FACTS against MYTHS

VIKAS ADHYAYAN KENDRA OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2004 INFORMATION BULLETIN

India's Agrarian Crisis:

The Myths behind Farmers' Suicides

COMMENT

Rural India is gripped by a severe crisis. There are starvation deaths in the backward regions and farmers' suicides in the developed areas. The entire rural economy that still supports almost 70% of the Indian population is under threat. The small and poor farmers in particular find survival extremely difficult. This is not a crisis brought on by natural disasters or by failure of monsoons. Deficient monsoons have not eroded production drastically in the country as a whole. Areas under stress should be able to get adequate relief and help since there is no real shortfall of commodities.

The crisis has been brought about by the path of development followed by the ruling classes and imposed on agriculture. To elucidate: consider the following two set of incidents. Since end of 1997 reports of large scale suicides by cotton farmers took place because they "took the easy way out". A number of reasons have been cited as reasons behind crop failures on such huge scale viz., shortfall in production became the bane of these farmers and their families. The other set of incidents, that took place, in mid mid-1997, not very far back from the time of the cases of suicides by farmers. Unprecedented rise in production of potatoes and lack of commensurate storage space, pre-emption of the existing space by the powerful farmers led to rotting of tonnes and tonnes of potatoes in various states of the country. Crashing prices and lack of buyers resulted in field being strewn with unwanted potatoes infecting the field and resulting in diseases and death in the rural areas. The farming community was once again faced with death and loss of income. But the reasons for loss of income in the two cases were very different. In one case income loss arose from shortfall in crop production, and in the other, from exactly opposite set of reasons, i.e. over production. Both these sets of reports are a clear indication of what is happening to the farming community. That is, the economic reforms have failed in reducing the vulnerability of the farming community, specially the poorer sections within that, to crop failures, accumulating debt, crashing prices and declining income. Whether vagaries of nature, lack of knowledge among farmers regarding use of fertilisers and pesticides, emergence of deadly pests alone fail to explain these happenings. There is no doubt that vagaries of nature, inadequate and/ or untimely rainfall, play a crucial role in agriculture. But crop loss arising out of that has been there even in the past! So has been the case of pest-infested crops and the resultant crop failure. But failure of crop has rarely resulted in such extreme incidents.

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How does one, therefore, explain the phenomenal case of mass and serial suicides by farmers? Or for that matter how does one explain the incidents of over production or can that also be explained by nature or rather its generosity? Or is there something more than what meets the eye?

Obvious questions like what drove so many farmers to take up production of potatoes, etc., arise at this point. In the case of cotton, liberalisation policies in agriculture partly affected most the prices of cotton. Rising exports of cotton to earn foreign exchange had the effect of contracting domestic availability and inducing high rise in prices of cotton. A violent export surge without adequate protection rise naturally led to doubling of prices of cotton yarn. In the first quarter of 1989, owing to the release of 1.66-m. bales for exports, domestic raw cotton prices rose further by Rs.1100 to Rs.2400 per candy for the major varieties of cotton. Such massive rise in prices of cotton made it attractive for farmers to go in for production of this crop at the exclusion of all other corps. Large-scale shift in areas under cotton took place. High net return from cotton in the early years and case of cotton farmers growing rich within a short time span became trendsetters for other farmers. Thus reforms, rising exports and domestic prices had an important part to play in inducing a shift in cropping pattern from traditional crops to cotton.

At another level, in their haste to integrate with the corporate driven global capitalist system and capitalist markets, the rulers have criminally neglected the rural population. Suicides by farmers are symptomatic of this crisis. Partly under dictates of the WTO and similar bodies and partly under their own neoliberal steam the Indian ruling class has set upon a path to squeeze the small and poor farmer of the country. Their dream is to transform agriculture into an industrial corporate activity. The owner-cultivators – particularly the small and medium farmers are an impediment in this path. The rulers through acts of commission and omission are thus bent in squeezing them out of agriculture.

There is of course no thought given to the fact that no other sector of the Indian economy – particularly in the age of globalisation can absorb this human resource and provide it livelihood or even basic necessities.

The corporate greed knows no bounds. It wishes to now control all natural resources. Forests and mineral wealth it already does for all practical purposes. Urban land too is under its control. It now has set its eyes on water and agricultural land.

Farmers Commit Suicide

(July 14, 2004, 14:08 IST)

Two more farmers from the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra have committed suicide in the last two days, taking the number of such deaths to over 15. The farmers were apparently driven to death by crop failures due to insufficient rain in the region.

Ramchandra Premchandra Chavan, 36, from Pusad taluka of Yavatmal district hanged himself to death on July 13, according to reports reaching Nagpur. Chavan had taken a bank loan of Rs 20,000 and borrowed another Rs 7,000 from a co-operative society, but his soya crop was damaged due to inadequate rainfall.

Gangadhar Namdeo Ambhure, 27 from Narkhed taluka in Nagpur district ended life by consuming insecticides on July 12, the reports said.

The government has, however, not yet officially accepted that these suicides are linked to the lack of rains in the area.

(From an Online News Report in Rediff.com)

The path is also disastrous from the environmental point of view. It is an effort to finish of natural resources particularly water and convert vast portions of India into deserts.

The crisis is just beginning. If this situation is not dealt with in time it will become irreversible and cost the nation in millions of lives.

MYTH: The numbers of farmers committing suicide are not very significant. This is essentially a scare raised by the media and interested political organisations.

FACT: Three very simple facts totally counter this rather cynical claim. One, reportedly thousands of farmers has committed suicide in the country, particularly after 1995. Two, the suicides have occurred not in one pocket or state but in a numerous states across the country; the major states involved being Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and now Kerala. Three, the rates of the suicides for the particular groups – small farmers for example or populations of the affected districts – are way above the known national average rate of suicide.

Unfortunately in a country of over a billion in population, death too does not shock unless the numbers are astronomical. Moreover, all the suicides do not take place on a single day and in a single instance. They take place as one or two a day in different incidents in different villages. The reports too appear (if and when they do appear) as of discreet incidents (See Box). They do not therefore jolt or shock sensibilities and sensitivities of the urban readers of newspapers.

Look at the bare numbers for the year 2004. In Wynad – one single district of Kerala the suicides in 2004 were 235 up to September 2004 according to data compiled by Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences a part of the government medical college in the neighbouring district of Kozhikode. The government in the form of the district administration unfortunately only admitted that 48 cases were "farmers' suicides" though the NIMHANS study provides breakdown of the occupations and shows that they were all related to agriculture.

In Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh – the major 'centre' of farmers' suicides the number was 899 though again the government only admitted 511 cases as those of "farmer' suicides".

The numbers in Karnataka were 708 in 2003-04 and 165 in 2004-05.

In Maharashtra the suicides are confined to the cotton growing region Vidarbha, and that too to mainly two districts out of four. Here too the government admits low figures while local newspapers, researchers, social workers, and farmers' organisation put the deaths at least around 100.

The incidence of suicides also becomes significant if the rates are examined. In Maharashtra the rate of suicides went up from 1.77 in 1981 steadily to 7.06 in 1998 and dropped slightly to 6.31 per lakh population in district Amravati. It went up from 1.60 per lakh to 7.63 per lakh between 1981 and 1999 in Yavatmal, and from 2.86 per lakh in 1981 to 11.38 per lakh in 1999 in district Wardha.

The average for Kerala – three times that of the national average – is 30 per lakh of population, but in Wynad it was 39 per lakh in 1998. Along with the neighbouring district of Idukki it is 40 per lakh for the past five years.

The actual numbers of farmers' suicides would be much higher if the reporting and recording of the incidents was accurate. In a large number of cases the profession or exact causes are not recorded, only the medical details find mention. A large number of cases in Maharashtra it is said are explained away as pesticide related accidents – while the fact is that consumption of pesticide is the main method for the farmers to end their lives.

The administration, to downplay the crisis, or to deny responsibility often explains away the suicides as due to other causes. It is reluctant to relate it to crisis in agriculture.

MYTH: Farmers' suicide is an individual problem, not a social one or one related to the farming community.

FACT: Obviously there has been no single incident of mass suicide. There are no cases in which an entire village – or all or majority of the poor farmers from the village – have committed suicide. Suicides never occur in that manner. Individuals overcome by their situation and losing all hope decide to end their lives. Obviously each person who dies is an individual. Many 'unique' details can be found regarding each case. The specific details do not, however, make any difference to the basic circumstances and the fundamental causes.

Most of the suicides haav taken place in areas where the cropping is commercial and for markets. These crops in addition have witnessed a continuous and sustained drop in prices. The areas have also seen crop failures for the past few years (typically two or three).

Moreover, the farmers most vulnerable are small farmers with lands without irrigation; their interactions with people in similar economic circumstances in the same areas (small farmers with unirrigated lands) reveal that they face similar

GROWTH RATE IN INDIAN AGRICULTURE

problems and have found life equally difficult. Interviews show that just one or two may actually commit suicide from any one village but many more have entertained the idea and have come close to the ultimate act.

The farmers themselves uniformly feel that these are problems of the entire section. They see these firmly as problems related to agriculture.

MYTH: The suicides are not related to debts but are due to personal reasons.

FACT: The relationship between debt and suicide is very clearly established by journalistic reports as well as more in-depth studies. All reports indicate an almost similar pattern.

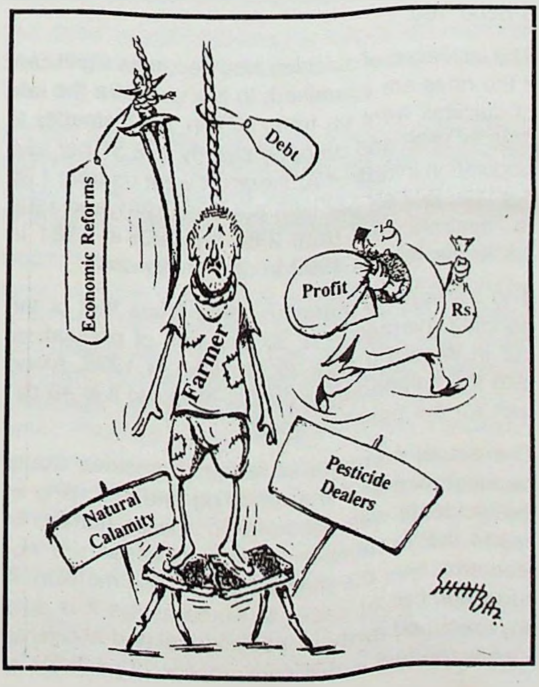
The cropping in these areas is commercial. In Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra as well as mostly in Karnataka the crop in question is cotton. In Kerala the crops were coffee and pepper.

The pattern in these areas is of exclusive cultivation of the commercial crop. This also means that there is no in-built mechanism of food security. These farmers are dependent on the market to buy the food grains they need. This is of course determined by the success or failure of the commercial crop.

The costs of cultivation of the commercial crops – often new varieties that are demanded by the market – are high. The farmers have to purchase the seeds every year. The farmers also have to buy the latest fertilisers and pesticides at high prices. These high costs mean that the cash requirement of the farmers in every cycle of cultivation is quite high. Most small farmers with lands without irrigation have no personal reserves to make such investments. They are forced to take institutional loans from banks, credit societies, cooperatives etc. for the cultivation. In addition they are forced to acquire most of the requirements (seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides) on credit from the trader. These loans have to be paid off immediately at the end of the cultivation cycle – when the crops are harvested and sold.

The margins in most of these crops are quite low. The rising costs and falling prices have substantially reduced the amount of money the farmer can make. The prices of cotton may not have actually fallen in India (internationally they have declined) but are not sufficient to provide a decent margin. The prices of coffee have fallen in the international markets and therefore in the Indian markets. Pepper has faced a stiff competition with cheap imports from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries. Moreover, the prices of all agricultural commodities have registered a steady decline in international markets since 1987. These factors have shrunk the margins even further.

If the rains are on time and sufficient the crops may just be adequate to meet these costs. A failure of monsoons, along with some other reasons, means a destruction of the crops. Attacks by new pests, resistant to known pesticides in use, are one major reason for the failure of crops. Another reason is the failure of seeds to sprout properly. The cases of spurious seeds – perhaps sold a little cheaper – are quite well known. The loss of a crop means not only financial loss in that cultivation season but total poverty. The farmer is in the first instance unable to pay back his (or her – suicides by women farmers are not unknown) loans. Such situations have multiple effects. The institutions consider the farmer a defaulter and refuse to extend any further credit even for the next cycle. After a period of time they may even begin legal proceedings to recover the loans from the farmers. The traders increase the pressure on the farmers – sometimes seizing whatever they can from the farmer. They may also stop any further credit and squeeze the farmer in the next season. The farmer in such circumstances is forced to contract loans from private moneylenders. The new moneylender is unofficial – not the traditional moneylender but the richer farmer in the village or locality. The rates of interest and methods of collection, however, remain usurious.



Failure of crops over one or two seasons leads to complete ruination. The paltry possessions, whatever they may be, are sold off to buy necessities of survival or to make at least partial repayments of the loan. The farmer then has no possession except the land which is his sole means of livelihood and survival. The crisis is not only occupational or economic – but one of very survival and existence.

The institutions begin recovery proceedings. They paste notices on the doors of the farmers – declaring that their assets will be auctioned at the earliest. The pasting of such a notice is a signal for the other creditors to move in and begin to apply direct pressure. The farmer is in anyway unable to pay even the interest – which may be as high as 120% a year. Constant harassment, public humiliation, threats, insults, possibilities of physical violence or forcible possession of possessions and property are frequent and common.

The farmer in such a situation knows no peace. He has no other alternatives to survive. The loss of social prestige also completely shatters his relationships in the village and often in other villages in the locality.

The personal reasons enter into the picture in mostly such situations. The farmer then is likely to suffer severe isolation and become depressed. The constant pressures may lead to addictions or to other personality and mental disorders. The indebted farmer then becomes vulnerable to suicides. The basic cause, however, is indebtedness and the total loss of all means of survival.

MYTH: Recovery of debts in the rural sector is anyway poor. Hardly any action is taken against the defaulters. The pressure of debts is thus not a reason for the suicides.

FACT: The institutions may not be able to recover major debts in the rural areas from the rich peasant who is often a trader as well. The small and poor farmer does not get away that easily. In fact, it is known that the recovery of debts from the small and poor farmers is much better than from the rich farmer. The poor farmer invariably tries to pay off the debt since his access to credit is very limited and he is dependent on the same creditors all the time. The rich peasant in contrast is able to circulate his loans. He tries different agencies and makes partial repayments. He is also able to negotiate partial repayments with the agencies. He is able to gain additional periods to pay back, waivers on additional interests, lump-sum arrangements etc. as far as his loans are concerned. The poor farmer does not have such recourse.

> First, there are clear indications that the crop pattern is leaning in favour of commercialisation and hence the risk of crop loss increased due to both higher proportion of purchased inputs and technology. Second, there is also a tendency to adopt monoculture and consequent over-exploitation of land in pursuit of high gross returns. An inevitable externality of this is added risk and soil degradation. Third, marginal lands are being brought under cultivation and this puts pressure on the inputs as well as on farming practices. Four, technology now available is lumpy in nature and therefore failure of one component in the package of inputs can lead to a severe aggregate crop loss. Lastly, the cash component in the package of inputs has increased substantially. This has necessitated higher cash need.
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> (Deshpande R K, 2002, EPW)

There is another mechanism at work as well. Two or three good seasons create an illusion of possible advancement. Some farmers that do well in the good season either decide to acquire more land or to dig wells in their land to obtain irrigation. For these purposes they take larger loans – often from the institutions. The irrigation efforts are usually a failure. In these areas the irrigation potential itself is quite low. The ground water levels are either unsatisfactory or out of reach of the poor farmer. The bore well he had hoped would change his fortunes dramatically often only consumes all the money he can muster and yet remains dry. There are numerous examples of the farmers incurring more loans to sink the well deeper and deeper in the vain hope of striking water.

It is these 'larger' loans that often cause the severe problems. The institutions often begin proceedings for the recovery of these loans – that have generally failed to yield any results.

If this is combined with bad seasons – and there have been many in the affected areas – there is a total failure of crops. This creates an accumulation of the long term and the cyclical loans. The farmer is now severely indebted. The pressure of the debt – particularly debt that has borne no fruits – begins to tell on the individual.

The only choice in such conditions is to sell off the land or to yield it to the creditor. The loss of land in most cases is the loss of total livelihood. It is also a loss of all future hope and possibilities. The loss of land also means a loss of prestige and social standing. A person without land in the village even today is a person without identity and prestige.

It is these situations in which hopelessness, anxiety, and depression set in. Instances cited by researchers or by journalists all point to these situations as the circumstances that provoke depression, social isolation, hopelessness, and ultimately suicides.

MYTH: Indian agriculture is backward mainly because Indian farmer is backward. He has refused to change, to adopt new techniques, to relate to new forces, and to take advantage of the globalised markets. He is solely responsible for the crisis, however unfortunate it may seem.

FACT: This argument sounds very sophisticated and erudite but is either erroneous or meaningless.

In the first instance one must note the fact that the suicides are taking place in states and areas that are considered 'developed' agriculturally. Look at the list – Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and now Kerala. The 'backward' states do not figure prominently in this list.

It is true that barring Punjab the other areas are dependent on rains for irrigation – and are generally dry areas. Artificial irrigation has not been developed very substantially in these areas. The main source of artificial irrigation remains wells – but that is true for the entire country. The rains too in these areas with the exception of Kerala are not very heavy.

These are areas that have generally seen some 'agricultural reform'. This means that absentee landlordism and dissipating tenancy have been abolished in these areas. The areas are dominated by the owner cultivator – though the percentage of agricultural labour is not insignificant. Agricultural labour in these areas – particularly in seasons in which the crops are good and not completely destroyed at the outset finds adequate work to survive.

Agriculture in these areas is not only monetised but also commercialised. The emphasis is on cultivation of cash crops for the market – national and international. The cultivation is carried out with the use of 'modern' inputs – hybrid or new seeds, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides. The use of newer – intermediate – machinery and equipment is not unknown. The cropping pattern too has shown changes with definite shift away from food grains and staple consumption crops to cash crops over the years. In some of these areas there have been experiments with the cash crops too and the farmers have switched the cash crops themselves as per the possibility of marketing. These are the attributes of 'development' in agriculture, not of backwardness.

> "The suicides have been occurring for over seven years now. And in some periods, with even greater intensity. So too has hunger been growing... The rural landscape is a shambles. Agricultural credit and finance systems have collapsed. Taking their place are new entities that can make the village moneylender seem relatively less coercive. Prices have pushed most inputs beyond the reach of the small farmer. For many, the move from food crops to cash crops proved fatal. In some cases, the shift was towards high-outlay, water-guzzling crops such as sugar cane. All this, in an era of huge power tariff hikes. A steady shrinking of local democracy further deepened the chaos."
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> (Sainath, P, Hindu-online 2004)

The Indian farmer is not backward. He has an undeserved and erroneous reputation of refusal to change. The entire experiment of 'modernisation' and 'development' of agriculture through green revolution techniques was made possible by the activity of the traditional Indian farmer. The gentleman farmer with 'global' techniques and managerial skills was not on the scene till the very recent years. Corporate agriculture was also not present. It is only recently that some corporations and some entrepreneurs have begun to treat agriculture as a corporate industrial activity and suddenly wish to do away with the traditional farmer – essentially to obtain land and create their *corporate holdings*.

Farmers in these areas relate to the markets quite deeply. The cash crops they grow tie them to the markets – national and international. Cotton is the main crop in some of these areas (predominantly Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh). It has no immediate consumption value and is an industrial raw material. The farmers can only sell it. Soybean is the other common crop in Maharashtra and in Karnataka. It is an item for human consumption but generally only after industrial processing. The purchasers of the crop hence again are industries. It is not a consumption crop. The crops in Kerala are coffee and pepper – which are mainly for the export market. Thus the relationship with the market is also very clear.

In fact, the vagaries of the markets have created the major problems for the farmers. Cotton had some price protection – particularly in Maharashtra through the Monopoly Purchase mechanism. The prices paid to cotton in Maharashtra were not only above the international prices but also above the national support price declared by the government of India. The Monopoly Purchase scheme has been watered down by the government over the past two seasons. The price support mechanism has not, however, completely disappeared. More importantly it sets the floor of the price offered by the private traders – the private traders offer generally 200 rupees per quintal less than the price declared by the government in Maharashtra. The prices of cotton have at least in theory been increased to some extent every year.

Soybean may have a declared support price but the mechanism to acquire it is highly deficient and the real prices are hence decided by the markets. The prices of soybean have in effect remained at best steady.

The situation is much worse for coffee. There has been a steady decline in the price of coffee in international markets. This has of course not affected the price the consumer of coffee – particularly in its blended and processed variety – pays for the product. It has only affected the consumer of coffee beans.

Pepper as noted earlier has faced severe competition from cheap imports. In the case of pepper there is another fraudulent mechanism. It deals with re-export of the imported pepper after it is repacked and relabelled. It is then sold as a produce of Kerala though the pepper grower in Kerala continues to face total ruin.

The operations of the market it is thus clear have brought no benefit to the *actual producers* of *agricultural* goods.

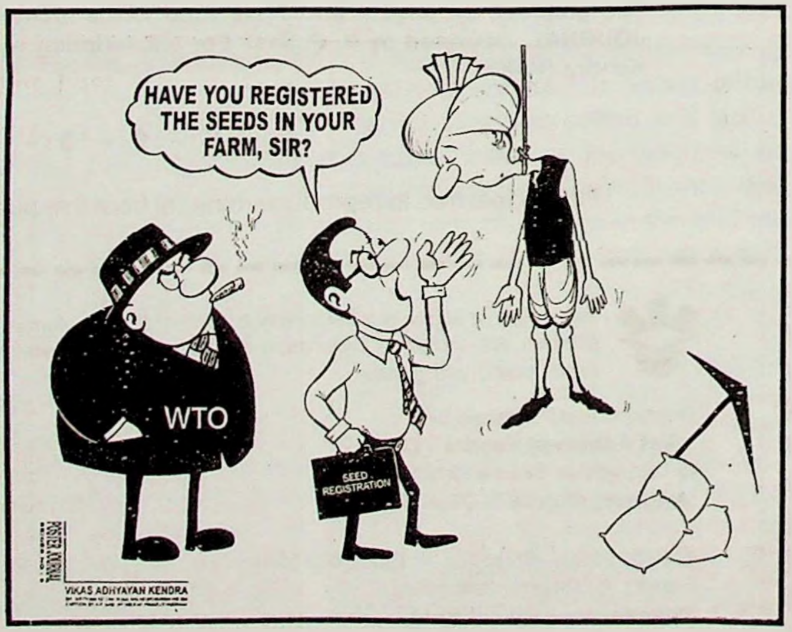
MYTH: The government has done enough for the farmers. In fact, the farmers get the greatest benefits. The reasons for the crisis (if any) have to be found in other mechanisms.

FACT: The government has paid a lot of lip service to the farmers and the agricultural sector but done precious little in practice.

In the first instance no government implemented radical reforms. At best there has been tenancy regularisation or in some cases tenancy abolition. The farmer never received adequate land. There was a lot of talk of distribution of land to the landless but in practice precious little land was actually distributed.

Land distribution or tenancy reforms when they took place were almost stand alone measures. No care was taken to provide adequate cheap credit, implements, inputs, initial consumption loans or other institutional support. A landless farmer suddenly in possession of barren undeveloped land can hardly utilise it productively with family labour alone. He needs consumption loans or preferably grants for the period it takes to develop the land and convert it into a productive farm. He requires soft loans or grants to develop the land, to acquire implements and inputs. These issues were never truly addressed. There are periodic announcements with great fanfare of new schemes for the support of the rural poor. They either do not take off or are only demonstrative – yielding benefits to a very few persons even from the selected categories.

No real attempt has been made to develop irrigation in a sustainable manner in the country. There is an obsession with mega projects that essentially benefit the industries and urban areas either through generation of power or provision of water for industrial and urban domestic use. The traditional irrigation sources have been completely neglected. This has also taken irrigation out of the legitimate control of the poor toilers or even the local communities. To crown it all now there are serious efforts to privatise and commercialise the water supply. The commercial pricing of water for irrigation will further increase cultivation costs (wherever it does become available) and bring further ruin to the farmers.



In fact, the entire 'development' in agriculture has neglected the producer – specifically the small farmer and landless agricultural labourer – and has sought to cater to the urban markets. The emphasis on mono-cropping and commercial cash crops, often for export, has meant a serious erosion of food security in the rural areas. Even some food crops – the expensive varieties of rice or wheat are an example – are grown as cash crops and do not in anyway augment the food security of the rural poor. The traditional nutritious foods like the various millets are becoming scarcer. The area under these crops in particular and under food crops in general has declined. (There is a perverse situation in the country – overflowing granaries, rotting grains and starving people.) The overall results are clear to see. The share of agriculture in the gross domestic product has declined drastically since independence. From just over 50% it has come down to about 24%. The population dependent on agriculture however has neither declined in absolute terms nor even proportionately to the same extent. It just means that a large proportion of the Indian population – nearly 70% - has a lower share of the national income and national product. This is a clear proof of the neglect of the rural population in the country.

The only scheme that has brought benefits to at least a section of the rural population is the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS). It did protect employment and wage levels of the rural population to some extent. This is not applicable uniformly in the country. Even under the present government, contrary to election promises, it is sought to be watered down and applied only in select districts in the country.

The agricultural research too has not really brought any relief to the actual producers. It is confined to profitable crops and congenial terrains. Most Indian farmers do not have these advantages.

In recent years the government has played numerous tricks with the farmers – particularly the poor and small farmers. Waiving of electricity charges is of no use to them. They are not consumers of electricity for irrigation. They possess neither irrigation sources nor any implements that use electricity to draw the water. A 'popular' measure is brought in to again advance the interests of the rural rich in the country.

Various state governments in the name of agricultural development seek to advance corporate industrial agriculture. The efforts to relax the ceiling laws and to promote consolidation of holding also benefit only the new entrants to the scene – the agri-business corporations.

Withdrawal of subsidies – both direct and indirect – will similarly hit the poor and small farmer. The costs of inputs will increase – as they already are – and the prices will fall. The squeezed margins will spell nothing but ruin for the farmers.

Sadly one must say we have yet only witnessed the onset of the crisis in agriculture. When it develops fully in not too distant a future we shall see deaths in tsunami proportions in rural India – either through starvation or suicides.

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Graphic on page 3 from "The 'Appeal' Handbook for Field Activists", PEACE, ISED.

The graphics on page 4 and 7 are from VAK's monthly poster publication, POSTER JOURNAL, designed by K. P. Sasi. For subscription inquiries contact Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (VAK).

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Facts against Myths is a bi-monthly bulletin of factual information on a number of development myths and fallacies, etc, including information against alien development models, paradigms and false concepts on caste, creed and gender.

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