by collective conscience and when this regulation weakens, the individual is driven towards suicide. The incompatibility between the goals set and the means to



achieve these goals creates frustration within the individual and are driven by a sense of failure. This compels the individuals to commit suicide.

Agriculture in India is not only an economic activity but also a way of life. Despite concerted industrialization in the last six decades agriculture occupies a place of pride. There is a strong chance that India will be a predominantly agricultural country in the near future. Indian agriculture experienced a very slow growth during the first half of the 20th century before independence. On the eve of independence, the agricultural sector was the dominant sector both in terms of domestic product and in providing employment. Therefore the fortunes of a large majority of people in India were basically linked with agricultural performance. For many years attempts were made to reduce Indian agriculture's dependence on monsoons by building a reliable irrigation infrastructure in the country. The development of irrigation was instrumental in reducing the incidence of famine through increasing the food grains. Tea, sugar, oil seeds, tobacco, spices, etc. constitute the main exports of India. Agriculture is the main support for India's transport systems, securing bulk of their business from the movement of agricultural goods. Purchasing power of the farmer leads to greater demand for industrial products and better prices. Bad crops lead to depression in business. Prosperity of the farmer is a necessary precondition for the progress of all industries. Rural areas are the biggest market for consumer items. In short agriculture has always been the backbone of the Indian economy. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 has caused fresh challenges to Indian agriculture. The contribution of agricultural exports to total exports has declined sharply from 20.5% in 1950-'51 to 10.5% by 2004-2005 (1). Agricultural imports have also recorded a rise after the liberalization of the economy in 1991.

Summing Up

The process of liberalization in fact proved more disastrous for agriculture and peasantry in India because it was adopted without resolving the fundamental agrarian problems or contradictions such as an absolute inegalitarian land structure, depeasantisation, and abysmal condition of agricultural labour, tenants and small peasants. Though India chiefly inherited most of these problems or contradictions from the British rule, it did too little to resolve them after independence. During the period of economic reforms, state did nothing to transform the depressed traditional institutional framework of agriculture because it believed that the barrier to lifting up agricultural surplus or growth and consequently to rural development could be surmounted with following the structural adjustment programme of neo-liberalism. But in reality the opposite happened, and the traditional agrarian contradictions in effect acquired bigger shape by getting associated with the new contradictions generated by the liberalization process.

The Farmers' suicide requires to be seen in the path of capitalist development that the regimes or the state introduced during the post-colonial/post-independence period. Capitalist development initially created euphoria however on later date it translated into massive agrarian crisis. This is the reason why beginning of agrarian crisis should be seen or located much earlier to the decade of globalization. In fact



globalization further sharpened the crisis, which led to the large-scale suicide of farmers in other parts of India, including Karnataka. Globalization also carried the inbuilt fear of losing identity- the identity of “New Farmers or Market Oriented Autonomous Farmers” (MOAF). Suicide is the new technique employed by the farmers. At the all India level more than one lakh farmers’ have committed suicide. At present the suicide is restricted to some states- there is no guarantee that it will not spread to such other states as BIMARU. It is in this there is a need to redraw preferences, rework on policy measures, otherwise there is a danger that suicide might envelop the whole of India. Now the crisis is not only manifested in the increasing suicide but also in other forms such as throwing up the agricultural produce on the roads, demand to delink from the global market, demand to come out from the WTO regime etc. However one cannot negate its political implications.

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