

Posted at: Dec 8, 2018

All have stake in farmers' welfare. Let's ensure it



Vishavjeet Chaudhary

Where exactly, along the tunnel of rhetoric of 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan,' did the sound of 'kisan' become faint? A reasonable starting point is a response from the government. However, public response is valuable and much needed. The survival and progress of the small farmer is to everyone's interest. The time to act is now — by initiating more research, establishing financial institutions and doing our own bit.

Vishavjeet Chaudhary
OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat

The last week has seen farmer groups protesting in the national capital. Earlier this year, thousands of farmers marched to Mumbai, to pressurise the government into meeting their demands. The venues of both protests are certainly very symbolic. The farmers have made their voices heard in the political capital, as well as the financial capital. This sums up the plight of the farmer today — the agrarian crisis in India is both financial and political.

With a majority of the people living in rural areas, a conservative estimate is that at least 50 per cent of the population is involved in agriculture in one way or the other. This number is more than the combined population of Russia, the United Kingdom, France and Germany. In fact, this profession has gone on for at least 5,000 years, making it an artefact of the past being carried into the 21st century.

Suicides by farmers

However, recent trends have brought about undesirable results. The crisis in the agrarian sector has led to an increase in farmer suicides. A report published by Shiva and Jalees (Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology) argues that farmer suicides started rising around 1997. Eminent journalist Sainath further drew

attention to this crisis in the 1990s. Since then, the number has mostly been increasing with some marginal otherwise trends.

Today, estimates vary. According to a report by the National Crime Records Bureau, between 1995 and 2011, more than quarter of a million of farmers had committed suicide (2.90 lakh). This amounts to approximately 20,000 suicides a year and translates to almost three deaths every hour. Undoubtedly, this is a chilling statistic. Even more so, if we put it in the context of the huge number of people who are at risk. Some reports suggest that the suicide rate among farmers is up to 47 per cent higher than in populations otherwise.

Causes of farmer distress

It is hard to pinpoint what causes these suicides. It is a safe assumption that there is a form of hopelessness that culminates into destitute, leading to such steps. The reasons that cause this hopelessness can be many. Oxford University's Centre for Suicide Research carried out research among farmers who had committed suicide between 1991 and 1993. Some findings of the research in the UK indicate towards broader issues that provide key insights into the Indian context. The 'key variables' in the study indicated at the 'presence of mental illness, low rates of treatment, lack of a close confiding relationship, work and financial problems.'

Other research indicates at the reliance on traditional methods of irrigation and erratic weather that translate into extreme debt and lack of readily available help or, more importantly, availability of such help. Shiva and Jalees, for example, in part blame the failure of 'institutional delivery of credit to farmers.' Another reason cited by some is the promise of genetically modified crops giving glittering yields. This leads to many farmers investing an awful lot into procuring those seeds, which do not necessarily live up to the promises, leaving them in debt. In many cases, a lot of this debt is taken from sources that are outside the ambit of fair practice and governance. The interest rates are incredibly high, penalties unforgivable. The broader problem is seen as 'policies of trade liberalisation and corporate globalisation.' (Shiva).

Others have speculated that climate change could be one of the reasons. Sainath, perhaps, convincingly argues that these factors culminate into debt that farmers cannot repay, which leads to despair, leaving few other options. Rapid urbanisation and pressing demands on farmers to give up their land, making way for India's huge appetite for swanky malls and convenient flats could be the other reasons.

A UN publication lists causes behind these suicides as 'financial stress, loss of independence and control, sense of loss, geographical remoteness and potential for social isolation, untreated mental illness and depression.'

All these findings to a great extent show what exactly has gone wrong with the ethics of farming. In a way, it is a conflict between the old and the new. Modern demands of certainty and high yield put a great pressure on farmers. Those with vested interests, in sale of seeds, rest in far-flung corporate houses whose names the very farmers that grow them might not even have heard of. In many cases, the only known ways to obtain credit are as old as the money itself and as highly obsolete as the interest rates. Methods of farming are old, labour-intensive and expensive. It is in sharp contrast to the expectation of quick money and progress — the direction, we are repeatedly told, India's youth is heading towards.

What is the solution?

Solving any issue as big as this firstly requires a deep, impartial and stable analysis of the problem. The problem is obvious — we are losing a farmer every half an hour. However, the reasons behind this need a lot more work to ascertain where exactly we lost track. Where exactly, along the tunnel of rhetoric of 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan,' did the sound of 'kisan' become faint? Almost inaudible. These, and other questions about this growing problem must be asked. And answers must be given. The loss of one precious life is one too many. The loss of more than quarter of a million in India alone, is more so.

The research conducted by Oxford University does provide a helpful starting point. It says that 'preventive interventions targeted at the farming community should involve medical, social and political strategies.' The force of such a multi-pronged force is probably a commendable response. To tackle a problem with so many facets, the solution ought to be such.

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development also stresses on the importance of such an approach — to tackle social issues as well as other problems. It emphasises on the importance of non-governmental players. A reasonable starting point in a country like India is obviously a response from the government. However, public response is valuable and much needed. The survival and progress of the small farmer is to everyone's interest. More importantly, it is of prime interest to the future of any country.

We all have a stake in ensuring that the small farmers are given their best. The time to act is now — by initiating more research, establishing financial institutions and doing our own bit. This crisis is such that it provides an opportunity for experienced people from all fields to come together and work — from law, technology, fashion, economics, and others. Action needs to be taken now.